

LECTURE NOTES ON AESTHETICS: THEORIES OF ART AND BEAUTY

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Aesthetics concerns the nature or essence of beauty. To understand this, first of all you need to distinguish the two ways of considering beauty: absolute and relative. To say that beauty is absolute means that something is beautiful by virtue of itself; a thing has its own way of being beautiful regardless of the judgment of people. On the other hand, the view that beauty is relative means that something is beautiful due to the perception and conception of people; so it is said that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

In this lecture, I will explain to you six theories of beauty with their corresponding theories of art. To have a general view of them, please take note of this diagram:

SUMMARY OF THE THEORIES OF BEAUTY AND ART				
<i>Aesthetic Theories</i>	<i>Absolute or Relative</i>	<i>Standard of Beauty</i>	<i>Standard of Ugliness</i>	<i>What is art?</i>
Idealism	Absolute beauty by universal idea	Reality, Truth, Knowledge, Good	Illusion, Falsity, Ignorance, Evil	Art is the imitation or representation of reality or nature
Functionalism	Relative beauty depending on what the object does	Function, Usefulness, Utility, Perfect	Malfunction, Uselessness, Futility, Defect	Art has didactic, political or therapeutic values
Hedonism	Relative beauty depending on the experience of a person	Experience of pleasure for the individual self	Experience of pain for the individual self	Art is pleasure, fun and play
Conventionalism (or Cultural Relativism)	Relative beauty depending on the culture of people.	Agreed to be beautiful by people in the society	Agreed to be ugly by people in the society	Art is what is made art by people within the institution
Psychoanalytic Theory	Relative beauty depending on the unconscious	Positive suggestions as in the concept of archetypes	Negative suggestions as in traumatic experience	Art is the artist's expression of emotion or idea
Formalism	Absolute beauty by mathematical principles	Order, Proportion, Integrity, Simplicity	Disorder, Disproportion, Disintegrity, Complexity	Art is the inherent combination of elements

Aesthetic Idealism. I'm sure you already encountered Plato in your other subjects. His contribution to learning is vast, however, he is primarily a philosopher. If you understand him, it is said that you would understand the whole of Western civilization. Plato formulated an aesthetic theory along with his theories of knowledge and existence. For him, beauty is truth and reality. But reality does not exist in this world where we live, because things here are changing and temporal. The reality are the transcendental forms or universal ideas existing in the metaphysical world of being. What we perceive in our physical world of becoming are appearances, shadows, images or reflections of reality. The real beauty, then, is not a physical thing, but the idea of beauty. To experience the reality of beauty is for the philosophers to know its idea in their minds, and not simply to perceive its reflection in this world.

Based on his worldview, Plato theorized about the essence of art. As this world is an appearance of reality, art is an imitation of this world. There are three kinds of chair: (1) the idea of chair in the world of being which makes up its reality known by a philosopher, (2) the physical chair in this world constructed by a carpenter, and (3) the painting of a chair produced by a painter in the world of art. As another example, we again turn to the Titanic. You saw in this movie the character Rose who is the artistic, beautiful woman. But Rose is an imitation of Kate

Winslet who is the physical, beautiful woman. And Winslet in turn is an image of the idea and reality of beauty. For Plato, art is dangerous because it makes us ignorant by leading our minds two times farther away from the truth.

Plato's notion of beauty applies to art. Called "Imitationism," his theory defines art as the "imitation of the appearance of reality." It is interpreted as Representationalism in which art becomes a copy of nature, like your ID picture that is a visual copy of your face. For Aristotle, art is also an imitation of things, but unlike Plato, Aristotle believed that reality is inherent in this world. Following this insight, Leonardo noted that "art is a window to nature," and Shakespeare wrote that "art is putting mirror up to nature."

Aesthetic Functionalism. This theory may be traced back from Socrates. Are you familiar with his quotation: "Knowledge is virtue"? Here, the philosopher implied that people are defined by their actions based on the dictate of the mind. Our rational operation constitutes our human nature. So what you do makes up who you are. If you know that a student is meant for studying, then you must study your lessons so that you may realize your true nature as a student. Interpreting this view in aesthetics, the essence of beauty is what things are supposed to do, that is, their function, use or utility. An object is ugly if it is defective and useless for its purpose. In this sense, you become a beautiful student because you study well and you learn, not because of the whiteness of your skin or the designer jeans you wear.

Functionalism is much applied in architecture. There is a fundamental principle that "form follows function." This means that the shape, size, space and other formal properties of a building is determined by its use. Consider your house. You know that each part of it has a function: the kitchen for cooking or the bedroom for sleeping. The more efficient the use of a house is, the more beautiful it becomes. This is how the famous designers, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier planned and built their works in the art of architecture.

In the other arts, some compositions in painting, sculpture and music are beautiful because they achieve a particular purpose, such as for the ideological aim of changing the society as in Marxist theory of art, for didactic purpose in morality, for therapeutic value in medicine, even for commercial worth in selling artworks for great price. Also in functionalism, art is a talent and skill for doing things according to Lucretius. We talk about virtuosity of the artists in fine arts. There are liberal arts which includes efficient use of language in grammar and rhetoric. While in practical arts, there is craftsmanship in embroidery, ceramics, masonry, carpentry, sartorial and culinary arts. There are martial arts too. For Rousseau, agriculture and metallurgy were the arts that propelled the development of human civilization.

Aesthetic Hedonism. You may find hedonism to be a very inviting theory. As an ethical view about human life, it was formulated by Aristipus and Epicurus. They believed that whatever is good is what brings pleasurable experience to the individual person. Food, money and sex are good because they give self-interested pleasure. Relating this insight to aesthetics, "pleasure and pain, therefore," in the words of David Hume, "are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence."

There is some truth in aesthetic hedonism considering our common experience of nature and art. We find the rainbow beautiful because of the pleasure it presents to our eyes, while the sight of a shit is ugly because of its terrible appearance and bad odor. Sometimes when we listen to music we feel relax, or when we watch a movie we enjoy it. Art is beautiful because of the sensuous delight it affords us. But if the music is irritating to our ears, or the film is boring, they bring us pain, and thus ugly. In culinary art, we appreciate the food not only because it is nutritious, but more because it is delicious. Have you experienced this that when you were eating lechon, you simply enjoyed the taste, and never minded its cholesterol that might bring you high blood and heart attack?

Plato and Aristotle did not altogether reject hedonism as an art theory. They claimed that imitation may also bring pleasure, and for Plato art is a kind of play for the artist. According to Immanuel Kant too, art is more of play and fun than of work, however, the person must be disinterested to the pleasure which art and things provide. And for Albert Faurot, painting, sculpture and music are meant only "for giving pleasure and life enhancement."

Aesthetic Conventionalism. Do you know “ethnocentrism”? It’s an anthropological term which means that when you were born and now living within a society, you have embodied its ways from which you judge the people outside your own community. This basic notion of Conventionalism may be interpreted based on the ethical theory by Thomas Hobbes. He claimed that the moral values of good and bad depend on social agreement. Morality is a construct made by human consensus through the civil law imposed by the sovereign in a political state. Along this line of thinking, Aesthetic Conventionalism contends that the concepts and facts of beauty are inventions of people. As members of society, we collectively create standards and rules for how the artistic values of things are measured based on our shared tradition and culture.

There is no universal norm of beauty. Each society creates its standard. For the Padaung people in Myanmar, women are considered beautiful if they have long necks full of spiral rings. In the Suri and Mursi community in Africa, the beauty of women is determined by their wide lower lip with a big hole at the center. And in China before 1917, women had the tradition of foot binding and made their feet small, only four inches long, looking like the bud of a lotus flower.

For us, present Filipinos, these cultural practices might look weird, but only because we apply our own cultural rule to them. We too have our peculiarities which in turn may not be acceptable to others, such as the practice of tattooing by the Pintados, or the blackening of teeth by the Aetas during the pre-colonial period. What we all need to do is to have a mutual respect for each other’s standards. The theory of conventionalism may also be applied in understanding the evolution of fashion, trend and fad, as well as the meaning of baduy, bakya, jologs, conyo. These are popular terms which denote different aesthetic norms prevailing within some times and places, for some groups of people in our society.

As a theory of art, Conventionalism is related to Institutional Theory according to postmodern thinking. For Arthur Danto and George Dickie, what makes something an art is due to the “art world,” an institution composed of groups of powerful people. These people are the professionals and experts who justify anything to be art by virtue of their influential status. Art has no fixed essence. It is defined by the art world through its own established rules which are changing and depend on relations of power. Could you consider a toilet urinal an art? Yes! In fact, one urinal became art, because it has been integrated within the art world, that means, it has been made art by the renowned artist Marcel Duchamp, it has been exhibited by the art curators in museums and galleries, and it has been affirmed by the art critics, historians and teachers who talk about it in their respective fields.

Aesthetic Psychoanalytic Theory. Probably you have taken up in Psychology the theory by Sigmund Freud. As you remember, he advanced the theory of the unconscious or subconscious mind. The unconscious defines and conditions our human personality. For Carl Jung, within the unconscious lurks collective standards which we share as members of the human species, and which serve as archetypes or models of how we perceive things to be beautiful or ugly. The perception of ugliness may be due to childhood trauma which lies dormant within our subconscious, but when triggered by a certain stimulus revives our conscious memory of an ugly object or experience.

As a theory of art, psychoanalysis is employed to uncover the artist’s desires, urges, inhibitions, depressions or wishes which lie hidden in the artwork. All of us dream where we see fantastic images. Images in the arts are like those in our dreams. They contain symbolic meanings; they are expressions of the unconscious content of the mind which may be interpreted to reveal the artist’s personality. Freud analyzed the psychological make up of Leonardo based on the painter’s dream about a bird flapping its tail inside his mouth, and on his paintings whose subjects were mostly women such as The Mona Lisa and Leda the Swan, and from which Freud concluded that Leonardo was a homosexual. In Reuben’s painting entitled Samson and Delilah, and in Van Gogh’s Bedroom at Arles, are found a red blanket which is an archetypal symbol for sexual desire and sin of the flesh. A lot of weird, dream-like images may be seen in the surrealist paintings by Salvador Dali, Mark Chagall and Rene Magritte.

The basis of expressionist theory of art is the view that art is a revelation of the artist’s internal impulses is. In his lesson on poetry, Aristotle proposed the term catharsis; it refers to a person’s overflowing emotion which may be diverted into artistic production and creativity. According to Susanne Langer: “Art is the creation of symbolic forms expressive of human feelings.” For Tolstoy, art is the “objectification of emotion.” And for Benedetto Croce, art is not the physical substance but the ideas in the mind of the artist which may be expressed

like words in a language. The best lesson that you learn from this theory is that beauty and art are not only perceived by your senses, but are also felt by your heart and conceived by your mind.

Aesthetic Formalism. In the tradition of Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy, in its theory of hylomorphism, the word “form” denotes the essence of a thing. The form of a beautiful thing makes up the essence of its beauty. Anything ugly is “deformed”. Fundamentally, there are two formal principles of beauty: order and structure. The two specific principles are proportionality and integrity. Simplicity is the principle of individuation of beauty. The coordination of all these principles determine the beauty or ugliness of a thing.

According to aesthetic formalism, “beauty is the harmony of proper proportion.” This means that the parts of a thing must be properly coordinated in shapes, sizes, colors and other elements, so that it may look beautiful. Have you seen a woman with a vital statistic of 36-24-36? This horizontal measure should correspond to an appropriate height, say five feet six inches tall, so that you may see the woman beautiful; but you would see her fat if she stands four feet tall, and thin if seven feet. The drawing by Leonardo, The Vitruvian Man, is the best illustration of the formalist theory of beauty and art. Taken from the canons by the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius, Leonardo depicted the perfect measure of the human body based on the mathematical proportion of its parts with one another. This proportion

is also said to be the harmony which underlies nature and the universe, thus attesting that, indeed, “man is the measure of all things” as proposed by Protagoras. Another mathematical form of beauty is the Golden Measure that is found in nature like in a nautilus shell, and was used by the ancient Greek architects in designing temples and buildings.

Aesthetic formalism asserts that an artwork is to be perceived as a whole made up of its corresponding parts. The relation of elements with one another composing the whole is the artistic form. Painting is the combination of points, lines, shapes and colors; musical composition is formed by the coordination of rhythm, pitch, tempo and dynamics; and a short story by characters, setting and plot. This means that, when you look at The Mona Lisa, you don’t see a woman but a form, not a nose but a triangle, not a smile but a curve line. Art then is to be regarded within itself, independent of its connections to anything outside. It is “art for art’s sake,” in the famous statement by Oscar Wilde. This is the same with Clive Bell who said that art is concerned only with the “significant form,” and has nothing to do with life.

Reference:

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