

Aesthetics as a Cross-Cultural Concept

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Kant's account of aesthetic appreciation was the experience of attending to something as purposive yet without attending to a purpose. In Noel Carroll's account of what this means, he says, 'We savor the colours in the painting of a tree for their richness and variety rather than using them to tell ourselves what kind of tree it is. We imaginatively explore the multiple, metaphorical, shifting meanings that a heraldic emblem might have, rather than simply, practically regarding it as the insignia of a certain family or clan.'¹ Carroll suggests that this account of aesthetic experience involves two distinct conceptions of freedom: the freedom of disinterestedness, that is, not being concerned with any practical, moral, financial or political interest, and freedom in the sense in which the imagination and understanding are free from the governance of concepts.² As David Whewell has observed, 'Few ideas in the history of aesthetics have been more pervasive than that of the disinterestedness of the aesthetic attitude.'³ This paper explores whether this concept of aesthetic appreciation can be applied cross culturally—that is, is it a fundamental human experience, as many of us presuppose? If it is not, then what *would* a cross-cultural concept of aesthetics look like, and how would it affect our philosophical understanding of aesthetic appreciation?

Surrounding this issue is a debate, if one may call it that, about whether indigenous arts, or artefacts or primitive arts, whatever you would like to call them, are arts. Often it has some political heat, as each side accuses the other as imposing an ideology that reinforces the structures of colonial domination. Here I offer a kind of composite version of the positions as I understand them.

One side of this debate suggests that people who deny that indigenous arts are art are imposing an ideology which establishes a hierarchy of what is valuable that allows other groups of people to be seen as less

cultured, and that reproduces colonial domination. For these people, to say that indigenous groups do not have art, or do not aesthetically appreciate it, is to maintain a hierarchy of value that makes the achievements of the other 'invisible'. According to this view, it is wrong to deny that other cultures have art or aesthetics. We think art and aesthetics are among the highest human achievements, and to suggest art and aesthetics are specific to European cultures is to suggest that European cultures are somehow more civilised than others.

The other side of this debate considers the description of indigenous arts as Arts appropriative, and an expression of colonial domination. In appreciating works as arts, we associate indigenous product with the arts market, and give it an exchange value according to its rarity, or beauty. Because of the ideology of the genius creator or master, works become attached to a name, and are valued in relation to this name. This kind of gallery appreciation seriously distorts our understanding of the cultural phenomenon, by dislocating and misrepresenting indigenous artefacts and their value. According to this view, it is wrong to suggest that other cultures have arts or aesthetics, as this is the means by which we appropriate the artefacts of other cultures.

It's rather hard to choose between positions, at least if you want to be on the side of the good guys. If the choice is between a form of colonial domination and a form of colonial domination, I guess I'll just have to engage in a form of colonial domination. Let me enter deeper into the mire.

We need to make a distinction between art and aesthetics. I'm going to argue that it is true that aesthetic appreciation, in its formulation in terms of disinterestedness, is culturally specific, and that there are merits to the arguments presented by anthropologists who present this argument. I'll show this through a discussion of Pierre Bourdieu's argument that the concept of a 'pure' aesthetic is intrinsically linked to the social and historical processes that produced the Western arts industry. However, our concepts are not necessarily determined by history. We can create conceptions of aesthetic appreciation that are not associated with disinterestedness, do not dislocate objects from their purpose. I will explore one such conception of aesthetics, as articulated by the anthropologist Howard Morphy, and develop it through the use (misuse?) of accounts of aesthetics offered by the philosophers Thomas

Leddy and David Novitz. As I will show, such an account presents a radically different picture of what it means to aesthetically appreciate something. It allows us to acknowledge aesthetics and art as cross cultural phenomena, without misrepresenting indigenous arts, and, moreover, allows us to better understand religious works in our own tradition.

1. Is Aesthetics a Cross-Cultural Concept?

A couple of years ago there was debate organised among anthropologists on the proposition, 'Aesthetics is a cross cultural concept.' Joanna Overing led the attack on the idea that aesthetics was a concept that could be used by anthropologists. Overing argued that aesthetics is a culturally specific concept.⁴ According to Overing, the fact that the category of aesthetics was created by Baumgarten in 1735 shows that its meaning is intrinsically historical and not universal. She suggests that the study of 'aesthetics' simply means the study of fine art, and she defined fine art as art that does not have a purpose. The art institution is a kind of cult of the art object, an object which is sacralised and set apart from everyday objects, and she states that, within this cult, artefacts in everyday life could not be beautiful: 'it was only when an object had no use that it could be beautiful, only when created for the contemplation of beauty alone that it could it thereby become art.'⁵ In contrast, she suggests, is the Piaroa conception of beauty, which is not detached from contexts of productive use.⁶ 'The idea that art transcends an every day reality remains central to anthropological sensibility', she says, and she thinks it follows from this that 'the Piaroa view of beauty and its relation to everyday production cannot be understood within our category of aesthetics.'⁷

This is possibly one of the worst arguments ever presented. It relies on an equivocation between aesthetics and fine art, and contradicts itself by explaining a Piaroa concept of beauty. But it is a common argument. Similarly Alfred Gell has argued that aesthetics is to fine art, what theology is to religion.⁸ Just as theological discourse cannot be used as part of the study of other cultures, or throw light on the relationship between religion and society, Gell suggests, aesthetics is not suitable as an anthropological category.

In response to this, many philosophers of art would acknowledge fine art as a Western institution, and a relatively modern one at that, yet point out that we think of medieval religious art as art, and indeed all manner of objects as art. It may be argued that we can call other cultural productions art because we can recognise that significant thought and attention has been paid to how an object is made, and that this thought concerns the relationship of form and content. We can recognise and appreciate this aesthetic intention, even where aesthetic appreciation is not the primary function of an object. Denis Dutton gives a particularly convincing account of this kind of intention in an example of driving.⁹ He considers the case of a person's intention to get somewhere, and if you asked him or her what their purpose was, they might tell you they were going to work.¹⁰ None the less, we can recognise other intentional acts made by the driver—that, for example, they stayed on the left-hand side of the road, and stopped at red lights. The driver would describe none of these acts as 'their intention', but they are none the less intentional acts. Similarly, he argues, aesthetic attention to form and material is perceptible in the making, and the final product, of an object made in another culture, even though the purpose of making the object does not involve making art. Whatever the purpose of making the object may be, it is possible to recognise that these objects, or products, involve skill, care, sensitivity and intelligence. That is, we can recognise this behaviour as involving artistic choices. This artistic choice may be considered a reason for believing that art is a cross-cultural phenomenon. This argument does not depend on the artist having self-conscious intentions to create art, or to create an object *for* aesthetic appreciation, but depends on objects *having* properties that allow them to be aesthetically appreciated. According to an 'aesthetic functionalist' approach, something is an artwork if it is an artefact and functions to provide for aesthetic appreciation.¹¹ It might be thought that one benefit of this approach is that it 'allows for cross cultural art identification without troubling ourselves over the specific purposes for which the work was created.'¹²

Elsewhere, Dutton has done an admirable job pointing out the weaknesses of Overing and Gell's arguments that other cultures do not have art¹³—I won't go into the arguments here, however there does appear to be something left over to say. We can and must distinguish

between arguments about whether a culture has art, and whether it has something like aesthetic appreciation. Whatever the value of arguments that other cultures do not have 'Art as we know it', which appear quite readily disposed of by pointing to the variety of objects we think of as arts that we do not think of as fine arts, I think there is some merit to the argument that aesthetics is not a cross cultural category.

The most persuasive account of why aesthetic appreciation (understood in terms of disinterested contemplation) cannot be thought of as a cross-cultural concept that I have read was presented by Pierre Bourdieu in his article "The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic".¹⁴ Bourdieu argued that the aesthetic attitude is not shared by all humanity, or even by all people at all times in Western societies. He picks up on the current popular theoretical position that art is not defined by a type of creation, but a kind of social institution, and argues that it follows from this that the consciousness of the aesthetic attitude is also historically produced. Bourdieu writes: 'although appearing to be a gift from nature, the eye of the twentieth century art lover is really a product of history.'¹⁵ According to Bourdieu, aesthetic appreciation, the disinterested contemplative attitude of the art lover, is a product of history, because the process of aesthetic appreciation is inseparable from the historical appearance of producers of art motivated by artistic intention, and is inseparable from the production of fine art as autonomous and as having ends and standards that are found or created by the artist. He points out that there have been many different answers to the question 'What is art'? For example, we might think art is expressive of the emotions, or that it has significant form, or that it involves mimesis, or that it is the product of genius. What all these approaches have in common is the absence of a function of a work of art. Moreover, they share in an attempt to find an a-historical essence to aesthetic production or appreciation. The experience of seeing something as 'art' immediately gives us what we see—a meaning and value, that also presents us with an 'appropriate stance' to take towards it. This appropriate stance might be described as a reverent attention to 'the work'. The aesthete is a product of the social process of viewing works of art. Put bluntly, aesthetic appreciation, or having an aesthetic experience, is culturally specific learnt response or ability.

This creates a hermeneutic circle. The institution of art is maintained by people who accord art a special status, and the aesthetic

attitude is dependent on, and a product of this institution, just as the institution is dependent upon, and a product of, the aesthetic attitude. The circle is maintained by belief in the 'sacred' status (sacred as in set apart from every day or mundane functions) of the art work.

So, you might summarise the objection to the very possibility of an anthropology of aesthetics as based on the proposition that the aesthetic experience is a culturally produced experience that arises from a specific cultural production, fine art. With the rise of fine art, the West has developed a culturally specific way of aesthetic appreciation, a kind of disinterested contemplation. As many other cultures do not have fine art they do not have what we characterise as 'an aesthetic experience'. And, according to this argument, if it is true that when Piaroa or other indigenous peoples characterise certain attributes of their art as important because of a purpose or function, and respond to the object in relation to these purposes or beliefs rather responding to the object without reference to its purpose, then they are not identifying what we could generally call 'an aesthetic experience'. The idea that aesthetic appreciation is 'disinterested' appears to be the primary reason why you might think an anthropology of aesthetics is impossible.

Bourdieu appears correct in his characterisation of the dominant philosophical understanding of aesthetic appreciation as disinterested. This is true, despite the variety of formulations of the concept of 'an aesthetic experience'. I'll only offer a few examples, as presented by Noël Carroll in his book *Beyond Aesthetics*.¹⁶ Carroll categorises accounts of aesthetic experience into four kinds, the traditional account, the pragmatic account, the allegorical account, and his own deflationary account. What appears to be common to all these articulations of 'an aesthetic experience' is the idea of disinterestedness in the sense of being distinct from moral, political, or instrumental purposes.

The traditional account is of a concept of aesthetic experience that identifies such an experience as 'intrinsically' valuable. It involves contemplating an artwork for its own sake, rather than as having some kind of instrumental value.¹⁷

The pragmatic account, represented by philosophers like John Dewey, characterises aesthetic experience in terms of its 'internal structure' as '*an* experience'. The structure of 'an experience' involves duration, a qualitative unity, and temporal integration and closure. Carroll suggests these

must be considered necessary rather than sufficient considerations for an aesthetic experience, as these conditions do ‘not differentiate the aesthetic experience of art from any other sorts of experience.’¹⁸ So it appears that, for Dewey, the aesthetic qualities of an experience may arise within experiences of events that have an instrumental, political or moral purpose, but they involve an experience of properties that are distinct from those purposes. He suggests that we can learn to identify these aesthetic properties through learning to appreciate art.

The third account of aesthetic experience presented by Carroll is what he describes as an allegorical account to be found in Herbert Marcuse and T.W. Adorno. Both accounts focus on the autonomy of art. For Marcuse, art is valuable because it opens up a dimension to experience that is only available beyond ‘reality’. In art, ‘Subjects and objects encounter the appearance of that autonomy which is denied them in their society.’¹⁹ Carroll explains that for Adorno, ‘because the work of art is autonomous or lacking any other function than that of producing aesthetic experience (which is itself free of any instrumental, practical, and therefore, social interest) art may serve as an occasion for a demystifying, negating experience of social reality’.²⁰ Both accounts share a central premise in regarding aesthetic experience as disinterested, and rely heavily on Kant’s account of aesthetic experience as the experience of attending to something as purposive yet without attending to a purpose.

Carroll’s own deflationary account of aesthetic experience identifies two features he considers paradigmatic. The first is attendance to, and appreciation of, an object’s design, that is, the structure or form of an artwork, taking note of how it ‘hangs, or does not hang, together’.²¹ The second is the appreciation of aesthetic and expressive qualities, taking notice, for instance, of ‘the lightness and grace of a steeple, or the anguish of a verse’.²² An aesthetic experience, on this account, is ‘an experience whose content is the response-dependent, qualitative dimension of the object.’²³ Like the many other accounts of aesthetic experience, Carroll’s account makes a sharp distinction between aesthetic experience, and other experiences of an artwork, such as the moral indignation accompanying blasphemy and sacrilege, or political indignation about racism in the content of a novel. Carroll suggests these responses are quite different from aesthetic responses.

I realise this is a very quick survey of what we might mean by an aesthetic experience, but I think that these are not isolated or peculiar accounts of what it means to have one, and it supports Bourdieu's point that the aesthetic attitude, as we generally understand it, is characterised by disinterestedness.

Bourdieu's account of the historical relationship between the rise of the concept of a distinct, or autonomous, realm of aesthetics and the history of the development of our art institutions and practices also appears to be correct, or at least uncontroversial. Crispin Sartwell has pointed out that:

If the aesthetic is to be insulated from ordinary human purposes and emotions, and if it is to induce an exalted state in which such human purposes and emotions are to be held in suspension or distanced, then it must be firmly distinguished from craft, entertainment, industry, information technologies, and other spheres of practical or economic activity. This conception of the aesthetic thus corresponds to a conception of fine art which in turn coincides with the beginnings of the modern museum system... These conceptually interlocked notions of art and the aesthetic in turn fuel a set of artistic practices that are associated with romanticism and modernism.²⁴

Similarly, in *The Invention of Art*, Larry Shiner points out that appropriate, respectful behaviour in galleries, theatre and music, developed historically, and were part of an intentional education program on the part of these institutions, and disinterested contemplation became a marker of the upper class appreciation of fine art as opposed to the raw, emotional, boisterous response of the lower classes to the popular arts.²⁵ Bourdieu, Sartwell and Shiner all point to a historical 'coincidence': the development of a concept of aesthetic appreciation, the development of a practice of aesthetic appreciation, the development of an arts institution, and the development of artistic practice. The 'coincidence' is not a mere coincidence; all these developments are mutually supportive. Yet, this doesn't seem quite enough to prove the argument that aesthetic appreciation is culturally specific. If the anthropologists' claims that

aesthetics cannot be used in anthropology are to have any bite, they need to show more than that the concept is culturally specific, but that the *experience* is culturally distinct or specific.

Our practices, that is, what we do, influences what we experience. We can understand this even without a grand Marxist theory that modes of production produce modes of consciousness. Here is a non-artistic example. I took up tennis a couple of years ago. As I learnt to play tennis, I learnt to see and 'to read' a ball. I actually experienced different things to what I experienced prior to playing tennis. It was no longer 'something yellow and round and coming at me fast', it was something yellow, round, coming at me fast, that would bounce in a certain way, at a certain point of a court, that I could respond to in a variety of ways. I'm told that a professional player experiences the ball quite differently again, as though it is in slow motion. I have no reason to doubt this. The point can also be made in art. We appreciate artistic production because we have learned what is involved in the skills of painting, and making music and so forth, very often trying ourselves in school. Similarly, we teach people 'what to take note of' in paintings in art history classes, and how to recognise the structure of a symphony in music. Our skill development is associated with learning the ideology of the genius artist in art history, and, along the way, we learn to appreciate art in a certain way.

What is important to note here is that, if we define an aesthetic experience as disinterested, and if we acknowledge that this concept and practice of appreciation arises historically and is a learnt response, then there is substantial agreement between philosophers arguing that art *is* a cross cultural phenomenon, and anthropologists arguing that aesthetics *is not* a cross cultural concept.

For example, Dutton's response to Susan M. Vogel's argument that the Baule's concept of art is not like our concept of fine art, because the Baule believe the artefacts are merged with the spirit world and have great power, is to point out that the same problem applies to arts in our own tradition:

[A] majority of believers whose religious sentiments were inspired by Giotto's frescos at Padua might have been just as moved by similar frescos which did not approach Giotto's

artistry; in other words, the original audience might have possessed little or no appreciation of the comparative artistic value... of Giotto's frescos, and would have been responding to them as religious narratives. Part of understanding the cultural importance of Giotto for his original audience... is grasping the place of his works in a specific economy of religious thought, and religion, though often intermingled with art, need not be confused with it.²⁶

While Dutton disagrees that the merging of spiritual power and an object disqualifies that object from being art, Dutton is agreeing that if the interest in and response to a painting is in relation to its spiritual power, then it is not an aesthetic experience. I have presented a similar argument myself in relation to whether the category of something being 'sacred' can contribute to our aesthetic appreciation.²⁷

The notion of disinterestedness in our account of aesthetic experience disengages aesthetic experience from life's other concerns, in the same way that Western cultures disengage fine art from life's purposes. I think this disengagement of aesthetic experience from life is a problem, at least it is a problem if we want to argue that aesthetic appreciation is a universal experience or that 'aesthetics' is a cross cultural concept. If we recognise that this disinterested experience is culturally produced, we must also recognise that something that 'functions to provide for aesthetic appreciation' only functions that way from our perspective, and that it is true that when we place these objects into a gallery context we impose a new value on them. But equally, if we accept that the aesthetic attitude as disinterested contemplation is a learnt response to the rise of a culturally specific art form, it is a problem for our understanding of the significance of many of the art forms of our own tradition. How do we understand what Giotto was doing? I think Dutton is right that we cannot say his frescos were some kind of 'by product' of religion; Giotto was intentionally producing certain effects. We may also assume that Giotto lacked the intention to make 'art'; his actions were intimately connected to a religious purpose. This poses the question, how did religion and religious values influence, but not determine, what Giotto produced? And, if Giotto's contemporaries were not 'aesthetically

appreciating' his paintings, what *were* they doing? Does the influence of religious values actually mean they could not distinguish between different images because they were all sacred and therefore equally good or powerful?

My intuition, and I suspect I share it with many other people, philosophers and non philosophers alike, is that aesthetic appreciation is a basic human capacity. If it is the case that aesthetic appreciation is a basic human capacity, and it is the case that the predominant philosophical understanding of aesthetic appreciation as disinterested is a culturally specific concept, then we need to explore other ways of articulating what aesthetic appreciation involves (at least we do if we want to say something applicable cross culturally). Against the position of some anthropologists who believe that the meaning of words is determined by history, we have the capacity to explore other conceptions of aesthetic appreciation. And, as the association between aesthetic experience and disinterestedness appears to be the most significant problem for a cross cultural concept of aesthetics, we might begin by exploring what aesthetic appreciation would look like if it did not make this connection. A model for this could be the conception of aesthetics articulated by the anthropologist Howard Morphy.

2. An Anthropology of Aesthetics

Morphy's aim as anthropologist is to explain how the sensuous qualities of objects intersect with their value and human behaviour. He argues that anthropology needs to focus on the aesthetic intentions and responses of people in order to explain certain facts about the properties of objects. For example, Morphy suggests that we cannot explain why all the beads from the Aurignacian period in Europe some 30,000 years ago are in pastels and have a soft soapy texture, if we do not focus on the intentional acts of agents choosing certain pigments and qualities.²⁸

The questions anthropologists ask are questions about the relationship of certain kinds of behaviour to the structures of society. According to Charlotte Otten, the first anthropologist to recognise the social element in artistic behaviour was Ernst Grosse, who in 1894, called for a scientific, 'rather than aesthetic' response to its study.²⁹ Durkheim connected Aboriginal totems, which we would now recognise as sculptures

and paintings, to religion, arguing that religion just is society worshipping itself,³⁰ thereby placing what we would consider art as central to society. More recently, anthropologists have paid specific attention to the manner of presentation of objects, rather than merely focussing on the social function or its meaning. The value of this approach is that it connects *how* something is made to its meaning or social function. Some anthropologists have focussed on the relationship between style and cultural function, for example, in studies of Eskimo masks that connect levels of abstraction with levels of sacredness (Vastokas in 1967, as well as Ray in 1967).³¹ Morphy's work on levels of abstraction in Yolngu art, and on the relationship between abstraction and sacredness may be seen within this tradition.³² In this account of aesthetics, however, Morphy is not concerned with something that may be identified with art, but with 'aesthetics' as a primary mode of socialisation and experience that operates in every aspect of a culture.

Morphy's account of aesthetics is not entirely resolved, and is often densely written, making it hard to analyse. Yet there appear to be three central elements to his account of aesthetics, the physical properties of objects and their effect on the senses, the values and connotations physical properties acquire culturally, and the connection between those connotations and the semiotic for example, symbols of power, or religious symbols.

In one article, he presents two definitions of aesthetics. First, he defines aesthetic experience as 'the effect of the physical properties of objects on the senses, and the qualitative evaluation of those properties.'³³ On reflection of what this might mean it appears that what counts as the effect of physical properties is the recognition of qualities, such as hardness, or softness, dullness or brilliance, but the properties recognised may also be more abstract than this. For example, Morphy includes the recognition of efficiency and aptness, as well as the recognition of a balanced composition or of harmony. The recognition of some properties, such as a balanced composition, involves acculturation. In this respect, his basic account of aesthetics is similar to the deflationary account presented by Carroll, yet his second account of aesthetics is quite different.

In a rephrasing of his first definition of aesthetics, Morphy states 'aesthetics is concerned with the qualitative dimension of perception,

and the incorporation of perceptible properties into systems of value and meaning that integrate them with cultural processes.³⁴ This slightly different phrasing extends the application of the term. According to Morphy, aesthetics permeates all levels of material culture. So, for example, it concerns how I dressed today, and the design of the chair you are sitting on. It may also permeate non-material aspects of culture, such as etiquette, or story telling. Accordingly, we may speak of everything having an aesthetic dimension. A person may do something graciously, or in-graciously. A story, or, for that matter, a philosophy essay, may have good form. Stated this way, it sounds similar to Dewey's account of aesthetics. However, there are significant differences. Morphy's account does not include an analysis of what it is to have 'an experience'. In addition, Dewey's account of aesthetic experience still makes a distinction between function, or meaning, and the aesthetic appreciation of an event or experience. According to Dewey, our aesthetic appreciation involves identification of aesthetic properties that are distinct from the purposes of an event or experience. Morphy's account of aesthetics includes social function as part of its analysis. Morphy's concept of aesthetic experience may therefore be contrasted with Dewey's account of the aesthetic appreciation of an experience: if aesthetic appreciation is disinterested, aesthetic experience is not. The religious experience of spiritual power, or the feeling of being in the presence of an authority, would count as *aesthetic* experiences, even if they could not count as aesthetic appreciation.³⁵

At the same time, there's a slip between this account of aesthetics, and functionalist or structuralist approaches. Morphy writes:

Aesthetics is concerned with the whole process of socialisation of the senses with the evaluation of the properties of things. However, such socialisation takes place in the context of the process whereby qualities acquire connotations and are incorporated within systems of meanings. This can happen at the general level of the qualities themselves, as Munn has shown in the case of heaviness and lightness in the Massim region of Papua New Guinea. More specifically, qualities are organised into formal systems of art, music or design, to create forms which can be used for particular purposes or to

create contexts for certain events. Thus music or sculpture may be intended for contemplation or to mark a royal celebration.

It is this interrelationship between the sensual and the semantic that makes aesthetics such an important focus for anthropological research, for just as the quality of a sensation may be interpreted as a meaningful sign, so too can an idea evoke an aesthetic response. Ideas can calm and excite the senses as much as objects can.³⁶

But here Morphy appears to strain his concept of aesthetics once too far. How do ideas excite the senses? Which senses do they excite? If they do, it is not the same way that an object does. This cannot be included within his definition of aesthetics because it is not the physical effect of something on the senses and the qualitative evaluation of it, or an account of the physical qualities of their objects and their relationship with a value system. We are no longer describing sensory effects. If we give up the definition, or the importance of the sensory effect, we have also given up on boundaries to the subject being studied. The word aesthetics would simply become another word for values. Ideas can only excite the senses if they are expressed. The focus of an analysis of aesthetics must be on this form, and not on a disembodied idea.

In what follows, I intend to articulate an account of aesthetic experience that I take to be consistent with this position. However, I intend to start my analysis from our every day experience of aesthetics, through two philosophers: Thomas Leddy and David Novitz. Leddy has argued that analytic aesthetics has not merely overlooked one or two aesthetic qualities, but at least an entire class that he calls 'every day surface' qualities, such as neat, messy, clean and dirty.³⁷ Leddy sets out to prove that these are indeed 'aesthetic qualities' and our appreciation of them qualifies as 'aesthetic appreciation' by testing our experience of them against various mainstream formulations of what it means for something to be an aesthetic quality or an aesthetic experience. A more radical exploration of every day aesthetic perception, which challenged the separation of aesthetic concerns and experience from socially held values was presented by Novitz in an essay exploring the social impli-

cations of grooming and dress codes.³⁸ Novitz's account of aesthetic experience directly challenges the notion of aesthetic experience as disinterested, placing it firmly within a social structure. While Novitz's account may pose a more direct challenge to the account of aesthetic experience as disinterested, Leddy's account appears to presuppose this challenge by discussing how we learn to apply these aesthetic terms in childhood through acculturation. My presentation of these ideas is not intended to be an accurate account of their work, but it is inspired by it.³⁹ The fact there is so little on everyday aesthetics seems at odds with what I take to be an assumption shared by all philosophers concerned with aesthetics: that it is a basic human experience.⁴⁰ But it is equally strange in the sense of other truisms as well, for example, the truism that aesthetics is connected to how 'at home' we feel in the world. What is interesting about such truisms is that they are not trivial, at least in the sense that, if we take them seriously, they will have a revolutionary impact on the philosophical study of aesthetics.

3. Everyday Aesthetics

A sense of aesthetics is brought in to play when I decorate my house in certain colours, fabrics and designs. I don't think that is a controversial statement. And, if Leddy is correct, and I think he is, a sense of aesthetics is brought in to play when I clean and order that environment. I do not clean my house for purely utilitarian reasons, ordering tidying and cleaning it have utilitarian effects, such as hygiene and efficiency, but I do more than merely clean it and place things in ordered piles, I arrange them into pleasing collections. The effect of a clean and tidy space is also satisfying; it creates a sense of order or rightness about the world. It is as though I organise the world around me in order to give me 'a place' in the world that is 'mine', and the aesthetic qualities of that space determine my sense of well being. Unsurprisingly, similar aesthetic qualities in the broader environment affect a person's sense of place in that environment. In an interesting study of the sense of place and displacement within migrant communities in suburban Sydney, the anthropologist Amanda Wise has recently explored how migrant communities express their sense of displacement by reference to shop window displays, and the colours of the street-

scape. With a recent influx of new migrant shopkeepers who covered their windows with posters and cluttered the floor space with displays, older migrants expressed a sense of being 'shut out' of the community.⁴¹

Such everyday aesthetic qualities are also connected to our values. To make this relationship between values and sensual properties clear, let me use examples with which you will no doubt be familiar. If you were to go for a job tomorrow there are attributes that, whatever else, you would endeavour to have. One is clean. Another is tidy or neat. You would not go, if you could help it, with a sauce stain down your front. You'd have washed, and would have groomed thoroughly. Your nails would be clipped and clean; you'd have shaved. You may have had a haircut. You'd have ironed your clothes. You'd have polished your shoes. We do all this when we want to make a good impression. If you want the job, you affect 'the look'. And if you were on an interview panel, judging candidates today, and someone did not turn up clean, neat, and with shiny shoes, you'd notice. You would judge them in some way. You'd think it was either an affectation of nonchalance, or that the person was 'a grot', or that they weren't trying and didn't want the job very much. However you interpreted their appearance, it would be deeply meaningful. And there are acceptable limits to breaking these rules. I put it to you that while nonchalance in a job interview is compatible with not ironing, and not polishing your shoes, it is incompatible with dirt, or a dribble of sauce.

Clothing and grooming places us within a hierarchy of values that we cannot escape, regardless of whether we consciously accept or reject those values. Grooming equates to status and respectability. We know the structure of our society in relation to these norms. Our responses are immediate, and even physical. The street person is dirty, sometimes smelly, and possibly slightly repugnant. The executive is sleek, a little intimidating. Turning up to a formal function, such as a funeral, wedding, or graduation, and even, according to some people, the opera, without appropriate attire is an affront, or act of disrespect.

According to this account of aesthetic experience, the recognition of attributes immediately places us in a social context. It gives us a sense of place, gives us an orientation towards other people and things according to a social hierarchy, and the system of values it introduces is normative. The normative element involves a sense of rightness or

wrongness about the world, things as they should be, as well as how we should behave—an appropriate behaviour.

Everything I have been discussing about the properties of the world is in relation to a sign. Shiny buttons on a well-tailored double-breasted navy blue jacket tell me a lot about the world. They are a sign of respectability. I know what I know about the world because I take the qualities of the world, shininess, dirtiness, or whatever, as signs of the world, just as I think smoke means fire and spots mean measles. Similarly, when people say that for Mesopotamian people, the shininess of gold and silver in a church was a sign of the presence of god, we can infer that the sensual quality of shininess operated as a sign that told them something about the world, their place in it according to a hierarchy of values, an emotional response, and appropriate behaviour. Such signs often operate in a similar way in our own culture. For example, in Australia, the Senate, or Upper House, of our houses of parliament are often more elaborately designed and decorated than the chambers of the Lower House, or House of Representatives.⁴² The richness of design is a sign of power. Novitz argues that we also bring religious, economic, moral and other values to bear on our evaluations of art and that it is simply not true that art operates in autonomy from these values:

The serene passivity of a Raphael Madonna is valued not just because of the formal correctness of the painting but because of the religious and gender-related values that we bring to it. By the same token, we often respond aesthetically to, and admire, the architecture and the interior decorations of the Palace of Versailles not merely... because of their raw appearances but also because of their uninhibited display of wealth. Indeed, we can speak aesthetically of the magnificence and resplendence of Versailles only because we share, or at least understand, certain economic and political values. We admire both the wealth required to build the palace and the power of the king who could marshal such wealth.⁴³

Earlier I posed three questions that I suggested were raised by our account of aesthetic appreciation as disinterested. These were, how did religion and religious values influence, but not determine, what Giotto produced? And, if Giotto's contemporaries were not 'aesthetically appreciating' his paintings, what were they doing? Does the influence of religious values actually mean they could not distinguish between dif-

ferent images because they were all sacred and therefore equally good or powerful? Answers that would be consistent with the account of aesthetics I have just presented would indicate that there would be no disjunction between appreciating the frescos as a religious narrative and appreciating them aesthetically. Giotto shared with his contemporaries a set of values about the connotations of certain properties, such as the clarity and purity of colour, and the 'proper way' certain religious subjects ought to be presented to do them justice, but it would not follow that these values completely determined his artistic choices, any more than the aesthetic properties of cleanliness, tidiness and shininess determine exactly what we wear to a job interview. His skill as an artist would be admired to the extent to which these values were exemplified in his paintings, but the value of the paintings would not be that they were painted by Giotto, or innovative in the context of art history, but that they did exemplify these religious values to a greater or lesser extent.

If one takes cognitive processes as those responsible for knowledge and awareness, as well as the processing of experience, which is how Simon Blackburn defines cognition,⁴⁴ our apprehension of sensual qualities in the world are fundamentally cognitive. We know that an object has a certain property. We also know, or have a sense of, our place in the world in terms of a social hierarchy, as well as the place of that property within a hierarchy of values of clean unclean, attractive or unattractive. That is, we know its place in a system of values. We know how to treat things and to behave towards them—which might be in terms of respect or as something to be fixed, cleaned and righted. Where this use of the term 'cognitive' differs from an analytic use of the term is that our apprehension or knowledge includes an emotional response, often one we would rather not have.⁴⁵ We experience disgust when confronted by a person who is dirty, smelly and ungroomed, regardless of whether we also know that they should be treated with respect as a person. We experience anger when someone deliberately flouts certain aesthetic conventions of grooming or manners. We experience anxiety when we recognise someone as higher on the social scale. These responses are part of what it means to have those values; that is, they are the cognitive content of those values. Moreover, according to this view of aesthetic experience, these emotions *are* aesthetic responses. They are learnt responses that relate to values. We

learn, as children to recognise a clean and tidy room, and to enjoy everything being in its place, just as we learn to recognise harmony or significant form. We learn disgust in the same way that we learn beauty.

4. Conclusion

It is true that aesthetics, and the idea that an aesthetic experience is disinterested, reflects a particularly Western social structure and the fine arts system. The effect of the system's separation of art from life is a separation of aesthetics from function, that is, of aesthetics from life. However, it does not follow from this that an anthropology of aesthetics is impossible. An anthropology of aesthetics, understood as a concept connecting sensory experience to cognition and to social structure has yet to be developed in a comprehensive way. It cannot over reach itself as moving beyond the sensory involves the danger of blurring the distinction between aesthetics as a field of study, and a theory of value or social structure. But if we maintain this focus, it promises new ways of understanding cognition, as well as a way of understanding basic human responses to being in the world.

An anthropology of aesthetics, or, as I have presented it here, an everyday aesthetics, revolutionises our concept of an aesthetic experience. This experience is not divorced from every day occurrences, and it is not divorced from other parts of our life, such as politics or religion. But perhaps something even more surprising than this is how our sensory impressions, and every day aesthetics are so implicated in ideas such as there being an order to the world, and appropriate responses to it. Even at an everyday level, the order to the world may be understood in terms of the pure and the impure, the clean and dirty, and in terms of a hierarchy of social relationships. Everyday aesthetics is fundamentally social and cultural, partly because it is how we relate to others and to our place in the world, but also because the recognition of attributes is learnt in the very process of learning a set of values. Finally, it is revolutionising in that our emotional responses are not only seen as aesthetic responses, but as cognitive responses. They are not only a response, or one response to our environment, they are an expression of our understanding of that environment.

NOTES

- 1 Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 54.
- 2 Carroll, p. 54.
- 3 David Whewell, "Kant, Immanuel", in David E. Cooper (ed.) *A Companion to Aesthetics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 251.
- 4 Joanna Overing, Aesthetics is a Cross Cultural Category: Against the Motion (1) in T. Ingold (ed.) *Key Debates in Anthropology*, London: Routledge, 1996.
- 5 Overing, p. 261.
- 6 Overing, p. 264.
- 7 Overing, p. 265.
- 8 Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology", Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 40-66.
- 9 Denis Dutton, "Art, Behaviour and the Anthropologists", *Current Anthropology*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1977: 387-94, p. 388.
- 10 I change Dutton's story slightly here.
- 11 James C. Anderson, "Aesthetic Concepts of Art", in Noel Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, p. 80.
- 12 Anderson, p. 80.
- 13 Denis Dutton, "Universalism, Evolutionary Psychology, and Aesthetics", in Stephen Davies and Ananta Ch. Sukla (eds.) *Art and Essence*, Westport: Praeger, 2003, pp. 213-226; Denis Dutton, "But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art", in Carroll (ed.) *Theories of Art Today*, pp. 217-40.
- 14 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 46, special issues Analytic Aesthetics, 1987, pp. 201-10.
- 15 Bourdieu, p. 202.
- 16 Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2001, pp. 41-62.
- 17 Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, p. 44.
- 18 Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, p. 51.
- 19 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Boston: Beacon, 1977, p. 72. Cited in Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, p. 52.
- 20 Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, p. 53.
- 21 Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, p. 59.
- 22 Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, p. 59.
- 23 Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, p. 59.
- 24 Crispin Sartwell, "Aesthetics of the Everyday", in Jerrold Levinson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 765.
- 25 Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001, chapter 12.
- 26 Dennis Dutton, "But they Don't have our concept of art", in Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today*, p. 225.

- 27 “Appreciating ‘Traditional’ Aboriginal Painting Aesthetically”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2004, pp. 235-47. I do not think I have contradicted myself between these papers. In the 2004 article, I was primarily concerned with finding some kind of neutral ground for aesthetic appreciation in a gallery context. Here I am exploring a concept of appreciation that may contribute to our understanding, but not our appreciation, because, if I am correct, we cannot change our appreciation without changing our values and beliefs.
- 28 Howard Morphy, “Aesthetics is a cross-cultural category”, for the motion (1), in Ingold (ed.) *Key Debates in Anthropology*, pp. 255-60.
- 29 Charlotte M. Otten, (ed.), *Anthropology and Art: Readings in Cross-Cultural Aesthetics*, Garden City, NY: Natural History Press, 1971, p. xi.
- 30 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1912.
- 31 Otten, p. xii.
- 32 Howard Morphy, “From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu” in Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 181-208. Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 183-5, 196-207.
- 33 Howard Morphy, “Aesthetics across time and place: An anthropological perspective on archaeology”, in Thomas Heyd (ed.) forthcoming.
- 34 Morphy, in Heyd.
- 35 Morphy, in Ingold (ed.) p. 259.
- 36 Morphy, in Ingold (ed.) p. 259.
- 37 Thomas Leddy, “Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: ‘Neat,’ ‘Messy,’ ‘Clean,’ ‘Dirty’”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 53, no. 3, 1995, pp. 259-68.
- 38 David Novitz, “Keeping up Appearances”, *The Boundaries of Art*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, chapter 6.
- 39 In fact my account of everyday aesthetics is quite different from Leddy’s, whose forthcoming work on everyday aesthetics defines everyday aesthetics in terms of Kant’s concept of the agreeable. See Leddy, “The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics” in Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (eds.) *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, forthcoming, Columbia University Press, 2004.
- 40 I do not intend to imply that these are the only philosophers working in this area. Sartwell identifies three phases of a movement of ‘everyday aesthetics’. This movement has developed through Dewey and the philosophers who have reinterpreted him, philosophers who have attempted to recover objects and modes of experience back into aesthetics, and philosophers concerned with what he calls an aesthetic multiculturalism. Sartwell, in Levinson, pp. 766-769.
- 41 Amanda Wise, “Sensuous Multiculturalism: The embodied habitus and interethnic living in Ashfield”, presented at the Centre for Cross Cultural Research, Australian National University, 17 August, 2004.
- 42 Sylvia Marchant, “The Historical Traditions of the Australian Senate”, presented at the Centre for Cross Cultural Research, Australian National University, 30 August 2004.

- 43 Novitz, p. 81.
- 44 Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- 45 The cognitive content of a sentence, for example, is taken to be an understanding of what it would mean for that sense to be true or false, rather than the emotional or affective part of it. Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*.