

Reflections on Writing the History of Aesthetics

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In the past few years there has been an explosion of interest in aesthetics, marked recently by the publication of a four volume encyclopaedia of aesthetics by Oxford University Press. At the same time there has been a narrowing of the subject in two of its most important journals, the American *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and, more emphatically, the *British Journal of Aesthetics*. These are both now clearly dominated by analytical aesthetics and the latter is, at times, hardly concerned with aesthetics but more focussed on issues of analytical philosophy. In a recent website paper, its editor Peter Lamarque argued:

Attention to the individual arts has the benefit of bringing aesthetics closer to actual critical practice and encourages links with subject specialists, in musicology, film studies, literary theory, and art history. It also puts salutary constraints on the grand designs of aesthetics, particularly attempts to develop overarching or all-embracing theories of the arts. But there are dangers too. One danger is that aesthetics becomes more parochial, more culture bound. When Anglophone philosophers talk about music or film or literature it is usually a pretty narrow band of works that are taken as paradigmatic—inevitably these are the works that the writers know, more often than not canonical works in the western tradition. Generalisations about these works and their properties are not always likely to carry over to works from different cultural traditions. It would no doubt be wrong to exaggerate concerns here because after all the western art

tradition is a vast and important one and if philosophers can shed light on it some good is done. But the worry is that aesthetics then loses that great aspiration of philosophy, however derided, to be universal and timeless. It does seem as if universality goes hand in hand with abstractness. In other words, the more abstract the subject matter the more universal are the findings likely to be; an analysis of truth or meaning or ontology or symbolism or fictionality is inherently less likely to be culture bound than discussions of impressionist painting, avant garde film or the realist novel.¹

Subjects like representation and the logic of fiction are, properly speaking, philosophical and are only marginally concerned with aesthetics. The original editor of the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Harold Osborne, warned that this would happen as long ago as 1977 in his article 'Aesthetic Relevance'.² It seems to me that the time has come to get back to basics and spell out the distinctiveness of the subject in its relationship to the arts. Ironically, this is a case of history repeating itself. At the beginning of the twentieth century a significant number of academics felt that the aesthetics of the German idealists was getting so remote from the artistic that they had to re-invent the subject 'from below'. In response to this situation, in 1906, Max Dessoir established a journal to do just that, the *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*³ and, in 1913, he inaugurated international congresses on aesthetics, which have continued through to the present day. In fact, this Pacific Rim Congress is a product of that movement that draws the study of aesthetics into alignment with the study of the arts. The American and British societies were also a product of that movement and the Sydney Society of Aesthetics and Literature echoes its aims.

The word 'aesthetics' has a number of meanings including, in Mediterranean countries, the work of beauticians. In our context 'aesthetics' has two significantly different meanings: an academic discipline and a domain of experience.

As an academic discipline aesthetics has had a chequered history.⁴ It was initiated by a circle of intellectuals associated through *The Spectator* with Joseph Addison to explore the pleasures of the imagination and judgements of taste. It became incorporated into a major philosophical

system through the work of Immanuel Kant, drawing on earlier British and German sources, and focussed primarily on beauty and sublimity in nature and, again, on the judgement of taste. Through Hegel aesthetics became specifically associated with fine art and continues to be so to the present day.

The domain of the aesthetic was both the beautiful, and sublime, as attributed properties of nature, and then of art, and then the area of experience subjected to judgements of taste. A typical English philosopher of the 20s, W. T. Stace, following Benedetto Croce, declared that beauty was an all-encapsulating concept including ‘the pathetic, the comic, the sublime, the grotesque, the magnificent, the grand, the whimsical, the romantic, the idyllic, the realistic, the impressionistic, the symbolic, the classical, the sad, the melancholy, the graceful, the humorous, the majestic, the pretty, and so forth.’⁵ Stace declared Croce’s great insight was that ‘all these supposed divisions and modifications of the beautiful are arbitrary and not based on any scientific or philosophical principle. No special aesthetic theory is needed for them.’⁶ I doubt that any commentator on the arts would share that view today and it hardly merits discussion, except within the context of the history of the subject.

With the rise of analytical philosophy there has been a considerably more rigorous analysis of aesthetic concepts, particularly in the work of the late Frank Sibley whose collection of essays published posthumously in *Approach to Aesthetics* is probably one of the most sophisticated explorations of their logic available. He observed: ‘The *objects* to which we apply aesthetic words are of the most diverse kinds and by no means esoteric: people and buildings, flowers and gardens, vases and furniture, as well as poems and music.’⁷ To this we can add paintings and sculpture of course. His list of aesthetic terms includes: *beautiful, graceful, delicate, lovely, exquisite, elegant, dainty* (connected with liking, delight, affection, regard, estimation or choice); *ugly* (connected with fear or revulsion); *garish, splendid, gaudy* (with what notably catches the eye or attention); *dainty, nice, pretty, exquisite* (with what attracts by noticeable rarity, precision, skill, ingenuity, elaboration); *handsome* (suitability to ease of handling).⁸ The logic of such concepts is that they may not be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Reasons can be given for their use, in terms of their objects’ features,

but these are indicative and of no logical force except in a potentially negative way: a straight line, or angular, cannot be graceful but you cannot create a rule for a graceful curve. Aesthetic judgements are judgements of taste and they are not confined to the world of high art.

Interestingly, Sibley argued that an engagement with the aesthetic was universal and deeply rooted in human responses to the natural and artefactual world around them. In his essay 'Arts or the Aesthetic—Which Comes First?'⁹ he argued that, conceptually, aesthetic experience takes priority over artistic activity. Without going into all the nuances of his argument: it is a feeling for the aesthetic that leads people into the production of artworks. Even the deliberate production of anti-aesthetic artworks is parasitic upon the concept of the aesthetic. If we recognise that Sibley's broad points are correct, we also have to recognise that he used distinctions drawn from a particular moment of English linguistic usage and that Stace, again, used English words drawn from Western European artistic traditions. While the phenomenon of a feeling for the aesthetic may be universal, it may well be articulated in different ways by different cultures at different times. (And, just to be clear, this does not mean to say that there is an identifiable feeling that is a feeling for the aesthetic.) This is something best explored by linguists, philologists and anthropologists, not by philosophers, because it is a matter of empirical facts.

So I now get to the core of my argument. Human beings, across cultures and through history, have responded to the natural and artefactual world around them in a variety of ways articulated through both language and behaviour. Some of it has been documented; a lot of it has not. Ernst Gombrich has raised doubts about whether one is entitled to infer these responses through works of art alone, labelling the phenomenon 'the physiognomic fallacy'.¹⁰ It is also an error to believe that one can theorise about artistic activities without recognising that at different times and places they have had different functions and were frequently multi-functional. Both the 'discipline' of aesthetics and the concept of fine art are modern and European. That does not mean that the feeling for the aesthetic or the creation of works of art had to wait for the emergence of modern Europe.

If we compare our situation to Dessoir's, back in 1903, a number of things become apparent, not least our knowledge and understanding of

other cultures, which was high on his agenda, but also what he described as 'primitive art'. Chapter six of his book *Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*¹¹ was titled 'The Origin of Art and the System of the Arts' and its second section 'The Art of Primitive Peoples and of Prehistoric Times'. What we might forget is although prehistoric remains were discovered in the cave of Chaffaud in 1834, no-one realised how old they were. While the famous cave paintings of Altamira were discovered in 1879, they were denounced as fakes and it wasn't until 1902 that the famous French prehistorian Émile Cartailhac published his *Mea culpa d'un sceptique* recognising both their authenticity and their age. In the following year, 1903, Salomon Reinach published his famous essay on art and magic in the journal *Lanthropologie* arguing that the only way in which we can understand Upper Palaeolithic art was by way of analogy with the products of so called 'primitive' peoples. With the recent emergence of cognitive science, the subject has been re-examined, resulting in Steven Mithen's *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art and Science* in 1997¹² and the publication of a special issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in the spring of this year on 'Art, Mind and Cognitive Science'. Luckily for my purposes, the authors had ignored David Lewis-Williams' exciting book *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, published in 2002.¹³

The great strength of Lewis-Williams' argument is that it attempts to account for all of what I would call the contingent features of cave art. His starting point is that from a neurological point of view *Homo sapiens* is the same whether he be cave-man, hunter-gatherer or 21st century man. 'Fully modern human consciousness, by contrast to that of the Neanderthals' he argues, 'includes the ability to entertain mental images, to generate mental images in various states of consciousness, to recall those mental images, to discuss them with other people within an accepted framework (that is, to socialize), and to make pictures.'¹⁴ The variable factors pertain to cultural context and to the values attached to those various kinds of experience.

Unlike Mithen and the aestheticians, Lewis-Williams emphasises the full spectrum of consciousness, from being fully alert to day-dreaming, to hypnagogic states, to dreaming or hallucinations. Across and through history, different cultures have assigned different values to these various mental states. Historians of religion are familiar with such things as

visions. More significantly, ethnographers have recognised for a long time to role of hallucinogenic states in hunter-gatherer societies and the special role in them of the shaman. Noticing the co-presence of entopic images with naturalistic forms in South African and North American rock art, and a similar co-presence of previously unidentified 'abstract' images with naturalistic images in Upper Palaeolithic cave art, Lewis-Williams suggested a shamanic explanation of this phenomenon. He doesn't suggest that cave artists painted the images that they did while they were experiencing hallucinations, but that they produced the paintings to recreate the hallucinatory experiences.

It would take much more time than I have been allowed to discuss Lewis-Williams supporting evidence but a significant part of his argument revolves around the material conditions of the imagery's creation and use. Although we are used to seeing works of art as photographs on a page, before the invention of photography people didn't see them in under those conditions. Before the invention of museums, spectators saw works of art *in situ*, installed in a variety of settings. And before people started collecting religious images, they were used for site specific purposes in churches, cathedrals and so on. In those kinds of contexts they were worshipped, touched, kissed and even eaten. As for cave art, it was obviously produced in different sites in caves. Some locations involved dangerous travel into their very depths. We know from ethnographic study of hunter-gatherer societies that the shamanic visions involve the three spheres of the sky, the land and the depths of the earth. We also know that they retreated into barely accessible places to experience their visions, induced by fasting, drugs, or sensual deprivation. The interesting feature of cave art is that it can make use of physical projections in its creation: it is almost as if the animals are emerging from the walls of the caves in which they have been depicted. They are not grounded in illusory spatial contexts, but are grounded in the walls themselves. They are not depictions but what Gombrich has called simulacra: the hobby-horse is not a depiction or a representation of a horse but it is a horse itself. The entopic imagery to be found in the caves is not so much images of entopic sights so much as simulacra of entopic experiences.

The question remains, did the artists and spectators of the Upper Palaeolithic period experience their cave paintings aesthetically? I believe

that Sibley was right to think that that the ‘qualities and appearances that can be admired aesthetically for themselves must be ones which somehow, putting aesthetic questions aside, are vitally involved in human experience.’¹⁵

In a paper that I’ll be presenting to a philosophy round-table in Adelaide in a week’s time, I will be arguing that the time has come to move on from endless debates about pictorial representation and ask the more fundamental question: what were pictures for? What were their tasks? And the answers should lead back into the heart of aesthetics.

NOTES

- 1 ‘Reflections on Current Trends in Aesthetics’, *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 2004,
<http://www.british-aesthetics.org/uploads/Peter%20LAMARQUE.pdf>
- 2 Harold Osborne, ‘Aesthetic Relevance’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1977, 17(4), 291-304.
- 3 1906-1943.
- 4 See my review of Michael Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York and Oxford 1998, 4 volumes) in *The Art Bulletin*, LXXXIII, 3 (September 2001), pp. 559-63.
- 5 W.T. Stace, *Meaning of Beauty: a Theory of Aesthetics* (London: Grant Richards and Humphrey Toulmin, 1929), p. 85.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Frank Sibley, *Approaches to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), p. 14.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3n.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp.135-141.
- 10 E.H. Gombrich, ‘Achievement in Medieval Art’ (1937) reprinted in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and other essays on the theory of art*, London: Phaidon 1963.
- 11 Published by Ferdinand Enke Verlag, Stuttgart 1906; translated by Stephen A. Emery with a foreword by Thomas Munro, *Aesthetics and the Theory of Art*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1970.
- 12 London: Thames and Hudson 1997.
- 13 London: Thames and Hudson 2002.
- 14 *Loc. cit.*, p. 94.
- 15 Sibley, *op. cit.*, p. 31.