
Perception

On Surprise and Expectation

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What's the matter?

- Nothing. It just wasn't what I was expecting.

What were you expecting?

- I'm quite sure I don't know... I just know it wasn't that.

Though no one has ever attempted to throw me one, I am certain that I inherited my father's dislike for surprise parties. Surprises, as I have been habituated to regard them, are the most acute failures of perception. How is it that the combined might of my sense apparatuses – a body tuned to encounter, absorb and process sensation, and the capacity of my mental engagement with said stimuli – fail to prepare one for a room full of inexplicably shouting buffoons and the sudden activation of a light switch from 'off' to 'on'?

Expectation and surprise may be intimately linked. To be startled or surprised has much to do with what certain types of sensuous data, scenarios and context one is anticipating or expecting to encounter. Indeed, much of what we may choose to count as perception or 'meaningful comprehension' is that which we expect to encounter and perceive or rather we perceive our expectations rather than that which we encounter: *snow in mid-march / depression* rather than *snow blind sunshine mid-march / not-really-so-terrible*. Based on this habitual unperceiving, or the continuous editing and purging of sensory information which does not conform to my habituations, it is a

wonder that this conscious demand for self-regulation, of what I am and am not 'allowed' or allow myself to perceive, allows me to be shocked by anything at all.

And yet, a form of the surprise is that which I find central, most important and the only sort of connecting thread that I am able to distinguish amongst the many facets of my multifaceted 'practice'. I am fond of calling it: *The Big Reveal*. Thinking across the ideas of narrative and storytelling, performance and voice, the notion of not playing all of one's cards at once is rather important. What will a listener keep listening to if there is not an "Aha! So that was it all along!" coming somewhere close to the conclusion of whatever it is they are listening *to*? Is this indeed what they are listening *for*?

I find the lines of what we demand of art and that which we demand of perception to be frighteningly and disconcertingly close. Why do we want perception to result in "So, *It Was That!*"? We desire first and foremost *the end*, the outcome of the experience without having experienced it; the transformation, but not the transformative moment – an object or situation to admire, regardless of our admiration of it. Whitehead clearly delimits this tendency as only a small fraction of the field of an experience, of all of perception – consciousness:

Consciousness is an emphasis upon a selection of these objects. Thus perception is consciousness analyzed in respect to those objects selected for this emphasis. Consciousness is the *acme* of emphasis. (Whitehead 1967: 180)

Acme, the apex, the point at which someone or something is best, perfect, or most successful – is the *extremity* of experience. Consider sense perception as extremity, those entities which are 'supposed' to be the mitigators and mediators of the world; between it and ourselves (indeed that which allows us to make this distinction *me / not-me* at all). This conception is the one that I was brought up to believe: that my senses perceive sensation (*stuff*), then I (*my*

brain) processes it and makes it *make sense*. Despite my attachment to the *idea* of the world as an experiential field and the appeal of the inherent equality of ecological thinking, I am *stubbornly* attached to the idea of *making sense*.

What is it about the attachment to this *idea(l)* of perception as it relates to the big reveal? Is it this demand to make sense and to make sense of which requires the creation of “*world-lines*” (Massumi 2011: 108) – stratifying difference indiscriminately, writing and rewriting the same contour – resulting in having no idea at all where one is nor where one is going, but knowing intimately where one *ought* to be? Could it be that this relentless appeal to reason and consciousness as the end-all-be-all erases the flexibility of these stratifications in the attempt to ossify what we know, what we think we know? Is this atmosphere of further cutting and defining difference, in its distinctions, in its endless repetition leading not to creative and helpful demarcations but a hazy sense of having done this before, of having seen it all. Or worse still – producing the pressure to re-create the never-been-seen? Contrary to the valuation of the experience of experience and the elevation of perception from a dumb tool to that which truly exists in the world, the value system of “*So, It Was That!*” impresses upon me that I must be the explainer of the world to myself. This places atmospheric, yet very real demands upon the work that I make and the way in which it is to *make sense*.

Process philosophy has, thus far, been the thing that makes the most sense while trying to explain, to interrogate and to resist the urge to *make sense*. It insists on allowing the virtual and that which is most certainly part of the world (if not yet *in* the world) to have its day, as well as demanding on the engagement with that which exists, that which acts. It causes us to consider *this* experience of *that* even. It elongates time and makes elastic the space of making, of thinking, that which need not ever come to the moment of conclusion, allowing me to ask: so, what is this? Is this a thought? Is it the end of the composition of a thought or the beginning of thinking it?

I propose that "*So, It Was That!*" is a kind of temporary conclusion which may open the possibility of a beginning - or at least we ought to regard it as such. First: it necessitates situating itself and ourselves in time (*was*) and identifying the issue at hand (*it*), as well as linking cause and effect or the coupling of sensations which we hope enter into the simplified construction of cause-effect (*it, that*). How a narrative, or an occasion of perception can build itself up to this apex, acme or Big Reveal must involve an event that is in the doing or in the making of itself. While we may 'perceive' the reveal in a flash, it cannot exist as a temporary and fleeting surge disconnected from that which precedes, follows, contains, and completes it. However - this simplified, linear and simplistic construction of time forces the reveal to wait its turn; to allow the proper sequence of events to unfold in due time and arrange the reveal *just there* - right at the end.

Yet - how can an event become itself, form within a space held open by any number of factors, if it is not itself a negotiation of time - not a predetermined sequence of events? How can an event or a narrative build up to the Big Reveal unless we feel its affect - unless we can attune our senses and appreciation of perception to the sensations of the event, narrative, instance, becoming, work.

Each instance is one of duration. Each holds its own duration. Each has an appetite for what it is and how it might become. This duration, which is so often artificially linked to ideas of speed and/or motion (how often have we regarded a 2 minute video clip as 'time based work' and a 300 year old painting as somehow without duration?), is how we can hope to perceive anticipation.

If the occasion has an appetite for itself, for its own becoming - then is art and/or perception just a focused way of attuning to *that* thing and *that* space and *that* time locationally? How else can we account for the ideation and mythology of the flash, the epiphany other than the idea of localized specificity

- a hyper specific attunement - one that disregards all else - and forces the lived process of perception to fall away, placing primacy on the apparent relevance, importance and false clarity of the revelation?

Such a construction is just that – a construction. A watering down of existence to a sort of processing faculty, or rather the end result of that process; the demanding of existence and perception to first and foremost highlight the production of a conclusion. The desire for understanding and comprehension likely closes down the spaces for experience and events to become – the opposite of Arakawa and Gin's "*tentative constructing toward a holding in place*" (Arakawa & Gins 2002: 32). The predetermination of what a space, event, object, artwork or life should be, do, present or represent disallows our engagement with that thing. The hungry search for the justification of "*So, It Was That!*" preempts our ability to experience experience, perceive our perceptions.

In point of fact, dear reader, are you not now expecting that the third act of this paper is near at hand - that the cumulative *point* that I wish to deliver is coming any paragraph now, if only I would get on with it? But what if, in point of fact, the fact that I assume your expectancy of a meta-narrative, a structure that will provide the said important "Aha!" moment, may very well be my point?

All of which leads us now to the question of pretending and pretense. Can a narrative, thought, or art work without a sense of completion, culmination or exhaustion ("*SIWT!*") still retain an air of accuracy? Can a narrative lie on its own behalf - pretend its own conclusion in order to alter that sense of familiar linearity which leads up to the seemingly inevitable "*Aha!*"? Further still, perhaps approaching the *acme* of this situation, what do I mean by this sense of 'lying'? Consider: "I'm tired of pretending. I want to tell the truth of what happened, {I broke my hand because of Ninjas} *even if it didn't happen that way.* {I fell and broke my hand because I was pretending to be a Ninja}."

Does the idea that a maker making without a clearly defined Big Reveal (ie. thesis, plan, ideation, goal, meaning, pretense, ideology, propaganda, message, outcome... I could go on) cause discomfort in a prospective viewer? My experience is that it does. This discomfort somehow equates the feeling of unease with blaming - that blameworthy subject the 'unthinking' maker - intentionally duping their audience into viewing *without purpose*. It is this linkage of pretense *as* purpose - as experiencing looking *for* the Big Reveal that I find to be the sticking point of these stakes. From where does the frustration, displeasure and discomfort of attempting to value the experiencing of experience come from?

I have not yet arrived at an answer - other than that "*So, It Was That!*" is not some sort of literary trope to be applied whenever it is felt needed. Rather, that this encapsulation of what we may be looking for (both in perception and in works of art) is far more powerful than I had first realized. The insistence on making room for a space that honours the experience of perception, in the act, in the event, not one that seeks its immediate resolution is an architectural thinking- it is the endeavour to construct a '*tentative holding in place*'. This framework in and of itself proposes the contrary to my (possibly inherited, possibly self-imposed) curmudgeonly dislike of surprises. For experience to be allowed to become of its own accord in whatever duration it may take place in proposes that *everything* has the potential to surprise - should no predetermined "*So, It Was That!*" be proposed - perhaps one could be truly surprised by that which supplies itself as the "*Aha!*"

Works Cited

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