

AESTHETICS: WHAT IS ART?

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Aesthetics is one of two main branches of value theory in philosophy. Ethics is a study of values in human conduct. Aesthetics is a study of value in art. The word traces its origin to a Greek word that means sense appearance. However that could too narrowly define the field when we consider that art include prose and poetic literature. We could quibble that literature always has an auditory component. When we read literature the sounds and inflections of words accompany our thoughts. We could solve the problem by saying that aesthetics is a study of value in the plastic, visual, conceptual, auditory and performance arts.

The difficulty of answering the question: “What is art?” is a major one in aesthetics. The term has to cover a vast variety of media, from the plastic arts of painting and sculpture, to music, literature and the performing arts of dance, opera, and theater. It can even be expanded to certain performance sports like ice-skating, water ballet, diving and gymnastics. Seeking a common definition that covers the wide number of art productions from the earliest cave drawings to the latest experimental film is difficult. The definition would have to identify both Marcel Duchamp’s *The Fountain* (which is a urinal set in a glass cube) and Michelangelo’s *Pieta* as equally works of art. The most uncontroversial and agreed upon definition is that art is anything that is artificial, that is anything that humans make which is not simply something that exists in nature. Even that might be tested by, say Picasso’s found object sculptures, many of which consist of natural objects. However Picasso juxtaposes these natural objects into unique forms. If, however, I place a twig in a frame and hang it on a museum wall that might qualify as art since I have taken it out of its natural context and intend it to be seen as though it were a production of an artist. We will see that Arthur Danto will claim that it is the referential nature of art that distinguishes it from natural objects (a twig on a tree doesn’t refer to anything.) More provocatively Marshall McLuhan (*The Medium is the Message*) claimed that “art is anything we can get away with.”

It should be obvious by the above that there is nothing uncontroversial about aesthetics including the very definition of art. Still the rumination and analyses of philosophers who think about these issues have consistently enhanced the enjoyment of those who love the arts because they highlight multiple features of the aesthetic experience. In this short introduction I want to briefly discuss how aesthetics interrelates with the other main branches of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and political philosophy.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that inquires about the being or reality of things. Aesthetics interrelates with metaphysics when one inquires about the ontological status of the work of art. What kind of being is it? Back in the 5th Century BC, the Greeks of ancient Athens interpreted aesthetics as a search for what made an object beautiful. Plato saw that there were many beautiful things such as paintings, mosaics, sculptures, lyric poetry, epic poetry, all beautiful but not Beauty Itself. When an artist makes a beautiful thing she mysteriously attunes herself with a secret reality that lies beneath and behind the concrete work of art, something that is not itself visible or tangible, i.e. to the Ideal universal and eternal Form (*eidos*) of Beauty Itself. In the Middle Ages, theologian/philosophers like St. Thomas Aquinas made beauty one of the transcendental properties of God. Thus God being infinitely beautiful created the world in which His beauty would be manifested both in the natural world and in the human artistic creations that imitated the natural world. Consequently the artist attempted to imitate the natural world in order to reveal the supernatural world beyond it.

Plato was suspicious of the artist as one who not only could reveal the natural world but could distort it as well. Since the natural world was only an imitation of the really real of the Ideal Forms, art was an imitation of an imitation. Better to forget about art and contemplate the pure Forms directly. In the nineteenth century, following the aesthetic writings of Immanuel Kant, the quest for beauty was augmented by the search for the sublime. Beauty is experienced when a perceived object most perfectly embodies our pre-formed idea of its nature. This felt sense of the aptness of the representation to the nature of what it represents is beauty. However, there are times when confronted with the immense forces of nature or by works of art which defy our ability to fully take them in and rationally interpret them. Subsequently we have emotional responses to the overwhelming visual and auditory array giving rise to the sense of the sublime—an experience which transcends reason.

The Achilles' heal of the representational view of art (judging a work on how well it could imitate, realistically depict, capture the true universal essence of a thing, or reveal the Divine origin of things) has always been music. What does music, especially non-vocal music, depict? Despite the best efforts of Romanticist artists and critics, not every piece of music tells a story or depicts a natural phenomenon. About the time of the invention of photography, artists, critics and public alike began to realize that the work of art had never been a mere imitation or copy of nature. Viewing a framed painting was not really like looking through a window, and Botticelli's women are worlds apart from a woman photographed or directly observed. Aestheticians focused on the art *object* itself, and not on any alleged *subject*, as art became less and less representational and more and more divorced from both natural and supernatural beings. If what we perceive in the work of art is the work of art, what is that, since certainly we do not merely perceive the raw materials from which the work is crafted? It is not oil paint blotches that we see in a Cezanne landscape, nor is it Montaigne Saint-Victoire as a real mountain. We enter the visual world of Cezanne and perceive the art object that conveys simultaneously a sense of depth and of flatness of the picture surface as well. We do not perceive isolated blobs of color, but shapes and forms in a style in a composition (the visual Cezannesque "world") unique to the artist. Susanne Langer will call this peculiar world the "virtual space" of the painting as distinguished from the actual dimensions of the canvas. Get too close to the work and it disappears. Not only does the form and unity disappear, but the medium (the materials and the psychological and emotional associations we have when we see the materials) disappear and only the bare materials remain (stretched canvas and oil paint smears.) Later

abstract expressionist artists will present shape and color divorced (abstracted) entirely from a discernible subject matter. Artists such as Ad Reinhardt title their painting as *Number 43*, which depicts nothing at all discernible in nature.

The shift from the artist's subject to the artistic object by aestheticians brings us to the interrelationship between aesthetics and epistemology.

Epistemology

The mysteriousness of the reality of the artistic object gets clarified when we stop looking for the supernatural or natural origins of the work and concentrate on the intentional object of the work. Problems such as how a work of art such as a play, opera, dance or orchestral piece might exist in multiple manifestations or performances and yet remain a single work of art are also alleviated when we consider that the notation of the work allows the presentation of the artistic object to a variety of audiences or viewers. The work of art exists between the materials used by the artist or the performers and the consciousnesses of the audience or viewers. Without the pattern recognition aptitudes of our minds there would be no work of art. Aestheticians like Norman Goodman in *Art and Illusion* bring this relationship out in high definition. It should have been obvious to us that the glint of the sun emerging over the hills at dusk is not a light beaming from the back of the painting but a smear of titanium white oil paint, that a line can be perceived as a surface and a three-dimensional cube produced by grey tints juxtaposed against broad flat areas on a two-dimensional canvas. If an audience member jumps up onto the stage to save the damsel in distress, he has obviously mistaken the art object for natural reality. This brings us to an interesting set of questions. If the artwork is the phenomenal object and not the natural materials from which it is comprised, what is the relationship between art and truth? Verisimilitude may be one of the qualities that we appreciate in art as when a visitor waded at the painted sons of Charles Wilson Peale in his *The Staircase Group* or when Meryl Streep is praised for capturing the look, voice and mannerisms of Margaret Thatcher in the *Iron Lady*. However, the copy view of art hardly applies to the prostitutes in Picasso's cubist *Demoiselles d'Avignon* or to the form of a Mozart sonata. That having been said, we would still like the proposition "Sherlock Holmes smokes a pipe." to be true, whereas "Sherlock Holmes was a vampire" is understood as false.

There are several contenders for the criterion of truth in art. Some aestheticians claim that the deliberate intention of the artist is the basis of the true interpretation of the work of art. The art purists or formalists reject the intention-of-the-artist theory. The later say that appreciation of artistic form independent of any reference to a subject or the emotions or intentions of the creator of the art work is the aesthetic experience. We might appreciate the information we receive from the art work about history for example, or enjoy the patriotic emotions engendered in us about the heroes of the last war that art brings out. But these are not aesthetic qualities according to the purists. Only our appreciation of artistic form should constitute our aesthetic appreciation and the truth of the piece. Clive Bell and Roger Fry are proponents of the purist position. The intentions of the artist cannot be, according to them, what is truest about the work because the artist may not be conscious of what she is intending in the work, the work may not in fact successfully reflect the intentions of the artist and it doesn't make any difference anyway because the meaning the art work has must be derived from the form of the work itself. The audience may in fact give the work entirely different meaning than what the artist intended. And again, for the purist any extra-aesthetic meaning the work may have is irrelevant to the worth of the work aesthetically.

Another contender for the truth of a work of art comes from the Expressionists. For them the aesthetic experience is primarily the emotions that the work of art evokes in its audience, readers or viewers. That art works evoke a wide spectrum of emotions in us from terror, horror, sadness, nostalgia, anxiety, to awe, wonder, compassion, empathy, love, and reverence can hardly be denied. It is also uncontroversial that artists often attempt to convey in their productions emotions that they themselves feel in response to their own life's experience. The purists would however claim that the artist's own emotional history is irrelevant to the appreciation of the art object since whatever emotive elements are present in the object are the one's that are accessible and not the dark recesses of the artist's mind. If we cry when Mimi dies in the last scene of *La Bohème* because it reminds us of a recent loss of a close relative we are missing the appreciation of the artistic form. The expressionists however would say the tears are a proper response to the emotional expressiveness that is present in the swelling sobriety in the minor key that Puccini has penned for the orchestra to play and the protagonists to sing. Suzanne Langer, who is a prominent proponent of the expressionist theory of art, states that music is the language of the emotions (Cf. *Feeling and Form*). It is not the actual emotions of the composer but the musical composition that exhibits a family resemblance with our emotional lives. For example, emotions and music are both temporal phenomena, they are both expressible in dynamic terms like *accelerando* and *decelerando*, *sostenuto* and *allegro*. This is why, she contends, that even absolute music, music that is totally abstracted from a natural reference, can elicit emotions because of the structural similarity with our own emotions. A similar analysis could be made for the connotation of words used by poets or the use of symmetry and asymmetry in architecture. The human psychological make-up formed within a historically based culture has already assigned emotional associations with the various elements in artistic media. The artist draws upon these emotively latent media elements in the composition of his works. Suffice it to say that the purists like Clive Bell and Roger Fry would find that any emotion evoked by the artwork (other than the, at times intense, satisfaction that comes from recognizing the form of the art object) to be distraught nonsense and outside the aesthetic realm.

Ethics and Political Philosophy

The relationship between Aesthetics and Ethics is intriguing because the artist/composer has always had an ambiguous relationship with society. On the one hand, she is dismissed as a craftsman or decorator, on the other a cultural hero (e.g. within the city-states of Renaissance Italy) or as national icon (e.g. the composers and authors of Tsarist Russia). On the one hand she is called upon to promote the revered ethical values of a society and on the other feared as a bohemian incendiary threatening the moral core of a culture.

Again the purists would say that expecting art works to either reinforce ethical or cultural values or to denigrate the same is a major category mistake. Aesthetic values have nothing to do with moral values. Since however art cannot be extracted fully from the historical contexts of not only the societies within which the artists work but also from classical aesthetic theories that associated art with beauty and alleged obligations of the human community to pursue beauty in the world and in the character of persons, the philosophy of art has attempted to show the relationship between art and moral and political values. Plato for one recognized the value of art as a medium for conveying moral and political values. In fact the pedagogy of ancient Athens consisted mainly in the singing of Homeric epic poetry in unison by the youth of the city-state. As the principal means of educating the sensibilities, psychic harmonies and civic responsibilities of the great-souled individual, Plato was in favor of severely censoring

Homeric depictions of both heroes and gods as vengeful, licentious, duplicitous or unjust. This one illustration of a classical art criticism shows that art has been historically both lionized as a central means of propagandizing moral, religious, cultural or political values and castigated as potentially dangerous to those values calling for censorship, prosecution, or banning by Church or State or both.

The Freudian and the Marxist aesthetics feature ethically relevant components. Freudian interpreters of art expression see art works as the result of a titanic struggle between the artist's asocial, uncultured, rapacious libidinous ego and the lawful, ethical, cultivated and sophisticated super-ego. Nietzsche anticipated the Freudian analysis in the nineteenth century. Marxist art critics find that artworks always represent the values of the dominant and exploitative class in a society. Thus they see contemporary artists who seek an unprecedented individualistic style (a style which not only invents a new work but an entirely new genre of work) to be the result of a bourgeois capitalistic celebration of the individual rights, justifying the liberty of corporations to exploit the laboring classes. Suffice it to say that any artist who seeks the public's recognition of her work will find the work judged not only on its aesthetic values but also for its negative or positive effect on the public sensibilities. The battle between the censors and the freedom of expression advocates goes on and on.

This brings us to one final consideration that many would have considered to be the most prominent concern of aestheticians. What makes a work of art a good work of art? There's no deficit of art critics out there trying to guide our weekend plans at the gallery, theater or recital hall. Aestheticians have conflicted over the very possibility of a single universal aesthetic standard for judging the myriad works and genres of art over the millennia as either good or bad art. Pluralists who reject a single all-encompassing standard contend that the criterion a great dance performance is distinct from the criterion for great literature, and so on. Aestheticians have tried to distinguish between subjective tastes (relative to a group or an individual) and aesthetic appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the phenomenal objective. Sometimes called the subjective universal, these qualities rely as much upon the subjective projections of the audience or reader as the objective structure of the artwork to achieve the experience; and yet allegedly there is some quality of the object that evokes a universal human response to those sufficiently prepared to receive it. The assumption of all art critics is that their own evaluation of an artwork is generalizable to the aesthetically sophisticated audience.

One contemporary aesthetician is bold enough to offer a criterion for great art that transcends time, culture and the varying genres of art. Monroe Beardsley's provocative notion of compendiousness as a criterion of art bears noting (*The Aesthetic Point of View*). When a work of art is compendious it exhibits three sub-criteria: unity, complexity, and intensity. Works of art are good when they convey a depth of meaning, diversity or intensity with an economy of means or when a diversity of elements pull together in an overall unity of form. When a Chinese artist renders an old man trudging through the snow with a single stroke of a brush, the fullness of meaning with the economy of means is impressive. Minimalism is an example of this but Warhol's silk screens of the *Campbells Soup Can* might also qualify because he conveys the vast banality of commercial culture with a sparse use of materials. Needless to say that even the correct application of the Beardsleyan criterion to the myriads of art works will be contentious for aestheticians for the indefinite future.

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