Aesthetics derives from a Greek word meaning ‘things perceptible to the sense’, ‘sensory impressions’. At its broadest, anything could have an aesthetic effect simply by virtue of being sensed and perceived. From the late eighteenth century, however, aesthetics became narrowed to mean not just sense perception in general but ‘perception of the beautiful’ in particular. Thus by the late nineteenth century aesthetics was chiefly identified with the cultivation of ‘good taste’ in anything and everything from fine wine and clothes to literature, painting and music. As such, it melded with highly idealised and often socially elitist notions of ‘the sublime’ and ‘the beautiful’. At its crudest, an aesthetic sense was simply a sign of good breeding.

Art, meanwhile, was undergoing a corresponding process of narrowing in meaning and elevation in social status. Initially, the term ‘art’ had derived through French from a Latin word (ars/artis) meaning ‘skill’, ‘technique’ or ‘craft’. At this stage anything requiring practical knowledge and technical expertise could be an art, from the arts of husbandry (i.e. farming and housekeeping) to the arts of writing and building. Moreover, the ‘seven arts’ of the medieval universities (later called the Seven Liberal Arts) did not recognise modern distinctions between sciences on the one hand and arts and humanities on the other. The seven arts thus comprised Grammar, Logic and RHETORIC (the trivium) along with Arithmetic, Music, Geometry and Astronomy (the quadrivium). But all were ‘arts’ in that they required technical knowledge. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, ‘Art’ was increasingly being used as a singular and with a capital letter. Art was also being used as an umbrella term for what were now being called the fine (as distinct from the applied) arts: architecture (as distinct from building); sculpture (as distinct from carving), chamber and orchestral music (as distinct from popular singing and playing), ballet (not just any dance), painting on canvas (rather than, say, house-painting); poetry (as distinct from verse and song) and LITERATURE in the sense of ‘belles lettres’ (as distinct from writing in general). Significantly, at the same time, the sciences were also tending to be split into pure and applied (e.g., physics as distinct from engineering).

The overall result was that henceforth Art was increasingly distinguished from other forms of representation and signification. By the same gesture, artists (who were supposedly preoccupied with the sublime) were carefully distinguished from their more humble and practical counterparts, artisans. The former, it was argued, made beautiful things; the latter made useful things. (Incidentally, it was precisely against this divisive state of affairs that William Morris and Company and the related ‘Arts and Crafts’ movements came into being. They resisted the split between fine and applied art, as well as that between artist and artisan.) At any rate, notwithstanding the efforts of Morris and Co, from the late nineteenth century to the present it has been common to assume that art is ultimately a matter of ‘art for art’s sake’, and that it is either fine and pure or impractical and useless, depending on your point of view. At the same time ‘the aesthetic’ is casually assumed to be nothing more nor less than a sensitivity to the sublime and the beautiful and an aversion to the ordinary and ugly.

For English Studies, especially for the study of Literature, the legacy of such a division has been profound. Many traditional English Literature courses still concentrate substantially on just one side of the divide: on a canon of literature treated as high art (poems, plays and novels revered as classics), as distinct from popular writing and mass media production in general (magazines, news stories,
songs, soap operas, adverts, etc.). All the latter tend to be treated as artisanal, applied, commercial and ephemeral, and therefore left to courses in CULTURAL, COMMUNICATION, AND MEDIA Studies (see 1.3.3). The former, meanwhile, still tend to be treated as artistic, fine and in some sense timeless, and privileged as certain kinds of aesthetic literary object. The narrowed sense of aesthetic, meaning tasteful, refined and discriminating (rather than ‘sense perception in general’) has played a crucial role in maintaining the boundaries. So has a willingness to play down the fact that many works currently canonised as timeless classics (e.g., Shakespeare’s and Dickens’s) were highly popular and commercial and designedly ephemeral in their own day.

But contemporary understandings of both aesthetics and art are far more various and contentious than one might casually expect. They also tend to be materialist in emphasis and have a radical political edge. In English and Literary Studies, for instance, the two dominant aesthetics of the first half of the twentieth century have been effectively challenged. NEW CRITICS had approached texts as semi-sacred art objects (‘verbal icons’) and had asserted an aesthetics which resolves tensions and ambiguities and celebrates organic unity, balance and harmony (see 3.2). FORMALISTS had concentrated on literariness and *poetics in so far as these *defamiliarise routine language and sharpen dulled perceptions (see 3.3). Both these critical movements, for all their differences, were therefore upholding positions consistent with late nineteenth-century versions of aesthetics and art. Nowadays, however, such positions are much harder to maintain and in many areas have been substantially superseded. FUNCTIONALISTS and reader-reception critics, for instance, argue that every period or culture develops its own aesthetic principles, often defined against those which precede or surround it. They point out that the Romantics challenged an earlier eighteenth-century neo-classical aesthetic based upon symmetry, variety within unity and the reasoned subservience of parts to whole. In its place Romantic artists and writers developed an aesthetics based upon dislocation, multiplicity as it exceeds unity, and the emotional power of parts to shatter wholes. In a similar way, Modernism then POSTMODERNISM challenged and changed the dominant tenets of realism. We are thus left with competing aesthetics (plural), not just one.

Many modern views of aesthetics are politically charged, therefore, and reject the view that art is somehow above or to one side of social struggle. MARXIST, FEMINIST and POSTCOLONIAL writers, especially, all insist in their various ways that a traditional aesthetics of harmony, balance and unity is often maintained only by ignoring or playing down potentially disruptive issues of class, gender and race. They point to the existence of opposed and alternative aesthetics based upon different versions of beauty and visions of pleasure (e.g., representations of labourers, women, people of colour and the family that resist or replace stereotypes based upon Western European aristocratic, bourgeois and patriarchal values). Often, too, there is a radical revision of what we understand by pleasure. Desire, for instance, may be perceived as a power which blasts apart stale social forms, not simply as something to be restrained by reason or religion. Pleasure, meanwhile, may entail participation and collaboration (in its extreme form Barthes’s ecstatic ‘jouissance’) rather than a sensation derived from mere spectating and voyeurism.

It is also now commonly insisted that ‘the aesthetic’ is not an inherent property of objects at all – artistic or otherwise. Rather, it is argued, an aesthetic experience is what is generated in the encounter between specific artefacts and specific readers, audiences and viewers in specific conditions. Different aesthetics are
thus conceived as dynamic relationships not intrinsic essences: ongoing dialogues and exchanges in specific material conditions, not the observance of fixed codes. POSTMODERNISTS, moreover, point to the commodification and globalisation of all cultural products and processes. They observe that modern technologies of reproduction and communication are effectively abolishing any final division between ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ arts. In fact the dominant characteristic of postmodernist aesthetics is its hybridity and changeability. Such an aesthetics may be treated as a common currency and have nothing to do with art in a narrow sense at all. The complex matter of value persists, however, depending upon the notions of cultural propriety and economic property in play (see difference . . . re-valuation).

Activity

Aesthetics (plural) Identify two or more texts which seem to be constructed according to different aesthetic principles: perhaps one which appears to celebrate order and wholeness, harmony, balance and variety within unity; and another which appears to celebrate disorder and fragmentation, cacophony, imbalance and variety beyond unity. Also consider the possibility that these categories are themselves – along with notions of ‘beauty’ – partly in the eye, ear and mind of the reader, audience or viewer. (Clusters of texts which work well here, for stark contrast and subtle comparison, are those in Performance poetry (5.1.5); Novel voices (5.3.2); Voice-play (5.3.3) and the poems, adverts and journals in ‘Daffodils?’ (5.4.1) and ‘Versions of aging’ (5.1.4).

Discussion

(i) In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends.

F.R. Leavis, Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture (1930) (1979: 3)

(ii) I would regard with dismay a politics which subtracts the aesthetic and refuses it cultural meaning and possibility. [ . . . ] But the best answer to this case might well be to retheorize a flagrantly emancipatory, unapologetically radical aesthetic.

Isobel Armstrong, The Radical Aesthetic (2000: 30)

Also see: ETHICS, AESTHETICS, ECOLOGY (3.9); LITERATURE; CULTURE; FORMALISM INTO FUNCTIONALISM (3.3.); canon and classic; creativity; poetry and word-play; difference . . . re-valuation.


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