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Aesthetics in Culture

By

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MU 736

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This paper will examine the role of aesthetics in art, music, non-art objects and activities in daily life. The word “aesthetics” is generally connected with the visual arts and music, I will examine how aesthetics is understood, appreciated and used in other areas of modern life beyond art and music. There are many theories and interpretations from philosophers about aesthetics. Many have their own ideologies as to the purpose and function it plays in society.

I begin with John Dewey who believed that the fine arts should have continuity between everyday experiences and works of art. He thought that fine art grows out of the practical and the practical arts are never merely practical, but contain a consummatory aspect (Dewey, 1987, 3). Dewey believed every person is capable of being an artist, living an artful life of social interaction that benefits and thereby beautifies the world. For him, art functions as experience that looks and finds meaning in all that is good and right. Art also communicates a moral purpose and education in society meaning that a moral purpose is justifiable and art conveying messages stimulate reflection for purposeful lives (Goldblatt, 2006, 17).

Dewey is a pragmatist whose attraction to art assumes it as a means to an end because he envisions the end to be just and fair. To this end, Dewey believes that art denotes a process of doing and making objects or images that reflect some aspect of life.

Aesthetic recognition begins with an objective analysis in the brain that defines qualities and properties. Recognition is realized in the following properties (Clercq, 2002, 168).

- Sensory Properties - qualities that we experience through our senses: shape, line, texture, value, color, space, and scale
- Formal Properties - how sensory properties are organized to achieve a sense of unity, balance, movement, and dominance
- Technical Properties - appearances of shapes, values, colors, etc., that are due to the use of particular materials and techniques
- Expressive Properties – a dramatic subject such as a crucifixion that can evoke feeling of fear, loneliness, joy and ideals (McFee, June K, 2007).

I will examine these properties later in Chopin's Funeral March and the burial practices of nineteenth century Paris and explain how these properties were used to heightened music for the new rituals of the day.

Once assembled, these properties take the shape of paintings, drawings, sculptures, ceramics, architecture and creations of everyday life. Within these properties are styles and forms that have changed throughout the centuries. A list of art styles includes romanticism, cubism, minimalism, impressionism and expressionism to name a few. To analyze the characteristics of each art form is beyond the scope of this paper but demonstrates the range of artistic styles.

Recognition is vital to our understanding of art and art-objects. Sometimes there are conflicts that ask, what does one do with art? The answer to what function a work of art or art-object was created for should include the following purposes (McFee, June K, 2007).

- aesthetic, amusing, artistic, cathartic, commemorative, commercial, cultural
- decorative, economic, educational, entertaining, experimental, expressive, historical, hypnotic, instructional

- magical, moral, persuasive, political, practical, propagandistic, psychological, religious
- satirical, sensitizing, social, spiritual, stimulating, and therapeutic (McFee, June K, 2007).

Recognizing these properties is easy as they are a part of everyday life. Their functions provide an endless resource that transcends generations.

The structure of music is the character of events and not a causal entity or source of an event. Therefore, the cultural context and situation determines the aesthetic form (Dewey, 1925, 179). Musical elements much like the elements of art shape its contour and can be identified audibly by a non-musician or visually through the study of musical analysis by an educated musician. John Dewey recognizes music similarly to art and believes performing a piece of music is not simply a “means of external causal condition for the aesthetic experience and work of art to appear”, but rather the means are integral ingredients of an “experience that comes from doing” (Westerlund, 2003, 45).

The following characteristics are elements that comprise the structure of music.

- melody, harmony, texture, counterpoint and polyphony
- tempo, meter, key relationships or tonality
- phrasing, rhythm, articulation and dynamics
- form: binary, trio, fugue, concerto, symphony
- Style: baroque, classical, contemporary, serial or 12-tone

Each musical element is assembled with other musical properties to create a whole or complete musical work. It is the combination of these characteristics that create aesthetic beauty and enjoyment. A music listener does not need to read or

understand music nor its properties to enjoy the experience but there are characteristics that separate works in distinct ways that affect the listener. The style in which music is written often illuminates the listeners' musical taste. For example, all of the above elements such as melody, harmony, rhythm, articulation and dynamics can be written in the style of baroque, classical or contemporary forms including minimalism, serialism or 12-tone music, chance music and impressionism to name a few. When heard, each form affects the human experience and emotions differently. To analyze the characteristic elements of these styles is beyond the scope of this paper but demonstrates the range of musical styles in the Western world.

The aesthetics of non-art is generally observed when we discuss beauty and the aesthetic experience. Even discussions of non-art objects and activities often focus on their resemblance to art. For example, discussing the aesthetics in sports can question whether any sport can justifiably be regarded as an art form (Best, 1988, 487). An example of such art forms could be figure skating, gymnastics or swimming. In these sports, the gracefulness of the body in motion and its contour are judged on the performer's abilities to achieve perfection during performance. Each sport competition has a winner but do the movements of the participants or winners' exemplify artistic creation that could be called art?

Another distinction most artists do not equate art with is cooking. Many chefs throughout the centuries have seen themselves as artists (Kafka, 1989, 163). I propose food or the cooking of food is not an art, it is the preparation and design of food when it is displayed on a plate or table that makes it appealing to the human senses. Our sense of smell and sight augment the pageantry of edible beauty which can be viewed as

artistic in the eye of the beholder. A positive human reaction to this panorama can augment a chef's ego into believing they are an artist (Kafka, 1989, 163).

It is understandable that the aesthetics of non-art objects and activities are explained through comparison to art, simply because, for better or worse, aesthetics of art is our familiar frame of reference (Best, 1988, 487).

I argue there is a risk in such comparisons. Non-art objects tend to be regarded as "wannabe" art, which often turn out to fall short of those features characterizing art, such as formal structure and expressiveness that is embodiment of an idea, creation and originality (Kafka, 1989, 163). Consequently, non-art objects are regarded, at best, as something like art or as second-rate art. I find this to be problematic with respect to aesthetic matters, pursuing and celebrating diversity in arts is more rewarding and constructive than limiting what counts as worthy aesthetic objects. I believe that diversity of aesthetic objects in general require diversity of analyses if something is to be considered true art.

Ignoring the diversity of aesthetic objects diminishes the scope of aesthetics in two aspects. The first is a rather parochial viewpoint unique to modern Western aesthetic theories, which presupposes the institutionalized artworld and certain cultural and economic conditions (Higgins, 1996, 592). Secondly, it limits the range of aesthetic issues by implying that only those related to art are worthwhile for theoretical analysis. I will address these limitations as follows.

The first limitation is based upon observation. Most non-art objects and activities concern our everyday experiences of eating, clothing, cleaning and dealing with life's

natural elements. Unlike the institutionalized artworld, these are shared universally. In a Western culture such as ours that has a distinct artworld, the experience of art is usually limited to special occasions set aside for that purpose. In contrast, all of us engage in everyday activities and handle non-art objects. Arnold Berleant believes the custom of selecting an art object and isolating it from its surroundings has been most pronounced since the eighteenth century, “with its aesthetic of disinterestedness”, yet it is at variance with the ubiquity of the aesthetic recognized at other times in the West and commonly in non-Western cultures (Berleant, 1992, 157).

Example, the non-Western tradition of Japanese culture aestheticizes everyday objects, phenomena, and activities that provide a positive foundation that enriches their culture. There are two principles of design associated with Japanese aesthetics. The first is respecting the innate characteristics of objects. The Japanese aesthetic tradition is noted for its sensitivity to, respect for, and appreciation of the quintessential character of an object and secondly, honoring and responding to human needs (Saito, 2007, 87). This second part is tied closely to society in that Japanese “aesthetics contributes to moral life through cultivation of a respectful, caring, and considerate attitude toward others” (Saito, 2007, 88). The Japanese practice of expressing one’s “sensitive, caring, and considerate attitude through artifacts and actions” has a long tradition, dating back to the court culture of the Heian period (794–1185) (Saito, 2007, 89).

Traditional Japanese culture offers rich examples of aesthetic experience facilitated by the body and mind. They include refined sensibility regarding seasonal change and weather conditions felt by the body; the physical and spiritual discipline involved in martial arts; and “a sensual feeling of well-being, of harmony with one’s

environment and with one's self" when taking a Japanese bath, which "goes beyond efficiency and transcend(s) physical cleanliness" (Grilli, 1992, 22).

Another example established as an artistic medium in Japanese culture is the tea ceremony that is an aesthetic experience for the participants. The process of making tea includes predetermined ingredients, such as the tea hut, utensils, flower arrangement, and snack, but other features are beyond anyone's control such as the weather, the sound of rain on a hut roof or birds chirping in the trees and the conversation between a host and guests. This art medium requires the movement (walking) of the participants through the tea garden, cleansing the hands and mouths, entering the tea hut, holding the tea bowl, drinking tea by slurping, and eating a snack (Saito, 2007, 90). Another feature unique to the tea ceremony is the difference between Western art and everyday objects and activities. The aesthetics of the tea ceremony emphasize the singularity of each occasion, expressed by the term *ichigo ichie* (one chance, one meeting) meaning that the object of aesthetic appreciation is impermanent, which is often characteristic of the objects of our everyday aesthetic experience (Saito, 2007, 92).

In the Western world, aesthetics does not always fit so smoothly into everyday life, its ceremonies and functions that we have admiration for or appreciation of. Society differentiates values separately from common objects and activities used in life. For example, when attending a classical music concert, art museum or theater production, we sit quiet during the concert and theater performance and do not participate in the event. When visiting a museum, we look at a sculpture or painting without touching, holding or moving it. From these activities we have an emotional experience or

sensation that arouses us in such a way that brings out human emotion. There is however a realization in human communication and expression that takes place through everyday objects and activities. These non-aesthetic daily functions are dominated by aesthetic dimensions. For example, there are various rituals and ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, religious functions, attitudes toward life and human relationships through the choice of color, music, setting, costume, organization of the ceremonies etc. According to Richard Shusterman, art in aesthetic form can function as a means and practical end for social celebrations, religious worship and romantic love (Westerlund, 2003, 49). Whether or not we find an emphasis on aesthetics in these rituals, aesthetics nonetheless plays a crucial role in our cultural practices.

Often times there occurs a melding between art, art-objects and activities that culminate the human senses and experience. For example, most ceremonies (weddings, funerals, festivals) have music, sculpture and art incorporated into the event to help heighten the experience. I can think of no better example than that of Chopin's Funeral March written to symbolize the rituals that occur after death. I firstly want to consider the death experience and practices of the day without Chopin's music.

Because of the crisis of the French Revolution, nineteenth century Paris was engaged in renovating the culture of death. The new practices combined the return of religious practices, funerary customs, and commemorations. These practices symbolized the catacombs of Paris, the Paris Morgue, and the modern cemetery (Kramer, 2001, 101). All places where people went to mourn their loved ones. The builders of these locations incorporated art and designs in such a manner that would

heighten and commemorate the death experience. The catacombs are one example where bones were assembled into a mosaic which has an emotional affect on the human senses when viewed (Kramer, 2001, 104). A second example would be the artistic design of head stones that were placed over the grave to commemorate a person's life. The aesthetic experience and human emotions that arise from walking through and visiting these locations is something most people never forget. Together with the act of participation in the funeral ritual heightens the emotional experience. These are all sensory, technical and expressive properties I mentioned earlier that culminate the heightened experience of the ritual. This ritual and experience does not require music to evoke human emotion. Everything is visual.

For the second portion of this funeral event I will introduce Chopin's Funeral March. The Funeral March is written into three sections that symbolize the three rituals (return to Religious practices, funerary customs, and commemoration) that occur after death. Each section evokes emotion from the listener as they listen and imagine what is occurring and where they might be during each section of the march. The listener can have an aesthetic experience through music and their imagination without actually being present at the catacombs, morgue or cemetery. Music transcends the listener to these locations and illuminates aesthetic emotions through their imagination. By listening to music associated with the funeral ritual, we are creating a new dimension that takes imagination.

John Dewey said, "An imaginative experience is what happens when varied materials of sense quality, emotion, and meaning come together in a union that marks a

new birth in the world” (Granger, 2003, 53). He believed the goal of interpreting an object of art was not simply to “get it” by reading the artist’s mind, but by exploring the potentialities of the object and its medium.

Imagination is required on some level in order for the participant to have an aesthetic experience. Therefore, the result from this experience should be based upon our knowledge, tastes and imagination which in turn provide us an understanding and appreciation that is unique to oneself. Although similar to others, each person has their own imagination. It is this characteristic that maintains a person’s view point of what aesthetics is and is not in relation to life, art, music, dance, sport, food, etc. in Western culture. Judging from the many disciplines, there is no one, ‘correct’ aesthetic for art/music or non-art that we can view as a basis for our understanding as a whole. Art, music and non-art objects and criticism of them will continue to evolve and create controversy due to the passing of time. This is why we cannot pass judgment defining one form of art over another. Each evokes an aesthetic emotion and appreciation from which the human experience can enjoy and learn from.

In conclusion, one must realize that aesthetic experience exists within the eye of the beholder and can be illuminated by anything. It is important to emphasize that whether one responds to a music concert, sports event, social celebration, work of art or object created by humans or natural forces, the components of aesthetics are experienced meaningfully by those who have developed an imagination for life and all things in it.

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