

## Does Art make you happy? Lecture@EGS by Peter Sinapius

The German term for happiness is "Glück". "Glück" does not only mean happiness, but also luck. Indeed, the difference of both meanings is fundamental: Luck is something that happens to me while happiness is an individual feeling. I will move between both meanings in order to explore the moment, when luck and happiness come together.

In my lecture I will investigate the question "Does art make you happy?" from the perspective of the philosophy of the aesthetics which can be understood in the original sense of the word Aesthetic as a history of the perception. Therefore I will relate the question "Does art make you happy?" to different ways of perception. At the centre of my investigation will thus be the perception by which luck appears to us and either makes us happy or not.

After a short introduction about my search for the tracks of happiness, I will investigate different aspects of perception. I will pay particular attention to the keywords *ecstasy*, *rush*, *dance* and *encounter* which mark positions of the philosophy of aesthetics as well as being connected with our everyday lives.

### Tracks of happiness

Looking for happiness, I am not confronted with happiness itself, but with the tracks which it leaves behind: a photo, a piece of music, a smell, a taste. I follow the track and am led back into the past: I remember a holiday, a meeting, an event. I examine the track and follow it. I am on the way to the same holiday place, where I spent time in the past. I visit a friend with whom I spent happy days 20 years ago. I hear a piece of music which enchanted me long ago: my experience, will not be the same as the first time. The friend is older and his history has changed him, the holiday scenery reminds me of the vacation which is alive in my memory, but the sky is not the same, the sun feels different on my skin, the scenery does not seem enchanted any more. The feeling of happiness is not the same as it was.

A particular experience of happiness cannot be repeated. I am following the track of a kind of happiness, which is related to images of the past and doesn't appear again. I cannot recreate old feelings by retracing their tracks. Happiness has no place and knows no past. The search for happiness is a life after happiness.

What kind of happiness am I trying to learn about?

The minute I try to learn something about this so called 'happiness', I catch myself searching for knowledge. I look for it in books, in the more than 130 million entries which Google finds. I go to the park and observe nature. I observe other people and try to imagine whether they are happy or not. I read up about processes in the brain and find out about the neuro-physiological processes of lovers. I study the history of the saint Felix who carries happiness in his name. But the more I research about happiness, the less I seem to understand about it. The information I have about happiness seems to be inversely proportional to my knowledge about it.

I feel like Siddhartha in Hermann Hesse's novel, who is searching for nirvana and finds out along the way to the enlightenment that teachings are nothing and experience everything. Hermann Hesse writes: *"I can love a stone, and also a tree or a piece of bark. These are things, and things can be loved. But I cannot love words. Therefore, teachings are no good for me, they have no hardness, no softness, no colours, no edges, no smell, no taste, they have nothing but words. Perhaps it is these which keep you from finding peace, perhaps it is the many words. Because salvation and virtue, sansara and nirvana, are also mere words. There is no thing which would be nirvana; there is just the word nirvana."*

When I dedicate myself to a stone, a tree or a piece of bark, when I feel their surface, their smell,

their cold or warmth, I feel myself at the same time. By touching them, I let them speak. The hypothesis, which I derive from this is: if that which I experience speaks to me, it is love and maybe the source of happiness.

Before turning to different forms of perception from a philosophical-historical point of view, I will investigate my own experiences with happiness in the light of this hypothesis and in connection with the keyword *smile* as a special way to encounter the world. Exploring my own experiences I discover a moment which appeared recently absolutely unexpectedly in a rather joyless period of my life. It seemed to appear out of nowhere and disappeared again soon afterwards.

## **Ecstasy**

I was confronted with a conflict at work that caused me to be extremely stressed. My back reacted with violent pain. My state of health got dramatically worse within a short time. I was absolutely unable to move and had to be taken to hospital. The paramedics gave me morphine to put me out of action in order to be able to carry me into the hospital. The morphine caused not only unconsciousness, but also a state which felt strange and weightless - a state which I would call "happy". Having arrived at the hospital feeling pretty hazy, I saw a nurse's face above my head. She spoke to me with a friendly smile checking my state of consciousness: „Hello, I am the nurse, Petra“. I answered enthusiastically that I am Peter without being conscious of my situation or understanding the context of my statement. Then I drifted off again. But I had been happy for just a moment.

The happiness, which I experienced in this situation, was different to every day life, because I was not aware of where I had come from or where I was going, of future or past. The fact that I was and that somebody spoke to me was enough for me to be happy. The morphine, which I had been given had caused this state. It not only reduced my pain and made me tired; it also caused disturbances in my state of consciousness. I experienced a feeling of time delay, gaps in my memory and euphoria. This description is suited to the effects of opium and can also be applied to our perception of happiness. Reality appeared as if it had been extracted from the temporal stream of the everyday life and touched me in my "being in the world". This kind of happiness is connected with a perception by which the reality which surrounds us touches us immediately.

It is worth inspecting this reality more closely. The content of the reported episode lasted no more than a moment in which another person gave me her smile and attention. My luck was connected with the fact that somebody welcomed me. This welcoming was self referencing: „I am the nurse Petra!“. Somebody took care of me, even if only for a moment. And this moment made me conscious of myself.

If we welcome one another, we create a relationship. This requires a special kind of perception, by which we relate to the person we encounter. I relate to someone and through this they find a resonance by which they experience themselves being in the world: "Where I am, there is a space for you to be!" The understanding of the other, Emmanuel Levinas states, cannot be distinguished from the way we address him ("I greet you!"). What is referred to here as 'you', is being addressed at the same time. The relation to another person begins with a greeting, before I know anything about him: I address him.

The moment in which I was addressed by the nurse Petra was like emerging from the darkness of my unconsciousness. I awoke just for a moment from my semiconscious state in order to sink back into it shortly afterwards. When finally the effects of the morphine wore off, so did the feeling of ecstasy and happiness. I was confronted with reality, my back pain, which reminded

me of past conflicts. In the words of Michel Serres, I had left paradise.

Michel Serres writes: „*We left paradise for the tree of knowledge...Why did we leave the garden where the water murmured? Awakening takes place in a bath of skin and bed; you are buried in a double thickness of flesh and wool; the sheet is the continuation of the epidermis, the body spreads into its soft pockets and folds. A tip emerges from the shadow, heat and strangeness, the end of a journey under water, the swimmer bumps against the bank, carried there by the current ...*” (313) For Michel Serres the place of knowledge is where we touch a shore: The other that we touch, which warms us, which we hear, smell or taste: “There is no aspect of our knowledge, which hasn't already been realized through our senses”, he says. I had now come to this point. However luck was nowhere to be seen.

The happiness that I felt for just a moment in the hospital was due less to my sensory consciousness than to other causes. It was caused by the morphine that moved me into unconsciousness and the nurse Petra who appeared for a short moment in front of me, before I returned to my semiconscious state. My perception was clouded by the morphine. As soon as the effects wore off, my luck disappeared. I was no longer in the euphoric mood, which had transformed my reality. I was back to being controlled by my physically weak constitution.

Maybe there are means which can move me into a state of happiness in such a way that I could become addicted to them. According to my experiences Morphine is potentially one of them. Indeed, my subjective feeling of happiness was in contrast to my helpless, physically weak state. I had no luck. Happiness that is connected with luck, so I conclude, is more than just a state which dips the world sometimes in this, sometimes in that light. Happiness is divided reality.

If we are looking for this kind of happiness, we have to look at the situations in which we share reality with our surroundings, with a stone, a tree, a piece of bark, with the setting sun or even with another person. This requires affection or at least attention to that which we meet. However we never control happiness. We can't cause it. Thus Heinrich Heine mocked the sentimental, romantic, natural emotion which was widespread in his time like in the following poem:

*A girl stood by the ocean, sighing long and longingly, for she was much affected by the sunset on the sea. “My lady, this old story? Allow me to ease your mind. It goes down here in front of us and comes back up behind.”*

Heinrich Heine wasn't wrong to criticize his contemporaries: There is a difference between how reality is transformed by us and how it appears. The sunset can be a surprise to us: If we see the sun in an unexpected moment like a fireball on the horizon, it can catch our attention even if we don't intend it. If we take a photo of the sunset, it transforms into 'the old story' - which Heine refers to in the poem. Happiness can be accessed neither discursively, nor figuratively: It can't be shown. I need a counterpart (person or thing that one relates to) in which I can experience it. The counterpart can never be the same as the happiness itself.

## **Smile please!**

Smiling is not just an expression of feeling at ease or happy. It is an everyday form of nonverbal communication, which can, but doesn't necessarily make someone else happy. If someone wants something from us, they smile more or less intentionally. If someone feels close to us they also smile. The question is, whether we can differentiate between these two smiles.

According to Paul Ekman and his *Facial Action Coding* system, there is only one of 19 kinds of

smiles, which is genuine and expresses a feeling of ease. Paul Ekman investigated facial expressions as a combination of 42 muscles and allocated different emotions to different combinations. A smile which expresses ease is identified by the corners of the mouth moving upwards and the eyes becoming narrower (contraction of the orbicularis oculi), and the upper halves of the cheeks rising. In contrast, the eyebrow muscle, which signalizes fear and shock, is relaxed. It is interesting that these facial expressions usually happen involuntarily and cannot be easily controlled.

Apparently the whole body and not only facial muscles are activated when someone smiles. The famous example is the Mona Lisa. Why is the Mona Lisa smiling? For centuries there have been different theories and interpretations. Once I happened to see the Mona Lisa upside down and discovered that she stops smiling. The painting is the same, but the facial expression seems to be different, because we see it in a different way. The thing that makes it so secretive, is that she's not smiling at all, she just seems to be. Investigating this phenomenon it was discovered that it's the way she tilts her head that gives that impression. In scientific terms it is called 'lateral flexion': The head turns either in this way or in that way and makes us believe, that somebody is smiling or not. This phenomenon leads to the question: Is the sense of meaning of an image determined by the artist or the viewer?'

When I smile, I enter into a state of resonance with my counterpart – that is if my smile is genuine and not calculating. Smiling is interactive and it is not clear whether it is determined by the person who smiles, or the person or thing that is being smiled at. The state of happiness that we feel in this interaction happens somewhere in between: Between me and the other. Smiling is an expression and a perception at the same time. What we perceive is connected to how we perceive. A knowing smile tells me something else than a curious, courteous or good-willed smile. How we approach a situation has an effect on what we perceive.

The kind of perception which comes with a genuine smile can be described as an aesthetic perception, which is very different to other kinds. I want to investigate this phenomenon further by taking a look at the term *rush*.

## **Rush**

*Rush* or *rushing* is a term which, as far as I know, the German philosopher Martin Seel introduced or reintroduced into the younger history of the philosophy of aesthetics. A *rush* can be seen as opposed to the morphine induced state of ecstasy, which was described earlier. We perceive it when we hear wind rushing through the trees, the sound or feeling of a waterfall or waves dancing on an expansive stretch of ocean in the sun. As opposed to ecstasy, rushing is bound to objects, to material reality, which means that it is not a rush of ecstasy inside me, but rather outside of me and characterizes a state in which an abundance of impressions become apparent without having a fixed form. It corresponds to a perception, which doesn't try to identify a particular shape. Instead it surrenders to the complexity of the situation. If I let my eyes pass absentmindedly over the ocean's surface, I have no intention other than devoting myself to the glittering movement. What makes such perception special, is that it is not focused on anything in particular but rather devotes itself to the abundance of the present moment. It could be described as perception on the edge of perceiving something, as hearing on the edge of hearing, as seeing on the edge of seeing, through which the subject reaches a state being in the present moment, which is without differences – a present moment, with which the perceiver can merge into one.

In art this kind of rushing is used as a mean of expression. John Cage investigated the rush of silence, which usually forms the vague backdrop of our perception:

*"It was at Harvard not quite forty years ago that I went into an anechoic [totally silent] chamber not expecting in that silent room to hear two sounds: one high, my nervous system in operation, one low, my blood in circulation. The reason I did not expect to hear those two sounds was that they were set into vibration without any intention on my part. That experience gave my life direction, the exploration of nonintention. No one else was doing that. I would do it for us. I did not know immediately what I was doing, nor, after all these years, have I found out much. I compose music. Yes, but how? I gave up making choices. In their place I put the asking of questions." (John Cage, 1990)*

Our perception can focus on our environment in various ways. I can be interested in the effects that things have on me and expect calculable results. If I have a warm bath, I feel relaxed afterwards. If I eat a large portion of pasta, I feel full afterwards. I perceive my environment in such a way as to learn how to get into states, which are pleasant to me.

This is different to being interested in the things themselves. If I taste a dish, I am not aiming to fill my stomach. If I stand in front of a raging waterfall, I am not aiming to use the water in order to clean myself. I allow myself to be captured by the things and share a reality with them, which we might call atmosphere and what can be compared to rush.

An aesthetic perception, however, is not just passive. Experiencing a rush requires a kind of perception, which goes with the rush. From this perspective this kind of perception is an active deed: By touching, I am touched. By moving, I am moved. And that is related to dance. I am dancing with which we might call "luck".

## **Dance**

Dance is part of the anthropological foundation of our beings and certainly also of our happiness. Dance and playing are closely related. Playing is movement. The body, says Michel Serres, *is far from behaving as a simple passive receptor...it exercises, trains, it can't help itself. It loves movement, goes looking for it, rejoices in becoming active, jumps, runs or dances, only knows itself, immediately and without language, in and through its passionate energy. It discovers its existence when muscles are on fire, when it is out of breath – at limits of exhaustion.*"

In this context, dance is not only meant as a bodily movement. We relate to our sensory environment through all of our senses like a dance.

How we perceive something or how it becomes visible to us depends on the perspective that we take. When I touch a soft surface with my hand in order to discover something about it, my experience corresponds to the manner of my touch. I experience myself through the contact. I touch and in doing so, I am touched. By 'speaking' I allow something else to speak. What speaks becomes visible at the surface: I allow it to speak.

My perception is determined by factors, which are like a dance movement: proximity, the direction of movement, the flow of energy in the movement, the touch and the contact as well as the silence and the spaces in between.

Sometimes in art therapy I feel like part of a dance, which just happens and draws my full attention. I am responding to what is coming to me, like in the following episode about the first session with a little boy:

*Martin is 8 years old. He is convinced that he is not able to paint. His friends say so too. Martin has*

*mobility problems. He is passionately interested in football. He is full of desire to move. He starts our first meeting with the words: "I cannot paint!" and I answer: "Never mind!". I put a big white sheet of paper in front of us. "What should I paint?" I ask him. "A mountain," he answers. I paint a mountain and ask: "What is on top of the mountain?" "A tree!" Finally Martin instructs me to paint clouds which seem (to me) to forebode a storm. Suddenly, without me noticing it, Martin also has a pencil in his hand and lets it circle with lively movements about the sheet of paper like the wind driving the leaves off the trees. As soon as Martin has painted the sun, it starts to rain from the dark clouds in the sky. The leaves of the tree are whirled around by the air and flowers are bending in the wind. With big movements Martin stretches a rainbow over the paper and enthusiastically lets the wind rush through the whole drawing. Raindrops are clapping onto the mountain and the water gathers in the lower parts of the drawing and rises higher and higher, until, finally, the mountain and everything on it sinks into the breaking water floods. We are both totally out of breath and sit laughing in front of a drawing which has completely fallen apart. We had been completely immersed in the story that happened while we were not noticing what we were doing. Martin had come into movement. An image had come to life and drawing had lost his fright. For the next session with Martin I brought along a box in which all elements of this drawing had their place: A leaf, which was being whirled around by the air, a raindrop, the tree, the cloud, the wind. Martin drew everything on small sheets of paper and put them into the box. Then a new game started. Martin chose three images out of the box without looking at them and used them as elements of a new drawing: The bird, the meadow, the wind or the rainbow, the cloud, the rain. Martin discovered a lot of new combinations, which gave rise to numerous new drawings. In these drawings he regained the abilities, which had been kept from him through his mobility problems: free and playful movement.*

Dance-like movement characterizes the dialogue between me and Martin in this example. It is based on a kind of perception, through which we relate to each other. This is part of our general communication behavior: We shake hands when we greet one another, we seek intimacy or distance, we look into each other's eyes or give each other looks, we retreat or take action, we react intensely or softly, we avoid each other or attack.

## **Encounter**

Encountering the world luck might happen to us and bring us happiness or not. I would like to give an example from a therapeutic practice for the way that brings along luck as a shared reality. A colleague of mine gave the following example as part of a study on art therapy with patients with dementia.

The therapist D. tells of a woman, who has a relatively progressed case of dementia. She is no longer able to communicate in a way that is understandable to others and hardly takes part in everyday activities in the old people's home, despite her ability to respond to being addressed. The art therapy aims to improve her activity and openness in everyday life.

She sits down in the studio. She looks at the painting materials, which the art therapist has prepared. They don't move her to do anything. The therapist picks up a few things and shows them to her. She touches them and they speak about it. Then they look out of the window at the garden and appreciate the flowers. The communication is less focused on semantics than on the emotional meanings of language or sounds. The art therapist later tells me that he doesn't understand what she is saying, but that he sees images and associations to the things that she is saying and relates to these to join in the conversation. He feels trusted and as though he can follow what she is expressing on an emotional level.

After fifteen minutes she loses interest and the therapist accompanies her back to her room. The

next day, she starts to occupy herself with the materials, by crushing chalk pastels on the palm of her hand. She expresses joy at the traces, which the pastels leave on her hand and the art therapist shares her joy. Finally he cautiously joins in by drawing on her hand. It is an almost tender encounter: her hand became "our piece", the therapist told me. But at the same time it remained "her hand". The bodily contact between them led to an intense perception of that which developed on the palm of her hand. They both marveled at the colours, the therapist reported, and as they merged and became different colours they were far more marvelous on her hand than they would have been on a piece of paper.

In one of the following sessions the patient put her hands together in the middle of a conversation and began to pray. After a while the therapist felt the urge to join in and spoke the prayer out loud. He told of a deep intimacy, which arose between him and the old lady in this moment. When the prayer was finished, she took the chalk pastels and began to draw with them on paper for the first time and with great determination she drew vertical lines.

One could speculate about the meaning of the interactions in this episode. Neither that which is said, nor the images, which emerged in the process, whether real or imaginary, can be read as definitive metaphors or signs. The level on which the art therapist communicated with the old lady is not discursive, but aesthetic. Aesthetic in this sense simply means a special form of perception. This form of perception is clearly different from a kind of perception, which aims to define, identify or grasp something in a form that can be put into words. An aesthetic perception is determined responsively, which means that living an experience leads to its understanding. Martin Buber describes the response, which is connected to this form of perception as "Internalize". He writes that the only thing that is of central importance, is that I take the response upon myself.

Sometimes, I would like to add, it might be a question, which is already a response.

### **Will happiness find me?**

There are questions, which have answers. They need no respond. Once the answer has been found, the question has been dealt with and is over. That often makes sense, but it seldom makes you happy. There are also questions, like those that children ask and make me happy for a moment, before a definitive answer follows: "Why is the sky blue?", "Why is spaghetti so long?" or "Why are you going to Saas Fee?". These questions focus on experiences, which are related to life itself. The questions themselves are meaningful, before they fulfill in answers.

If we want to understand something, we usually try to access the world through language. We develop theories, models and constructions about the world in which we live. We create encyclopedias and knowledge databases, which we use in order to manage our answers. They offer knowledge on tap, which we have entrusted them. But what about all that cannot be made accessible in such a form, all that requires our direct presence, our participation and our responsibility? What about all the treasures of knowledge, of which we cannot be sure, because they cannot simply be reproduced: Things, which can be understood as and of themselves. Moments, which require compassion. Encounters, which happen in silence or only become perceptible in their sound, smell, appearance or movement?

If we rely on language, it is often the answer, in which we are interested in and which it holds ready for us. That gives us a certain amount of security. But not all questions are looking for linguistic salvation. The questions are often far more interesting than the answers, which shut us off from alternative solutions.

Luck is more interested in questions than in answers.