Objects into Persons: The Way to Social Aesthetics

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Abstract: This essay traces the steps to social aesthetics. It begins by affirming the central place of sense experience for aesthetics and its refinement in the perceptual acuity of a developed sensibility. This leads to associating aesthetic appreciation with such perceptual experience. Rejecting the identification of disinterestedness with such appreciation, the present paper proposes the full participatory involvement in the experience of appreciation as expressed by the concept of aesthetic engagement. This describes the appreciative situation as an aesthetic field in which the perceptual, creative, focusing, and activating factors are in reciprocal interaction. It characterizes not only appreciation in the arts but occurs as well in appreciating natural, built, and social environments. Aesthetic engagement in social aesthetics is exemplified by the gaze in the experience of four well-known paintings I shall consider. Following these a series of related ideas are developed that lead to the concept of a social aesthetics. Finally, the essay returns to the paintings for an enhanced understanding of social aesthetics.
Keywords: Sensibility, perceptual experience, aesthetic appreciation, aesthetic engagement, social aestheticwords.

Aesthetic sensibility

Social aesthetics may seem a strange combination of terms. People usually associate aesthetics with the arts--their experience, their appreciation, their value. What can this have to do with society except in the most general sense? Actually, this customary way of thinking about aesthetics is needlessly narrow as well as vague. The purview of aesthetics can be broadened to embrace the natural and built environments, and the social environment, as well. Not only do activities concerned with the arts and natural beauty have a place in social life, but the values we recognize in such experiences are found more widely in social experience.

It might be useful to begin by explaining this by turning to the meaning of 'aesthetics.' Definitions do not solve philosophical problems, nor do etymologies. They can, however, help us recover the scope and issues with which we are concerned. The word 'aesthetics' comes from the Greek word aisthēsis, which literally means "perception by the senses." It began to be used in the mid-eighteenth century to refer to philosophical problems concerning the meaning and judgment of beauty in art and nature, although those issues had been discussed by philosophers since classical Greece. It is important to keep the etymology of 'aesthetics' in mind in dealing with such questions because it reminds us that sensory experience has a central place in the meaning and value of art and natural beauty.

Another important concept here is 'sensibility.' Sensibility is at the center of the aesthetic values we ascribe to art and nature. That is because sensibility connotes more than simply sensation; it includes a developed awareness of perceptual experience, something more like perceptual acuity. That is why we can understand aesthetics to involve the philosophical study of both sense experience and its refinement, in brief, as the theory of sensibility. Aesthetic sensibility is a valuable dimension of human experience. Most people have a strong response to the beauty of a colorful sunset and a panoramic landscape. It is also clear that such appreciation need not be limited to nature or to the arts. Acute perceptual awareness can

be part of all experience, including social experience. Some of the arts exhibit the aesthetic force of social relations in powerful ways, arts such as theater and film, and, perhaps less directly, poetry and the novel. Moreover, a sensitivity to the perceptual nuances in human relationships adds greatly to the richness of social experience, and this sensibility can be called aesthetic.[1]

These above-mentioned experiences are generally called "aesthetic experience." They are regarded as valuable and so may be considered a form of normative experience. It is important to recognize that acknowledging aesthetic experience as valuable does not commit us to considering such experience as necessarily positive. It is possible, and even common, for aesthetic experiences to be negative to varying degrees, although this is not often recognized or discussed.

Aesthetic appreciation is the valuing of such experience, from basking in the warming brightness of spring sunshine to discerning the weariness in the sitter's eyes in Rembrandt's late self-portraits. Although such experiences are widely had, there is considerable debate about how they are to be understood and explained.

Since the eighteenth century, aesthetic appreciation has commonly been explained by following a cognitive model. On the one side stands the appreciator and on the other the object of appreciation. It is claimed that appreciating an object aesthetically requires that one regard it for its own intrinsic qualities and on its own terms independent of its utility or other extrinsic values. The word usually used to describe this attitude is 'disinterested.' Kant proposed the concept of disinterestedness to identify the specifically aesthetic character in the appreciation of beauty: appreciating an object for its own sake and not for external reasons or uses. Disinterestedness does not mean lack of interest but rather not having appreciation distracted by outside interests. One should appreciate the object for its own sake, not for its extrinsic value. Disinterestedness thus is a kind of aesthetic objectification. While aesthetic value may be found in practical objects and situations, it is considered to have a lower value than "pure beauty."[2]

Although still widely accepted, disinterestedness has been strongly criticized in recent times for widely disparate reasons. Bourdieu developed a sociological critique of disinterestedness, regarding it as a social construct that is class-oriented, an insidious intellectual basis for bourgeois self-esteem. Disinterestedness, he held, is a means of supporting the social status quo by using an aesthetic criterion to mask and justify class taste and its superiority (Bourdieu 1979).

For many years I have been developing an alternative approach to understanding aesthetic value that I call "aesthetic engagement." Rather than using a cognitive model or a sociological analysis to explain aesthetic appreciation, this approach uses an experiential model. It is based on a phenomenological analysis of the direct experience of aesthetic appreciation, an experience commonly had of full participatory involvement in a situation that may include a work of art, a performance, an architectural or environmental location, or a social situation. In aesthetic engagement there is no separation between the components but a continuous exchange in which they act on each other. I call this situation 'the aesthetic field' (Berleant 1970, and 2000).

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[1] Sensibility is capable of being influenced and even manipulated by social forces and practices. I have explored such influence on aesthetic perception in what I call "the co-optation of sensibility" in an essay from 2017 called *The Subversion of Beauty* (unpublished, first presented at the XXth International Congress of Aesthetics, 2016).

[2] Kant was the principal advocate of disinterested appreciation, part of a philosophical tradition that goes back to Aristotle's elevation of the highest form of knowledge as contemplative. Using disinterestedness as the criterion of aesthetic appreciation, Kant called the aesthetic value in practical objects "dependent" beauty, in contrast with the "pure" beauty found in disinterested contemplation (See: Kant 1790).

The aesthetic field recognizes four principal components. There is an appreciator, the person experiencing aesthetic value. Then there is the focus of that appreciation, usually an object such as a work of art, a building, or a landscape. The object, however, need not be physically separate, as in appreciating a poem, a novel, or music and, indeed, it may even be a mental thought or image, as in conceptual art. Nor need it literally be an object. It is, rather, the point of focussed attention. A third component is the activity or event that brings the object of focus into experience: the artist, the processes of nature, or the perceptual act of identifying an object of appreciation, as in found art. Finally, the fourth feature is the factor that activates the field or situation, such as the performer or the engaged perceiver. It is important to note that a performative element is present in all art and aesthetic appreciation, for the appreciator who is actively engaged is, by that fact, "performing" the work by attentively viewing a painting or reading a novel.

This brief account is only a bare outline but it is enough to show the integrative nature of the aesthetic situation and the interconnection and interdependence of all its components. For the aesthetic field is not a combination of separate elements but a single whole.[3] That is what is implied in describing the appreciative experience by the term 'engagement.' Aesthetic engagement, then, conveys the integrative involvement in the normative experience we call "aesthetic."

While aesthetic appreciation as engagement is, perhaps, more readily associated with our experience of the arts, it is not confined to them, for we can have such appreciation with nature. People are often powerfully affected when encountering natural beauty in a sunrise or sunset, a flower, or a dramatic landscape, but aesthetic appreciation also occurs in other contexts. There is aesthetic value in a fine meal, in the pleasure of driving an automobile that functions perfectly, and in the somatic satisfaction of participating in a group activity, such as a sports team or a social organization. The fact that aesthetic value in these cases is not the only value involved does not diminish its significance but rather recognizes its pervasive presence.

In recent decades, environment has emerged as a major interest in aesthetics. Questions have been raised about what is included in the meaning of environment and how environments can be appreciated aesthetically. Consider first the idea of environment. You will notice “the” environment is not refered to but simply “environment” Is used. This is not done s deliberately because to speak of "the" environment turns environment into an object separate from the perceiver. This practice of objectifying things in order to study them, a cognitive model, is a long-established feature of scientific inquiry. It has obviously had considerable success in the physical sciences and in some practical situations. Whether that approach should be used in the human sciences, however, is open to question.

In my view, the world in which humans participate cannot be entirely separated from the human presence. There is rather a reciprocal relation between people and the things and conditions with which we live. And when environment involves human interests, it must necessarily be understood in relation to humans and not as an array of independent objects. We can find support for this in the work of social psychologists such as Kurt Lewin and J. J. Gibson. The social psychologist Kurt Lewin envisioned a social world comprised of vectors of force between participants and the things and conditions with which they interact. These vectors invite particular behaviors and this led Lewin to call them by the German term Affördungsqualitäten, translated into English as "invitational qualities." More recently, the perceptual psychologist J. J. Gibson studied the ways in which the design and appearance of environmental

[3] I articulated this view was more fully in *The Aesthetic Field: a Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Berleant l970) and in later publications.

configurations and objects encourage particular responses in human behavior. He called these connections "affordances" for behavior, clearly influenced by Lewin's terminology and resembling his observations. The work of Lewin and Gibson is important and instructive for it suggests that environment is not just open space filled with arrangements of independent objects but rather is a field of forces in compelling relationships of attraction, repulsion, and neutrality or indifference. Environment is, then, a field that includes the human participant.

When environment is experienced aesthetically, sensory features assume primary importance. This is the environmental meaning of aesthetic engagement. The human environment not only includes things in the natural world; it comprises most significantly humans as individuals and groups in their social and environmental relationships. For the human world is a social world. Moreover, there is an aesthetic dimension in human relations that often goes unrecognized. To point this out does not mean that human relations are always necessarily or primarily aesthetic but that an aesthetic factor may be present and at times may predominate (Berleant 1999).

The aesthetic occurs as a condition that has different aspects that are depicted in the aesthetic field. That of focus is critical here. The human is the center of attention, both perceptually and psychologically, as a physical, biological being and a cultural construction, and as a behavioral entity in our actions and responses.

As the aesthetic of humans becomes more pronounced in experience, it may merge with the moral, since the human presence is the focus of both aesthetic and moral value. For the irreducible value of human being is inseparably moral and aesthetic. There is a moral obligation, indeed a moral compulsion, to preserve and to honor a human life as there is to preserve and honor an outstanding artistic achievement. Their very existence is their aesthetic and moral claim.

Social aesthetics

It is now easier to see how aesthetic engagement relates to human relations and may, at times, suffuse a social situation. This may occur in group activities as when a shared enthusiasm develops that leads to a sense of expansiveness in a common situation and delight in its pursuit. This can be seen in team sports, in choral singing, between individuals in amorous relations, and perhaps in a most negative manifestation, in the total self-abnegation of a terrorist group (Berleant 2009).

What becomes clear is the pervasiveness of aesthetic engagement and its value in describing aesthetic appreciation both in art and nature and in human relations, as well. In the most general sense, aesthetic engagement occurs in social situations that lie outside the arts when aesthetic perception predominates in social relations. Some psychological theorists have recently identified similar occasions as "direct social perception" (DSP) and "basic empathy" (BE).

The idea of the aesthetic field can be useful here. As we have seen, the aesthetic field describes the context of interacting perceptual forces, and aesthetic engagement may at times characterize the perceptual experience of a social process. When it is an integral part of social relations, aesthetic engagement transforms that process, turning relationships governed by a utilitarian standard that objectifies people into a perceptual context of interdependencies. By recognizing the presence of the aesthetic, its influence can be enhanced by creating conditions that encourage aesthetic engagement. This may be through educational practices and environmental designs that facilitate an awareness of the

aesthetic dimension of experience in situations that may be personal, social, natural, or cultural, and that transform people as objects into people as persons.

To return to the paintings with which I began, we may ask if these images look any different now. Do they have anything significant in common? There are, of course, many common features. All the paintings are figurative; all depict people in various places and situations. As art works they were made using similar materials and techniques, and much more that is of varying and perhaps lesser relevance. But there is one feature of each image that has special significance.

Japanese print makers have noted that there is a feature in a print called the "crying point." This is the specific place that brings the entire print together and makes it work, activates it, so to speak. What makes the crying point important here is that it is not just a visual feature but the place in a print that evokes a visceral awareness that connects the print to the viewer, the work to its act of appreciation.

Now each of these paintings has a feature that acts in a similar way: the eyes. Each painting is not merely an object that depicts the likeness of the sitter. It invites the viewer to make contact, to engage with that person. The eyes in each painting are not just a feature of the face: they look at us. They look at and connect with us and we are led to gaze back at a person. The eyes are the crying point, so to say, not just the crying point of the painting but the crying point that activates the aesthetic field in which the painting and the viewer participate. For the eyes create a human relationship in which the image ceases to be simply a likeness, an object, and becomes a person with whom we enter into a relationship. This is a vivid instance of aesthetic engagement.

The aesthetic is not a substance, an object, a quality, or a feeling but the distinctive experiential character of a situation. The aesthetic does not displace the occasion on which it occurs but, so to speak, colors it, gives it a special, distinctive tone that we call aesthetic. An environmental situation is no less an environment when it is experienced aesthetically; it acquires a different, distinctive character. What is it that makes a social occasion aesthetic? To answer this question we must return to the field experience that describes the aesthetic.

As noted earlier, aesthetic engagement is an experience that displays four principal aspects: creative, performative, appreciative, and focused. While we can distinguish these aspects, they are not separate but thoroughly interpenetrate each other in aesthetic experience. Such experiences are most widely recognized in our engagement with the arts, but they also occur in different environmental settings, both natural and built, and in everyday life situations. Moreover, as this essay endeavors to show, the aesthetic may have an often unrecognized presence in a social environment. We can find it coloring the complex features of many social occasions. And when they are strongly present as a perceptual ensemble, we can consider that situation aesthetic.

Consider common social situations that typically evoke conventional, impersonal roles that position people as objects. Education easily devolves into teacher and student, commerce into salesperson and customer, business into representative and client; entertainment into performer and audience, a work environment into supervisor and worker; a medical visit into doctor and patient. These are binary types of relation between people objectified in impersonal roles whose places are occupied by human objects, relationships in which mechanical patterns replace the human exchanges and in which one of the pair is dominant and the other subordinate. How could this be otherwise? How can there be an aesthetic in such relationships? Don't we need these templates to conduct typical human affairs easily and efficiently?

Efficiency, however, is a mechanical value, a value in which the smooth operation of its parts is the mark of success. Yet efficiency is not a human value but a mechanical one. People require time and attention, time to acclimate themselves to the conditions of a situation and adapt to its requirements in order to function easily and well. And the unique value in and of individual people needs to be recognized and honored. How can the aesthetic transform such situations?

Consider the case of education.[4] What would transforming the student from a receptive object of education into an interested, attentive learner? An aesthetic model would display curiosity about the investigative process underlying the material being studied with interest in how it develops into justifiable knowledge, joining teacher and student in a collaborative quest. Such a situation would exemplify the four functional features of an aesthetic field: the scholar or scientist being the creative factor, the material being studied the focus, the teacher the performative factor, and the student the appreciative one. All join together, sharing their functions in the pursuit of understanding as a perceptual experience. It is important to acknowledge the powerful influence of environmental factors in conducing to aesthetic engagement: space, quiet, visual and physical comfort and stimulation all contribute. This analysis is, of course, abstract and minimal, but perhaps it shows the interdependent character and condition of aesthetic education.

Efforts are being made to recognize a social aesthetic in medical situations, particularly in patient care.5 What would change the stereotypical roles of medical professional and patient into an occasion of aesthetic engagement? As in the aesthetic appreciation of art, there is a focus of attention, in this case on the medical situation: the disease, infection, abnormality, disability, or other condition. A professional who is aesthetically aware performs a function by actively pursuing a plan of treatment designed to take into account not only the standard protocols but the particular characteristics, needs, and perceptions of the person being treated. The term 'patient' tends to institutionalize and prescribe a passive role. When aesthetically engaged, the individual undergoing treatment becomes an active participant, a collaborator in the process, understanding and appreciating everything that is done and making every effort to promote the optimum conditions for successful treatment. In this situation, as in all instances of aesthetic engagement, a human exchange takes place on a perceptual level, with eye contact, shared feeling, and interest that is palpable. Environing conditions also play a critical supporting role, where the space and decorative features of the treatment facility are carefully chosen, and distracting ambient sounds and other common disruptive conditions are monitored and modified so as to be conducive to healing.

The aesthetic field can illuminate and transform other social situations: in business, in commerce, in entertainment, and in routine activity involving manual labor or regular, simple patterns of activity. It is important to see the aesthetic not as a mechanical operation but as an experiential, perceptual process in which all four factors reciprocally influence each other. Such active perceptual engagement can transform the experience and influence the outcome. Perceptual awareness in human exchange can transfigure mindless, mechanical action, turning it into an activity of creative engagement. Such a social aesthetic expresses Aristotle's description of true friendship as between "*friends* [who] *wish alike for one another's good*" (Aristotle 1962, p. 219).

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[4] I explored this in an early study in social aesthetics, *Education as Aesthetic Process* (Berleant 1971) reprinted as *Education as Aesthetic* (Berleant 1997).

Conclusion

Aesthetic engagement is an experience of aesthetic appreciation that transforms a physical juxtaposition into a social relationship in which a personal encounter takes place. It projects the aesthetic connection we can experience in the arts into our engagement with other people and with things, as well, turning our encounter with separate, impersonal objects into personal relationships. Moreover, the paintings with which we began are not anomalous cases peculiar to portrait and figure painting; in a manner of speaking every painting looks back. So does every art work. So, too, can every thing in the human world. This is implicit in the idea of aesthetic engagement and why it is central to a social aesthetic. Indeed, a social aesthetic shows us how to create and live in a human world: how to humanize the world. By centering on the aesthetic, we see how human relations may resemble the experience of the holy in religion, the recognition of the sanctity of human life in ethics, and the ultimate value of the individual in the philosophy of democracy. The aesthetic embodies the defining value in each.

We have now traversed the conceptual stages that lead to an understanding of social aesthetics. Beginning by recognizing sense perception as central in aesthetic experience, we came to see how a developed sensibility underlies aesthetic appreciation. Acknowledging the participatory nature of such appreciation led to rejecting disinterestedness as its defining feature in favor of aesthetic engagement. The idea of an aesthetic field provided the basis for describing the complexity and the integral, contextual character of aesthetic experience.

This understanding of the aesthetic leads to the realization that such experience is not confined to the arts but extends to environments and to the human world, more generally. The pervasiveness of the aesthetic thus provides a different model for grasping human values. For aesthetic perception pervades the human world and, because experience is broadly social, we are led to recognize the omnipresence of a social aesthetic.

This is not simply a conceptual relationship. It has endless practical ramifications for all human activities, both necessary and freely chosen, and for the quality of human life most generally. A social aesthetic may characterize personal relationships, vocational situations, educational, therapeutic, and creative activities and, ideally, political processes. Because human life is thoroughly and pervasively social, social aesthetics offers a basis for a humane world view, one that both redeems our humanity and guides us in fulfilling it.[6]

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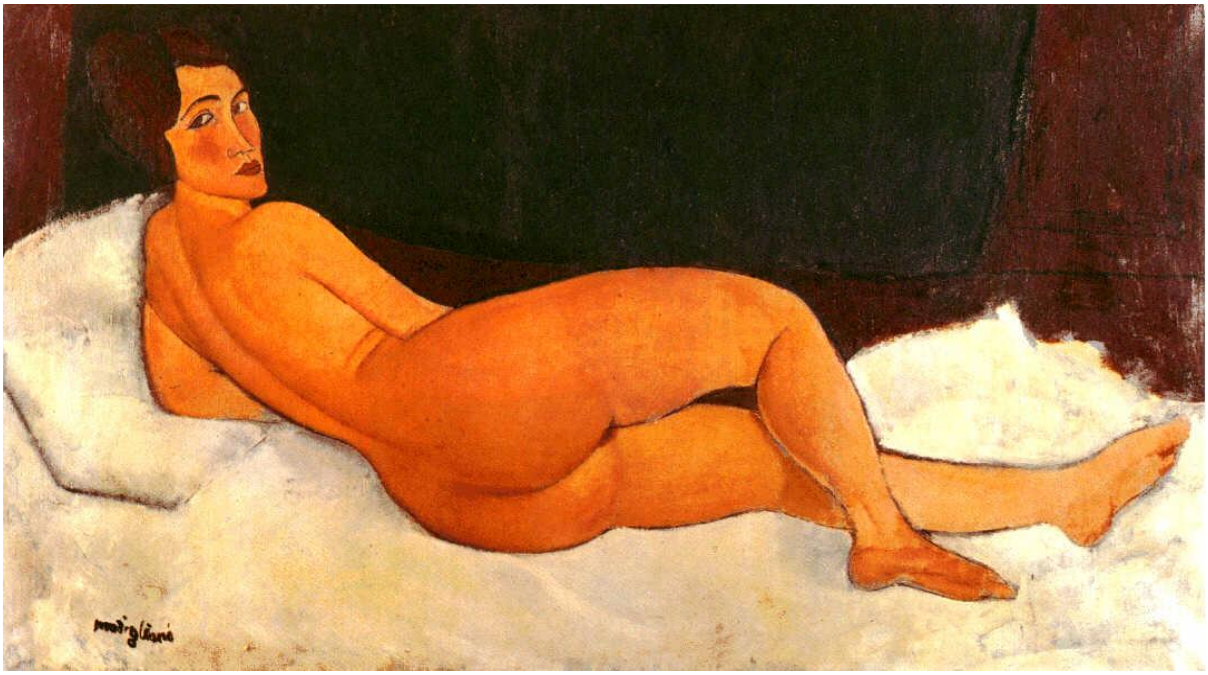

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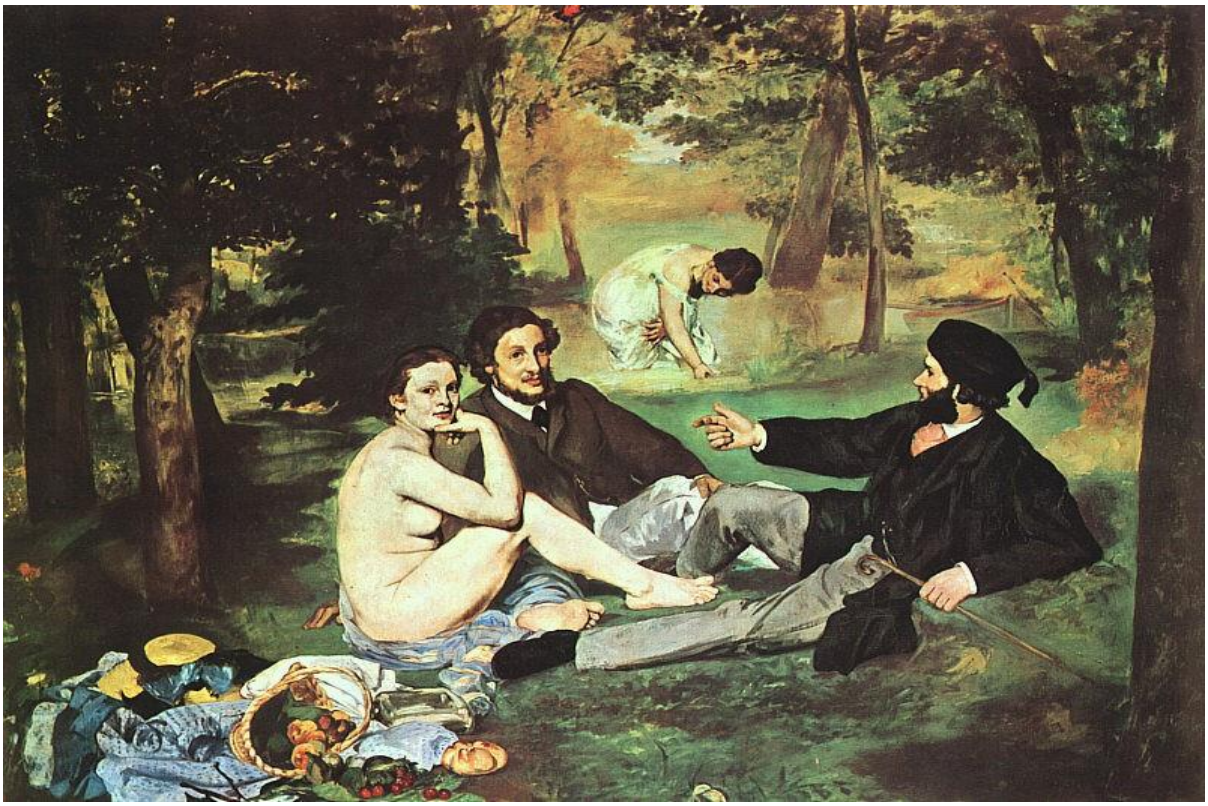

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