

Aesthetics Introduction

Theories of art and art itself exist within a context—philosophical, cultural, class and gender specific—from which it emerges and without which it does not exist. Philosophers and art theorists cannot escape the influence of past philosophers and theorists any more than they can remain untouched by current trends in film, technology, and architecture. Art and culture and theories of art and culture are inseparably and organically linked together. Furthermore, this is not a static or eternal pattern but one that is dynamic, fluid, constantly changing historically over time.

Aesthetics (as the study of art and beauty), aesthetic experience (the proper way of approach and experience art and beauty), and modern art (art for art's sake) all arose together at approx. the same time as expressions of modernist culture (somewhere between the Renaissance and the middle of the 20th century).

Aesthetics is the name of the philosophical study of art and natural beauty. It is a relatively new branch of philosophy that arose in the early 18th century (early 1700's) in England and Germany, over 2000 years after the beginnings of other branches of Western philosophy (which began in Greece around 600 B.C.E.)

Aesthetics is closely related to the concept of aesthetic experience. Baumgarten who coined the term aesthetics, claimed that humans experience the world in two fundamentally ways—logically and aesthetically.

- *Logically*—that is a thorn, it will hurt if it pricks me
- *Aesthetically*—enjoying a sunset, looking at seashells, enjoying a work of art. These things are beautiful because you are looking at them aesthetically.

What we call art, or more properly *fine art*, is therefore, according to the 18th +19th century tradition of the aesthetic, those objects made by humans to be enjoyed aesthetically. So, Paleolithic European cave paintings, Native American wood carvings are not really art according to some because they were made by people before the emergence of aesthetic experience.

So, art created as art, aesthetic experience and aesthetics are notions that all arose together. These human ways of interpreting the world have not always existed since the dawn of human society and not even since the beginning of Western civilization. Philosophy is often thought of as a kind of systematic reflection of our ordinary commonsense intuitions and deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions. This would mean that aesthetics is a reflection on ideas we already have about art and artists. If aesthetics is a branch of philosophy and philosophy is a reflection of our ordinary commonsense intuition, then, in a sense, we already know what art, aesthetics, and artists are.

But these commonsense intuitions may be so deeply engrained and internalized that we may take them for granted. Perhaps we can more fully experience artworks if we enlarge our perspective. How do we do this?

Our way of viewing art from an aesthetic point of view is only one way of looking at things. It appears at a certain point in the history of certain cultures and may just as easily disappear and be replaced by another way of viewing things.

The ideas of aesthetic enjoyment and fine art and artist arose in what we call the modern period (end of 17th century to middle of 20th).

Main points of modernist aesthetics are:

1. Aesthetic experience is nonutilitarian
2. Aesthetic experience is detached from ordinary self-interested pursuits (is disinterested)
3. Works of art are made to be viewed aesthetically—and so just to be enjoyed (For no other purpose)
4. Everyone can appreciate art just by adopting the aesthetic point of view
5. Artists see things in a unique way and creatively find innovative ways of communicating that vision to us
6. Artists show us how to look at the world, how to understand ourselves, who we are
7. Works of art express these unusual ideas of artists
8. Great works of art must be innovative and creative, expressing new ideas in new ways
9. The history of art is the history of these great innovations by these great artists
10. Art is not hard to understand—it just requires that we adopt the aesthetic point of view

The story of aesthetics begins with Hobbes's claim that all human perception is self interested. Many people disagreed with Hobbes and thought that some human actions were disinterested, that is, done for their own sake, enjoyed and appreciated for their own sake. And one large subset of such disinterested actions were those associated with art and natural beauty.

The reaction began in Britain with the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) who said we can love things for themselves (good wine, a beautiful sunset, a painting). Deciding what we should love and appreciate in this way is a matter of taste, a kind of inner sensation, or feeling. It is not something you can learn from a book.

As I mentioned earlier, In the 1750's Alexander Baumgarten pursued this idea by dividing all human thought into two broad categories—logic and aesthetics. After Baumgarten, the British worked on the idea of good taste as kind of refined

sensibility available to anyone who would adopt the detached, disinterested aesthetic point of view. And still later, at the very end of the 18th century, the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant synthesized the work of the British taste theorists and the German attempts to define the aesthetic as differentiated from the logical, and Kant's efforts pretty well defined and stabilized the tradition of the aesthetic attitude for the next 150 years.

Questions:

1. We can ask whether at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st, are we still in the modernist period or are we moving beyond that into a postmodern place, a post-aesthetic phase?
2. One of the most interesting issues in this ongoing debate is whether art merely reflects the existing politics of the status quo or whether art can create new ways of looking at things that may challenge the status quo. Does art have its own voice, can it generate its own point of view, or is it merely the expression, symptom, reflex of a larger political system?

This second question leads us back Plato's theory of art which can be classified under the general heading "Theories of Imitation". Plato explored two fundamental aspects of imitation: the nature of imitation itself and the bad effects of imitation itself. First, we turn to the nature of imitation.

Plato approached this point analytically and logically. Take an object in the sensory world, a bed for example. An observer can pick out its unity or commonality as a type or kind of thing, and its diversity as multiple instances of that thing. Beds are identifiable as beds and yet are different from trees. Logically, Plato argues, there must be a single ideal form that accounts for the unity (it is the philosopher who is able to apprehend the forms—understood through the mind's eye—not our physical eyes). Plato assigned priority to the single form which comes logically before sensory instances of that form.

Plato's analysis of imitation as a concept results in a threefold distinction in reality:

Forms—mind's eye → Sensory objects/physical objects → images/pictures/poems about beds.

Plato thought that the sensory world imitated the world of forms. So, poems/art are doubly removed from reality since they mirror the physical world. So, art is an illusion of an illusion. Images and pictures are only imitations of imitations.

Plato distinguished in a fundamental way between appearance and reality. Reality is not found in the immediate present, but in an accessible but protected sacred realm of forms that the present imitates. An imitation can be more or less true depending on how close it is to the original.

Painting is an art that will produce only inferior imitative instances on this scheme. Plato shows poetry to belong to the same imitative scheme, so the poet is

in no better position than the painter or naïve imitator who holds up a mirror to the world. None of the arts can claim knowledge because of where they stand in the imitative hierarchy.

Historical Introduction to Aesthetics

The problems, questions, and concepts included in aesthetics and philosophy of art are many and this sometimes makes a study of the literature of aesthetics a difficult and perplexing matter. However, the problems of aesthetics when studied historically (As I hope this short sketch of the origins of aesthetic questions will indicate) and the questions of philosophers are actually closely related.

The questions included within the study of aesthetics have developed out of twin concerns in the history of thought: the theory of beauty and the theory of art.

These two concerns were first discussed by Plato. Even though philosophers have disagreed about how art should be defined, they have continued to debate the theory of art in roughly similar terms as Plato until very recently. However, the theory of beauty underwent an important and monumental change in the 18th century. (Kant). 18th century thinkers, instead of only taking about the nature of beauty, added additional concepts, the sublime, the picturesque. That is, they added additional concepts to the study of beauty.

At the same time, another development was taking place and this is that the concept of the aesthetic was being worked out (Hutcheson, Burke, Alison, Kant). Generally speaking, these philosophers were concerned to develop a theory of taste that would allow them to explain the **experience** of the beautiful.

The notion of disinterestedness is at the core of these analyses and is the center of these philosophers's concept of the aesthetic. What happened is that the idea of beauty was broken up and fragmented and gradually was replaced by the concept of the aesthetic. After the 18th century, the word beautiful came to be seen as equivalent to "having aesthetic value".

Since the 18th century then, the twin concerns of aestheticians have been the theory of the aesthetic and the theory of art.

First I will sketch out some major theories of beauty in the tradition and then I will move onto the theories of taste as they developed in the 18th century (and the development of the term aesthetics began). Following these two sections, we can explore theories of art beginning again with Plato's imitation theory that you witnessed in his allegory of the cave reading.

PLATO

A good example of Plato's understanding of beauty can be found in the *Symposium*. This dialogue devoted to praising and exploring love, ultimately gives us a definition of beauty as understood by Plato. He explains that it is the Form of Beauty that is the object of love. Diotima's teachings describe a ladder of love that moves from the appreciation of singular beautiful bodies on up to the ultimate and higher contemplation of the Form of Beauty that makes it possible for us to discern individual cases of beauty at all. Those who have ascended the ladder of love learn that the beauty of the soul is superior to the beauty of bodies.

The Platonic philosophy of beauty does not have much interest in the world of sense and considers it from a philosophical point of view to be a kind of illusion and a potential source of error. According to Plato, beauty transcends the world of sense experience, which means that the experience of beauty is different from what would be described as aesthetic experience today. His theory dismisses sights and sounds as illusory.

Plato does however take an interest in the beautiful things of the world of sense. He does try to figure out what all beautiful things share in common. But for Plato, beauty is a simple, unanalyzable property and is logically similar to a primitive term such as red (cannot be defined—can only be understood by direct sense experience).

If we look at Plato's theory of art, we see that he held an imitation theory of art that focuses attention on the objective properties of the work of art. The theory of art in Plato is object centered. This leads to Plato's negative estimation of art as twice removed from reality and a poor source of knowledge. Art is doubly unreal and is an inferior product and poor model for moral conduct. Plato's characterization of paintings as untrue appearances may be understood as the origin of the view that art is illusion, a view held by a number of present day theorists.

Plotinus

Plotinus, like Plato, thought that the experience of beauty itself is not a sensuous experience but an intellectual one. One of the most important results of both these theories of beauty was the establishment of contemplation as a central idea in the theory of beauty and consequently in the theory of aesthetic experience. Almost all aesthetic theories have maintained that the experience of beauty, or more generally, aesthetic experience, involves contemplation.

When Plato and Plotinus thought of contemplation, they meant that a person had an awareness of a nonsensuous object.

Of course, meditation can also be linked to the sensory world.

St. Thomas Aquinas (354-430 AD)

Aquinas' understanding of beauty is not an unworldly one; he defines beauty as "that which pleases when seen". Objects please when they have the conditions of beauty which are perfection, proportion and brightness or clarity.

Importantly, his theory has both objective and subjective aspects. The idea of pleasing brings in the notion of the subject who is pleased. Being pleased is a property of a subject. This is a significant step away from the objective Platonic conception of beauty toward a subjective account. This subjective concept of beauty will reach its high point in the theories of 18th century philosophers.

As we progress towards the Renaissance, we find a great interest in more concrete and specific topics such as the theory of painting and the theory of architecture. There is also a resurgence of Neoplatonism at this time.

The 18th Century: Taste and the Decline of Beauty

The 18th century brings us into a critical and important time in the history of aesthetics. It is during this time that philosophers provided the basis for aesthetics in its modern form. During the middle of the century, the German philosopher, Alexander Baumgarten coined the term aesthetics. It is at this time that the philosophical tradition tried to explain behavior and mental phenomena by attributing each kind of phenomenon to a distinct faculty of the mind.

For example, the vegetative faculty (explains nutrition and procreation), the locomotive faculty explains movement, the rational faculty explains mental behavior, the sensory faculties explain perception, imagination, etc.

Prior to the 18th century, it was generally assumed that beauty named an objective property of things. But in the 18th century, there was a shift to talking about taste and thus a shift onto the subjective faculties of the perceiver. In the hands of these philosophers, philosophy, philosophy of art became subjectivized. What this means is that philosophers turned their attention towards the subject and analyzed the states of the subject's mind and his mental faculties. For example, British philosophers thought that they had discovered a new internal sense (in the subject)—the sense of beauty.

The establishment of aesthetic theory as the theory that unifies the problems of the theory of beauty and the philosophy of taste was not completed in the 18th century. However, Kant's views near the end of the 18th century incorporated the insights of the British aestheticians and came close to being a unified aesthetic theory. By aesthetic theory I mean a theory that makes the concept of the aesthetic basic and defines other concepts of the theory in terms of the aesthetic.

First I will describe Hume's views because they serve as the best contrast to Kant's and then I will move onto discuss Kant. We will read selections from both for next week's classes.

In Hume's "Standard of Taste" he makes it clear that his investigation into the nature of taste is an empirical investigation of certain aspects of human nature.

Hume denies that we rationally intuit beauty or the rules that govern it. For him, the foundation of our understanding of taste is to be found in experience. His claim then is that the normative question of what is correct to call beautiful can be solved by a comprehensive empirical survey of the taste of men. This is the feature of Hume's view that most vividly contrasts with Kant.

Hume concludes that beauty is not in objects but is a feeling. These feelings are linked by the nature of our human constitution to certain qualities in objects.

--faculty of taste is more refined and developed in some people. He also claims that standards of taste vary according to age and temperament

So, it is possible to have objective judgments about beauty in the sense that there might be universal agreement among normal subjects. (Hume—experiential account of beauty and taste)

KANT

Kant tried to show how it is possible for us to have some knowledge which is certain unlike Hume who thought that since knowledge derives from experience we cannot be certain of anything. The differences between Hume and Kant show up in their different philosophies of taste. The empiricists (Hume) understood the philosophy of taste as an empirical inquiry into the object which can lead to a psychological generalization about human nature. Kant conceives of the philosophy of taste as an inquiry into the a priori foundations of knowledge which will show why judgments of beauty are universal and necessary.

For Kant, all aesthetic judgments focus on pleasure, which is a property of the experiencing rather than of the objective world. But even if judgments about beauty are subjective, Kant does also think that they are stable and universal in a way that other pleasures are not. (pleasure felt with beauty is different than with other pleasures of taste like our pleasure of taste involved in consuming chocolate for example).

Kant's theory of beauty can be summarized in a sentence: A judgment of beauty is a disinterested, universal, and necessary judgment concerning the pleasure which everyone ought to derive from the experience of form.

Disinterestedness—perceivers are indifferent to the real existence of the object. The judgment of beauty is independent of the interest in real existence. Interest in the object is a secondary and different kind of judgment.

All of these qualities are primarily involved with the experiencing subject. Kant asserts that it is the recognition of the form of purpose which evokes the beauty experience. Only form is beautiful. (the design of a painting or the compositional

structure of a music piece—these are the result of purposive activity of a human agent). The form of a work of art is the result of purposive activity of a human agent.

Kant's views can be understood as a link between 18th century theories of taste and 19th century aesthetic theories. These 19th century aesthetic theories were totally subjectivized. An object is beautiful because it is an object of our aesthetic contemplation.

The significance of the 18th century for aesthetics can be summarized in the following way: Before the 18th century, beauty was a central concept; during the century it was replaced by the concept of taste and finally by the end of the century we open onto a concept of the aesthetic.

Other strain in the history of aesthetics—the philosophy of art

It was not until shortly before the start of the 19th century, that the imitation theory of art found in Plato and Aristotle was called into question. During the 19th century, the theory that art is the expression of the emotion of the artist came to be the dominant view. The doctrines of the expression theory of art has its roots in Kant's theory of knowledge. This viewpoint was a reaction against empiricist philosophy and an attempt to reach behind the sensuous screen of ordinary knowledge to something thought to be vital and important. This generated a new role for the artists and a new interest in artistic creation.

This new role of the artist is pointed up by the following passage from Nietzsche's will to power:

“Our aesthetics have hitherto been women's aesthetic's, inasmuch as they have only formulated the experiences of what is beautiful, from the point of view of the receivers in art. In the whole of philosophy hitherto the artist has been lacking.”

The expression theory of art explains that art is the expression of the emotion of its creator. This theory tries to show that art can also do something important for people. It attempts to related art to the lives of people. And finally it attempts to account for the emotional qualities of art and the way in which art moves people.

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