

## **Is Culture Original? Phenomenological Intersubjectivity in Art and Culture**

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While the subject of intercultural communications has become increasingly relevant to practitioners in fields as diverse as the sciences, humanities, politics and business, much of the discussion has centered upon the notion of cultures as monistic categories to be applied in isolation to various groups across the globe. Such thinking leads to a 'self' versus 'other' discourse that emphasizes incommensurable difference in an effort to label an idea as 'Eastern' or 'Western', 'African', 'Asian', 'European' or any other neatly defined classification. To ignore the reality, that cultures are not now, nor have they ever been, isolated, is to ignore the self as embodiment. Owing to humanity's shared corporeal perception of the world, this embodiment reveals an inherent cultural interdependence which defies the self-other compartmentalization. A phenomenological approach, by showing the self to be immersed in the external world, represents the true nature of cultural interconnection, while introducing an avenue for accessing a cultural other. The work of art, in its transmission of embodiment, serves as one avenue leading us toward a deeper recognition of the inherent intersubjectivity of Being-in-the-world.

The tendency to view cultural difference as incommensurable is predicated upon Cartesian notions of the self. While the weaknesses in Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* have been widely admitted, much of the framework continues to inform a contemporary discourse which conceives of the cultural other as an inaccessible consciousness. As Descartes concluded, 'I can make a judgment only about things that are known to me. . .Most certainly, in the strict sense the knowledge of this 'I' does not depend upon things of whose existence I do not yet have knowledge.'<sup>1</sup> Without a window into the other's thoughts, a way of envisioning the world through his cultural lens, which is consistently understood to be unique and totally distinct, I cannot possibly have access to the experience of anyone but myself and become imprisoned inside my own mind, unaffected by external consciousnesses. The logical conclusion of this line of thought is a rejection of intercultural understanding and an inability to engage with any other, including those with whom I share a culture of origin. In positing cultural compartmentalization and emphasizing cultural difference as an impassable gulf, one reaches the same sharp division between self and other as did Descartes in describing the other as a mere body orbiting within the self's personal space, a being that does not, and cannot, impact the self's experience, and therefore is beyond my rational judgment. It is to lapse into a kind of solipsism, wherein a culture self-sufficiently defines its own worldview.

These discussions often accompany attempts to elevate a diversity seen to be under threat by the homogenizing forces of globalization. And the classification of cultures or cultural products under an umbrella adjective – 'Asian', 'North

American', 'African', for example, or even more subdivided still, 'German', 'Malaysian', 'Native American' – facilitates analysis of geopolitical histories in which two opposing forces might have been involved. Indeed, the current postcolonial discourse, in order to relate the narrative of the colonial encounter and its effects upon contemporary power structures, seems invariably to fall into a framing of culture as 'West' versus 'the rest.' Nevertheless, these discussions retain elements of Cartesianism because they insist upon an ordering of the world that renders it suitable for empirical study. The cultures involved in this colonial history could have only done so as previously separate entities reacting to the shock of an unprecedented encounter. The 'control' for making rationally certain conclusions about the postcolonial world is to assume a completely isolated existence prior to the intercultural meeting.

If we accept what modernism showed us, that the world does not possess a classical order separating fields of experience, then we can employ a phenomenological conceptualization of identity to reexamine the interaction between self and other, and thus between cultures. The embodied self draws its identity from the perceptual world. It moves through space, a space it can only discern from its own corporeally limited vantage point, and acts upon objects, infusing them with human attributes at the same time as it understands itself through its interactions with those objects. And, just as we necessarily come to know ourselves through the physical world, we can only interact with others through their bodily presence to us. Thus, where Descartes posited a disembodied intellect, Merleau-Ponty showed human

beings to be minds intimately caught up in bodies, wherein the body is the medium through which the self encounters others.

Merleau-Ponty illustrated that human intersubjectivity derives from our perceptual experience of others through Sartre's example of honey. The moment I attempt to interact with honey, it is stuck to me, it becomes part of me physically, informing my behavior. Merleau-Ponty concludes that 'the quality of being honeyed. . . can only be understood in the light of the dialogue between me as an embodied subject and the external object which bears this quality.'<sup>ii</sup> Thus, because I am a body in the world and I inevitably interact with others, I must accept that my identity derives from my bodily experience amongst others. I am born with a history, a community, a culture, and these social interactions shape my self-understanding throughout my life.

Few cultural theorists would deny that a pre-existing cultural tradition impacts one's Being-in-the-world. In fact, it is precisely this premise which leads to the argument of incommensurability. It is assumed the self cannot see beyond the lens of its culture of origin in order to access the *Lebenswelt* [life world] of a cultural other. However, I propose that it is not simply the individual who is intimately bound up in a perceptual experience of the world and others. Cultures, too, are interwoven, their members immersed in an experience of the tangible world which all beings, both human and animal, share. Our phenomenological understanding of existence, then, can also shed light on the intersubjectivity of culture, thus proving that the very lens

purported to obscure our intercultural understanding is itself already influenced by a shared perceptual apparatus.

Merleau-Ponty's explication of modern art demonstrates this. Embodiment is brought to bear upon our vision of the world and thus the ways in which we express that vision through art. The painting becomes a world of its own because it transmits the artist's perceptual experience. Rather than a meticulously delineated copy of the original, the work is a space in which, as Merleau-Ponty put it, 'form and content. . . cannot exist separately from one another.'<sup>iii</sup> It is a depiction of a particular state of Being-in-the-world and so takes on a life distinct from the object it portrays. Cézanne's paintings do not follow classical rules of perspective, instead opting to portray the point of view of an embodied subject wherein distance appears distorted yet accords with the artist's own positioning as part of his environment.<sup>iv</sup> Similarly, a prehistoric cave painting might show a four-legged animal to have eight legs, because the painter saw that animal running and rendered his perceptual experience of that animal on the cave's wall.

Yet, just as the self does not begin life in a vacuum, neither does the work of art, the visible (or, in the case of music, audible) expression of an embodied experience. My identity relies upon my interactions with others, because my consciousness emerges from within an environment of pre-existing traditions, history, social norms and relationships. In short, the world is infused with meaning even before I learn to apply it to my personal assertion of identity. Consequently, when I turn to the blank canvas or page and set down my vision of the world, I am

communicating a sense of self already informed by meaning that did not arise wholly from within me, from a disembodied mind. Thus, the work of art takes on a life of its own, but it does so in the same way the self becomes consciousness, immersed in a sea of external ideas and influences from which its particular identity is inextricable.

This sea of external ideas includes, in large part, other works of art. We can therefore say that art begets art, both directly and indirectly. In the indirect sense, art brings about memes, ideas that spread from one group to another, becoming so embedded in a culture that they can be referenced without even consciously calling to mind the original work of art. Shakespeare's works pervade English-speaking cultures, and in some cases an individual learns to decode the meaning attached to Shakespearean references even before being exposed to the work for himself. The artist, then, draws on an experiential repertoire of references that are a part of his embodied engagement with the world, and many of these references are, in fact, memes originating in other works of art.

Jorge Luis Borges recognized that memes inform the very culture into which the artist is born and are subsequently absorbed into the artist's work. His story 'Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote' chronicles the quest of an author attempting to re-write Cervantes' *Don Quixote* exactly as Cervantes wrote it – not to copy it but to write it again, by immersing himself in the cultural milieu of Cervantes. In effect, Pierre Menard endeavors to exchange his perceptual world for turn-of-the-seventeenth century Spain, adopting the entire cultural infrastructure into which Cervantes was born – religion, language, history (both personal and collective), and

artistic references. Nevertheless, Menard quickly discards this first strategy and decides instead to re-write *Don Quixote* using his own, twentieth-century French identity, informed as it is by a host of posterior cultural references. He concludes that given the milieu in which Cervantes wrote, the creation of the work we know as *Don Quixote* was 'inevitable',<sup>v</sup> and therefore it is a much more impressive feat for an individual far removed from that particular *Lebenswelt* to repeat the creation.

Art also begets art in a direct sense, which the story shows through its listing of Pierre Menard's critical works and literary/philosophical influences, among them Poe, Valéry, Quevedo, Baudelaire, Descartes, and Leibniz.<sup>vi</sup> As Elaine Scarry points out, in *On Beauty and Being Just*, beauty 'seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication.'<sup>vii</sup> So, my embodiment means that I experience an aesthetic response before a beautiful object, person, or work of art, and my desire is to recreate that beauty in some way. For Scarry this can take a host of forms, including describing the beautiful thing to others, but the artist, having also been struck perceptually by another work of art, may find himself compelled to integrate the essential ideas or perspective of that work into his own creation. A painter whose bodily experience allows him to hear a moving symphony is inspired to recreate the music on the canvas. He did not invent that painting from out of his own disembodied mind. Rather, his perceptual engagement with the world around him engendered the tableau.

We can find countless examples of great works created out of the artist's deep admiration for other art. Homer's *Odyssey* inspired Joyce's *Ulysses* and Pound's

*Cantos*, among others. T.S. Eliot and Rodin looked to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, itself inspired by Greco-Roman, and possibly Hebraic thought,<sup>viii</sup> while artists from Renoir to Proust to Mallarmé have been influenced by Wagner's music. Japanese filmmaker Shūji Terayama adapted Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* into his film *Farewell to the Ark*. And the aforementioned Jorge Luis Borges, in writing his stories, drew upon an expansive knowledge of world literature, as well as philosophical, philological, religious, historical and mathematical theories, including Islamic and Kabbalist.<sup>ix</sup> In these instances and innumerable others, the artist, through his Being-in-the-world, his perceptual experience of another work of art, inherited the ideas necessary to generate his particular oeuvre. Thus, art functions as a medium for the spread of thought, and it is the embodied self, deeply connected with others and its surrounding world, which enables this transmission of thought.

The artistic encounter, then, parallels the encounter of the embodied self in its intersubjective relations with others. Elaine Scarry, in referencing Wittgenstein, shows that 'when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it.'<sup>x</sup> This is a way in which we can conceptualize the intercultural encounter, as a form of 'touch', a tactile engagement with a culture's beauty. Certainly there is an abundance of historical instances in which the hand of one culture wrought pain in its encounter with another. A 'touch' can lead to rape, theft or murder. This is the legacy of colonialism. But, the eye also oversees the incorporation of foreign ideas, experienced through the senses, into the self's worldview, and the self then recreates that new understanding. As the body moves through its world, it encounters culturally



diverse threads of inspiration in each individual who has been similarly inspired, integrating them all into a hybrid sense of self. Through our intersubjective relationships, ideas have a reach far beyond their culture of origin, enriching an individual's horizon so that his self-understanding is never totally pure.

Thus, despite our tendency to speak of works of art as unprecedented and to elevate those creations which seem most avant-garde, each work, like each human being, owes its unique identity to that rich amalgamation of influences which predate it. Because the artist is not a disembodied mind and cannot be said to exist in a Cartesian state of complete independence from his external world, his work is also intersubjective. And, as the examples above show, thought flows easily among cultures through art, altering the very identity of that culture in much the same way the individual is changed through his encounters with others. The culture is 'honeyed', forever carrying elements of other cultures with it.

This phenomenon is easy to identify in those cultures whose peoples have entered into direct contact with one another. It is apparent, too, even in cases of indirect contact, through an intermediary culture or via the work of art itself, which is often spread far beyond an individual's physical reach. In the latter case, we can think of the Internet's role in the contemporary dissemination of artistic influence, wherein, for example, I have access to paintings I may never see in person, though arguably with a lesser aesthetic impact. So, one might conclude that cultural intersubjectivity is a recent development and is only as old as the face-to-face interaction of cultures.

However, I argue that even before cultures developed the means to physically reach out to other peoples through exploration, our embodiment resulted in a web of cultural similarity that showed humanity to be intimately interconnected. We have only to look at the example of the pyramid, a geometrical shape used for burials in multiple cultures simultaneously, without prior contact, from the Mayas to the ancient Egyptians. This is because as corporeal beings, both cultures saw the same perfection of the pyramidal shape in their external world. And the Biblical flood story may pervade Western culture, yet cultures on every continent have some version of a flood myth, because somewhere in the history of a people, their ancestors had bodily experience of this event and passed it on through verbal narrative. For all the diversity that can be found among world cultures, human embodiment ties us inextricably to one another, across arbitrarily defined cultural delineations. The likelihood that cultures, made up of human beings who possess homologous bodies, will have perceptual experiences of their environment similar to those of other cultures, demonstrates that any attempt to demarcate culture is, ultimately, illogical. The world reveals itself similarly to members of all cultures because as embodied humans we interact with it through the corporeal structures we have in common.

Therefore, the interpretation of artistic works allows us to answer Merleau-Ponty's call to 'rediscover the world in which we live'<sup>xi</sup> by reminding us that embodiment influences a particular artist's vision of the world. To come to some understanding of the work is to open that window into alterity using the tool of our analogous perceptual experiences. It is here where hermeneutics can aid the

phenomenology of the aesthetic response. For, as Ricoeur points out (citing Gadamer):

[T]he certitude of meaning again precedes [sic] from an interrogation of understanding: the beauty of the work of art has already taken hold of me before I judge it, tradition already carries me before I place it at a distance, language has already instructed me, before I master it as a system of available signs. In all these ways, belonging to meaning precedes every logic of language. Which is why hermeneutics is finally a struggle against misunderstanding of what has always already been understood. . . .<sup>xii</sup>

Thus, as embodied selves, we are born into a world of meaning communicated to us through art. As I have argued, this, too, is true of the work itself, for it comes into being already flush with meaning from the other works that have preceded it. My response to the work of art is to decode what I already understand through my experience as a Being-in-the-world. Ricoeur, then, asserts that through hermeneutics we can ‘rediscover’, to use Merleau-Ponty’s word, that previously understood meaning. Further, I suggest that it is the way to understand, through our own embodiment, our shared Being with otherness, either that of the culture from which the work arises, or that of the work itself.

As I have already discussed, the work of art can be said to be ‘embodied’, because it does not express an idea or worldview in the Cartesian sense, without the aid of its form. Just as in our interactions with others, when we learn to interpret the inner world of a person through his outward behavior, the expressions on his face, even the words he says which I, in my embodiment, hear, so too does the work of art transmit meaning through the artist’s execution. In the case of a painting, this includes the organization of space, the strokes and colors. A work of literature

conveys ideas through the text's syntactical organization. In reading the prose, we can learn, as George Steiner puts it, to "read" the world and our place therein. . . .<sup>xiii</sup> Here we are often limited by the constraints of language and individual experience, in much the same way our bodily perspective is limited and we can only approximate the true nature of the world due to our physical involvement with it. We interpret a particular understanding of experience and, following an experience of the work, learn to direct that gaze outward upon our own world, integrating the ideas into our own sense of Being. Therefore, this spread of ideas through art means we build upon the perceptual experiences of others, integrating them into an amalgamation of perspectives that continues to bring us ever closer to collective truth.

The work of art allows us to bridge the gap of our own individual experience. Where I cannot physically inhabit the world of another, the painting, the poem, the play, allows me that glimpse of an alternative embodied perspective. Yet, often what causes the work to make such a firm impression upon me is precisely those ideas contained therein which mirror my own. If art inspires recreation, then it is those traces of a recognized experience of the world that most urge their own perpetuation. Thus, a critical study of the particular perspective portrayed within the work can shed light not only on the evolution of thought that led to its creation – the influences that have formed the identity of the work and the culture from which it sprang – but also upon what aspects of Being we as humans share. Because, as embodied selves, we relate with one another intersubjectively, we must stand before the work of art in the

same way we stand before others, ready to interpret an inner world which is not our own through the medium of our own experience.

The Cartesian conceptualization of cultures as totally distinct impedes the hermeneutic task. It confounds our 'reading' of the world and leads to a misunderstanding of what we already intuit about ourselves. To posit the self and other as separate life worlds is to subdivide the world of experience into perfectly compact particles capable of empirical study but which have little meaning in and of themselves. Merleau-Ponty showed the futility of this task with his example of the lemon. An examination of the lemon, Merleau-Ponty argued, gives me a wealth of empirical data, for example its acidity, its color, its shape. Yet observation of these various characteristics in isolation does nothing to describe the lemon in its totality, for it is a composite of all its attributes, each intermingling with the others to create the object I perceive and with which I engage as I infuse it with human meaning.<sup>xiv</sup> We can examine a culture's isolated characteristics, and can even assign objective measurements to these attributes in an attempt rationally to understand them from a distance. But such efforts at observation fail if we do not recognize what particular elements of culture mean to us as embodied beings intimately connected with that culture through our intersubjectivity. We cannot approach a true understanding of alterity if we do not first connect with others through our shared Being-in-the-world. The interpretation of art, and thus the interpretation of culture, begins from our ability to 'read' ourselves into that canvas facing us.

In this way, then, the creative process continues, as an evolution. The work of art begets another work of art through the individual experience I bring to its interpretation. We may approach a novel with the intention of working out its original meaning, which, due to what Ricoeur calls the 'autonomy of the text', or the life it takes on independent of its author through the act of translating thought into words, can never be definitively grasped but only worked out through evidence.<sup>xv</sup> Likewise we can never make categorical judgments of another's mind based on his outward appearance but we can grow to understand him. Nevertheless, something else happens in the process of hermeneutic interpretation: We add to that meaning with our own experience. As Proust so eloquently put it, his book 'would furnish [his readers] with the means of reading what lay inside themselves.'<sup>xvi</sup> The interpretation of a work of art parallels the understanding between cultures because, in our embodied intersubjectivity of Being, we navigate alterity in order to know ourselves via our understanding of others. We then go on to assert our identity through a recreation of the work of art which speaks to our own experience of the world. Thus, like an evolution, diversity arises through a dissemination of the same. Our similar embodiments build upon one another to create difference.

In this respect, I argue it is not utopian to insist that a phenomenological examination of what binds us to one another as humans, revealed through art as a sort of rediscovery, will, in fact, allow us to elevate cultural difference. We can only appreciate what makes us unique as individuals if we understand what that

uniqueness owes to our bodily experience of the world and others. Merleau-Ponty, too, noted this paradox by asserting:

Humanity is not an aggregate of individuals, a community of thinkers, each of whom is guaranteed from the outset to be able to reach agreement with the others because all participate in the same thinking essence. Nor, of course, is it a single Being in which the multiplicity of individuals are dissolved and into which these individuals are destined to be reabsorbed. As a matter of principle, humanity is precarious: each person can only believe what he recognizes to be true internally and, at the same time, nobody thinks or makes up his mind without already being caught up in certain relationships with others. . . .<sup>xvii</sup>

We are, each of us, simultaneously individual and collective. The self thinks and acts as one, but one whose constant interactions with others and its belonging to collective meaning prior to self-recognition inform and shape this individual identity. There can be no stark division between self and other or between cultures because our embodied intersubjectivity means that we owe even our differences to our relationships with one another. No matter the distance between two inner worlds, we always have an avenue to that understanding through a probing of our own experience as a Being-in-the-world.

Any attempt to examine culture as a delineated territory with natural boundaries between self and other ultimately ignores not only a history of intercultural encounters but, more importantly, the true condition of embodiment, wherein alterity is internalized through the senses even before we learn to understand and assert the self-identity. Art is a natural response to the beauty of otherness. In

seeing another worldview expressed through art, the hand is compelled to recreate, thereby incorporating that beauty into the individual's own experience of the world. Art is humanity's continuous dialogue with itself, an evolution of thought across time and space. We are therefore called to rediscover the world through perception, to focus our attention upon the aesthetic experience of the work as both form and content in order to catch a glimpse of another worldview. In so doing, we take the route through alterity which leads us back to ourselves.



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- <sup>ii</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (London: Routledge Classics, 2004), 47.
- <sup>iii</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 72.
- <sup>iv</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 40-1.
- <sup>v</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis, “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote”, in *Ficciones* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf-Everyman’s Library, 1993), 34.
- <sup>vi</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis, “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote”, in *Ficciones*, 30-1.
- <sup>vii</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.
- <sup>viii</sup> George Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan* (New York: New Directions, 2011), 47.
- <sup>ix</sup> Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought*, 183.
- <sup>x</sup> Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 3.
- <sup>xi</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 32.
- <sup>xii</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 103.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought*, 93.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 45-6.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 45, 56.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 33.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 66.