

# Aesthetics

Comes from the Ancient Greek term "aithesis" meaning sense perception.

"In Greek the main reference was to material things, that is things perceptible by the senses, as distinct from things which were immaterial or which could only be thought."

– Raymond Williams, Key Words (Fontana Press, 1976) p.31

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the term came to be applied to art.

"It is clear from the history that **aesthetic**, with its specialized references to art, to visual appearance, and to a category of what is 'fine' or 'beautiful,' .... at once emphasized and isolated subjective sense-activity ... as distinct, for example, from social or cultural interpretations."

– Raymond Williams, Key Words (Fontana Press, 1976)  
p.31

# Enlightenment Philosophers (18<sup>th</sup> century)

## **Edmund Burke**

*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)

### The Sublime

- beauty is associated with pleasure
- the sublime is associated with terror – fear of death – sense of being overwhelmed, an experience produced by contemplating God and/or the power of nature.

## **Immanuel Kant**

*The Critique of Pure Reason* (1787)

### The Judgement of Taste

- distinguishing between subjective and objective
- information from the senses is “subjective”, information from reasoning is objective or “empirical”

## Late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Aesthetics

- Rejects the divide between art and life.
- Rejects the divide between sense perceptions and social/political context.
- Embraces a notion of “embodied” experience.
- All experiences (including aesthetic experiences) are constructed by particular individuals, living in particular bodies, with particular life experiences, operating in cultures with particular histories, engaging in particular social interactions.

# Late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Aesthetics

Influenced by:

**Marxism** (eg. Terry Eagleton)

**Feminism** (eg. Susan Buck-Morss)

**Queer Theory** (eg. Sara Ahmed)

**Postcolonial Theory** (eg. Edward W. Said)

**Indigenous Materialism** (eg. Richard William Hill)

**Eastern Philosophy** (eg. Francisco J. Varela)

**Posthumanist Theory** (eg. Katherine N. Hayles)

side note: and neuroscience ... (eg. Whitney Davis)

# Late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Aesthetics

Influenced by:

**Marxism** (eg. Terry Eagleton)

**Feminism** (eg. Susan Buck-Morss)

**Queer Theory** (eg. Sara Ahmed)

**Postcolonial Theory** (eg. Edward W. Said)

**Indigenous Materialism** (eg. Richard William Hill)

**Eastern Philosophy** (eg. Francisco J. Varela)

**Posthumanist Theory** (eg. Katherine N. Hayles)

side note: and neuroscience ... (eg. Whitney Davis)



“The nervous system is not contained within the body's limits. The circuit from sense-perception to motor response begins and ends with the world. The brain is thus not an isolable anatomical body, but part of a system that passes through the person and her or his (culturally specific, historically transient) environment.”

- Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” in *October*, no. 62 (1992)

“You ask why the aesthetic is important for me today and what is at stake in its definition. That takes us back centrally to the question of politics. The aesthetic to me is a fundamentally cognitive experience. It is how the body senses reality, and I mean this in a rather animalistic, even biological sense.”

“The critical power of art, or any cultural form, may not be perceived universally, but if it is perceived, it hits you in the gut.”

- Susan Buck-Morss, interview by Grant H. Kester,  
“Aesthetics after the End of Art: An Interview with Susan Buck-Morss,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 1 (Spring, 1997)