

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AESTHETICS THROUGH WESTERN EYES

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Aesthetics is the sub-branch of philosophy that investigates art and beauty. It is the philosophy of art. One might ask, “is a portrait of the Vietnam War beautiful?” Some might say, “yes! It captures the essence of what took place.” Others might say, “no! It looks bloody violent.” It is often, however, that many would consider it art.

For many, the first western systematic study of aesthetics started with the Greeks. For Plato, there is a perfect form of beauty in which beautiful things participate. The true nature of things is an idea. A portrait, for instance, would be an imperfect copy of the original perfect idea of a portrait. Ideas, generally, are beyond the senses and can only be grasped by reason. The idea of art and beauty, however, is the only idea that presents itself to reason through the senses. Plato professes that in order for us to perceive beauty, there has to be a transcendent form of it that makes it beautiful.¹

On the contrary to Plato’s idealist view, Aristotle takes a realistic metaphysical approach where the form of an object is the cause of its beauty. Instead of the platonic transcendent form, Aristotle believes that forms are constituted by the essentiality of the object and guaranteed by its identity. Aristotle goes further to discuss art in details and even set standards. He contradicts Plato’s notion that certain arts, such as poetry, are mere imitations:

The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree.²

For Aristotle, tragedy is a higher form of art, not just a mere imitation. Tragedy, in a play, is rooted in a universal process of cause and effect revealing a reality that could take place anywhere and at any moment. It is a possibility and a glimpse of what takes place in our world.³

Francis Hutcheson is one of the earliest contributors to early modern aesthetics. For Hutcheson, aesthetics is not only the theory of beauty as a tribute of the world, but it is based on the experience of the human being.

He professes that we are endowed with a special sense by which we perceive beauty. For Hutcheson, the perception of beauty is mediated by the external senses to an internal sense that recognizes and appreciates beauty. For the aesthetic experience to take place, it is imperative that the recipient is knowledgeable and has a refined sensibility. That which produces the aesthetic experience, according to Hutcheson, is the perception of unity in difference.⁴

Immanuel Kant agrees with Hutcheson's notion by professing that the judgment of the beautiful is based on feelings. He upholds that the act of judging beauty is subjective and can be shared among people (intersubjectivity, for phenomenologists, is also objective). What matters most, for example, is not the portrait one looks at, but the pleasuring results one might feel by such an act.⁵ In the Critique of Judgment, Kant argues that an aesthetic judgment of taste has four features: disinterest, universality, necessity, and purposiveness without a purpose.⁶

The pleasure one feels, by experiencing an aesthetic judgment of taste, is a pleasure of disinterest in which it is not based on the desire of one's having the need or want towards the object of art. One has to take pleasure by judging something as beautiful, and not because it gives one pleasure. Saying something is beautiful cannot depend on any private conditions. An object is beautiful because it pleases universally. An object is beautiful because it's necessarily delightful. Last but not least, through aesthetic judgment, objects appear to be purposive without a purpose. Because of this judgment, the object has the form of finality where beauty is the very form of the purposiveness of the object. A purpose, For Kant, is what an object is meant to accomplish. Purposiveness, on the other hand, is an internal feature of what an object is meant to be like.⁷

One more detailed account on aesthetics is that of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. A close look at Hegel's life demonstrates Hegel's diverse cultural awareness; be it the many languages he spoke; the culturally rich relationships such as that with Hölderlin, Goethe, and Schelling; and his vast knowledge regarding different fronts of arts such as Egyptian art, Indian and Persian poetry.

For Hegel, art is an expression of the spirit of individuals, cultures, and humanity. There is progress in art where the artistic expression is the climax of the history of the human spirit. This expression gives the human

spirit an understanding of itself by the objects of aesthetics which are created by humans for such fulfillment. Objects of aesthetic value, for Hegel, are neither a mere decoration nor an imitation. They are an expression of our spiritual freedom. Hegel is influenced by Kant when it comes to the idea that pleasure of beauty will bring our understanding and imagination to a certain freedom, however, he maintains that beauty is objective. True beauty, for Hegel, is only in aesthetic objects that are created freely by artists to bring about spiritual freedom. In art, material objects are spiritualized. Hegel also thought that the romantic art is the end, and no further advancement will take place.⁸

One unique account of aesthetics is that of Friedrich Nietzsche. He professes an uncommon view of aesthetics in *The Birth Of Tragedy* and in the *Twilight Of The Idols*. Nietzsche maintains that art is the highest expression of human perfection. The eternal justification of all of existence is only an aesthetical phenomenon. Justification of the world and its meaningfulness is not a product of rationality but the product of art. Art, poetry, music, and tragedy take us to a deeper level of meaningful experience more so than knowledge and philosophy. Value is only aesthetic value. For Nietzsche, we are the source of beauty. We shine the beauty that resides within us upon the world:

Man believes the world itself to be overloaded with beauty — and he forgets himself as the cause of this. He alone has presented the world with beauty — alas! Only with a very human, all-too-human beauty. At bottom, man mirrors himself in things; he considers everything beautiful that reflects his own image: the judgment “beautiful” is the vanity of his species... Nothing is beautiful, except man alone: all aesthetics rests upon this *naïveté*, which is its first truth. Let us immediately add the second: nothing is ugly except the degenerating man — and with this the realm of aesthetic judgment is circumscribed.⁹

For Nietzsche, art is what makes life possible and worth living. It is the expression of the will to power. Above all of art is the form of tragedy, and amongst the highest achievements of human art are the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Artistic creation depends on two opposite

principles which he calls Apollonian and Dionysian. Apollo is the god of light. The apollonian principle is associated with the visual, the figurative, and the imaginary. Dionysus is the god of wine and ecstasy. The Dionysian principle is associated with self forgetting where individuals are in unity with others and with nature. For Nietzsche, Aeschylus and Sophocles achieved such artistic value because of the perfect interaction and balance of the Apollonian and Dionysian principles.¹⁰ Contrary to the philosophical systematic approach to aesthetics, Nietzsche took a mythical approach.

The 20th century is very unique in its challenges, changes, and the variety it brought; not only to the field of aesthetics but to the whole world. World wars, science, technology, entertainment have definitely impacted art and changed the notion of beauty. One thinker who considered some of the modern aspects of art, in his theory of aesthetics, is John Dewey. Like Nietzsche, Dewey makes art central to his philosophy.

Dewey's theory of aesthetics is an experiential process. He stresses the importance of the integration of all aspects of the human experience in order to understand art. For Dewey, understanding an object of art is well associated with understanding the cultural context that gave rise to it. Experience should be understood in relation to the conditions of life. The experience of art is the experience of producing and encountering the object. An experience of art is a refined experience that takes in consideration the subject matter, and it is directed towards an enjoyed perception where the whole aspects of experience are consummated.¹¹

For Dewey, forms of art are intensified emotional experiences. Emotions select a qualitative unity of past and present meanings to arrive at an aesthetic experience. The artist is influenced, during the process of creation of an aesthetic object, by what is already done and what is to be accomplished. The artist understands the connection of doing and undergoing in relation to the wholeness of what is to be created. When perceiving an aesthetic object, the recipient creates an experience comparable to what the artist embodied during the time of creation. In addition, the artist during the time of creation envisions the perception of the recipient which influences the process and final creation. Furthermore, Dewey believed that art is linked to society as a whole and is a sociological phenomenon.¹²

Generally and up to this point in time, aesthetics describes art from the perspective of a subject confronting an external object of art. For Martin Heidegger, this aesthetic approach misses the point. It is a dichotomy of subject/object that overlooks a more primordial and more fundamental level of experience in which self, work of art, and world are a co-constituted structure of Being.¹³

Heidegger believes that art is an act of the unconcealment of beings. Truth, for Heidegger, is not the result of judgment; as it is, for example, in the traditional aesthetic approach where judgment is the result of the subject/object dichotomy. Truth is, in fact, external to judgment and belongs to beings themselves. Art must, also, depend on its essence as it unconceals truth. The artist acts as a pathway for the truth during the process of creation of art. The result is a world where Being is signified and put on display. Art, for Heidegger, redraws the lines to establish what truly and historically is. The artist uses lines to bring about a basic outline in which, later through creativity, a truth is brought into the light of the world out of inexhaustible possibilities.¹⁴

One vital element of Heidegger's philosophy of art is that all art is in essence poetry. For Heidegger, art is rooted and has its base in language. Language, however, is not a mere tool of communication. It is, rather, the possibility of bringing beings into the openness of unconcealment. For Heidegger, Art and language share the same characteristic of the unconcealment of Being¹⁵:

Being is born through the poet and his work-of-art. Heidegger's philosophy of art describes a process of revelation. A revelation of Being. For example, he describes this process of the revelation of Being in his discussion of Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes. Humanity lives in those shoes as nature lives in the sky, the earth and trees. Being is revealed, gathered up, conserved, in this one poetic image.¹⁶

There is no group of Western thinkers who viewed the relationship between philosophy and art as an intimate relationship like the Existentialists. This is not to mention that most of them were artists in their own rights. Existentialists went as far as placing artists on the same level as

philosophers or possibly higher. This is very apparent with Heidegger and Hölderlin, Sartre and de Beauvoir with Faulkner and Kafka, Merleau-Ponty and Cezanne. For Existentialists, both metaphysical inquiry and artistic talents are revealing to humans their own freedom and meaning.

Freedom, for Existentialists, sets the metaphysical and ontological foundations for aesthetics. Freedom also sets the foundation for knowledge in how humans existentially reveal something. This revealing is co-constituted freedom and responsibility amongst creators and recipients of art. Art is a product of the creator's freedom, and the recipient is responsible on the bases of interaction towards what the art reveals. The creator is also responsible for what is revealed, and the recipient has the freedom to act, not to act, and how to act towards what has been revealed. Jean-Paul Sartre describes this in *What Is Literature?*:

The writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object that has been thus laid bare.¹⁷

Albert Camus, Simon de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty also see freedom as the way for humans to relate to what art reveals and to the whole world. This gives rise to meaningfulness. Gabriel Marcel, as a Christian, interprets freedom as the capacity and responsibility of how humans participate in creation through openness (creation, here, is a monotheistic principle where God is the highest authority). He calls this resonance. Resonance is a shared ground of interpretation, and listening and responding give rise to the aesthetic experience.¹⁸

The work of art is not only a revelation but also, with responsibility introduced, is full involvement; ethical and otherwise. This, for Marcel, is communion. The freedom of the artist, where every art reveals an existential choice, and the freedom of the recipient make artistic practices ethical and political choices. This participation in the world is viewed by Marcel and Merleau-Ponty optimistically where the world is a welcoming place for participation.¹⁹ They differ; however, in interpretation. Marcel takes a religious stand, and for him, there is no gap between participation in the world and the world itself where our own existence is indebted to The Ultimate.²⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, our existence is the beginning of being in the world meaningfully. It is the physicality of the living body that gives rise to

a shared meaning between humans and the world.²¹ Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus take the opposite stand where uneasiness is the way of the world towards humans, our cries, and attempts for meaningful existence. Sartre calls this nausea, and Camus calls it the absurd. For most Existentialists, theater is the art of choice, and the novel comes at a close second.

No matter what view one takes towards aesthetics, forms of art should not be ignored or viewed as mere entertainment. Art authentically shows a unique existence whether human or of the natural world. Artist and art complement each other's being. It is a creativity of consciousness and a way of being where the work of art also creates the artist, humanity, and the world. Furthermore, no philosophical study could be taken seriously if it does not understand the fact that aesthetics could not be separated from the rest of philosophy. Aesthetics cannot be understood without understanding the metaphysical ground that gave rise to it. It cannot be understood without the epistemological and hermeneutic awareness of how to see it and understand it. It is also useless to study aesthetics without its impact on the world whether ethically, historically, or otherwise.

Notes

- 1) Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
- 2) Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, in two volumes, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, volume 2 1705, 1078a36).
- 3) Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics With An Introductory Essay By Francis Fergusson*, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961).
- 4) Francis Hutcheson, *Francis Hutcheson: An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, ed. Peter Kivy (Netherlands, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973).
- 5) Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume Six, Modern Philosophy, Part II, Kant* (New York: Image Books, 1964).
- 6) Immanuel Kant, *Critique Of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

- 7) *Ibid.*
- 8) Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel's Aesthetics*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2014 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-aesthetics/>>.
- 9) Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight Of The Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, 1895, URL = <<http://www.handprint.com/SC/NIE/GotDamer.html>>, Skirmishes Of An Untimely Man, part 19 & 20.
- 10) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy And The Genealogy Of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1956).
- 11) John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1934).
- 12) *Ibid.*
- 13) Sunnie D. Kidd, *On Poetic Imagination*, Inbetweenness: Movement And Vibration, URL = <<http://www.inbetweenness.com/Sunnie's%20Publications/ON%20POETIC%20IMAGINATION.pdf>>.
- 14) Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
- 15) *Ibid.*
- 16) Sunnie D. Kidd, *On Poetic Imagination*, Inbetweenness: Movement And Vibration, URL = <<http://www.inbetweenness.com/Sunnie's%20Publications/ON%20POETIC%20IMAGINATION.pdf>>, p. 1.
- 17) Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature? And Other Essays* (Cambridge: Massachusetts, 1988, p. 38).

- 18) Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Truth, Openness and Humility*, Inbetweenness: Movement And Vibration, URL = <<http://www.inbetweenness.com/Sunnie's%20Publications/TRUTH,%20OPENNESS%20AND%20HUMILITY.pdf>>.
- 19) Even though Marcel, for example, speaks of anxiety and anguish, I still think that Marcel and Merleau-Ponty, generally speaking, take a more optimistic stand comparing to Sartre and Camus.
- 20) Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (Westminster, London: Dacre Press, 1949).
- 21) Sunnie D. Kidd, *On Gestural Meaning In The Acts Of Expression*, Inbetweenness: Movement And Vibration, URL = <<http://www.inbetweenness.com/Sunnie's%20Publications/ON%20GESTURAL%20MEANING%20IN%20ACTS%20OF%20EXPRESSION.pdf>>.