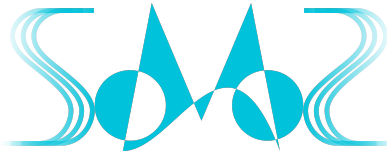


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A Socially Situated Aesthetics: Arguments from Anthropology and Neuroaesthetics

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In this conceptual paper, I explore arguments regarding aesthetics from two fields that differ greatly in their methods and epistemologies: namely, anthropology and neuroaesthetics. In particular, I discuss work by two neuroaesthetics researchers, Martin Skov and Marcus Nadal, whose arguments, I suggest, converge with, and even support, socially situated and anti-Eurocentric concepts of aesthetics developed in anthropology.

BACKGROUND

Aesthetics is a problematic concept for anthropologists (as well as for ethnomusicologists and ethnochoreologists) due to the socio-historical specificity of many notions associated with the term: for example, the disinterested aesthetic stance, the autonomy of art, and the entanglement of concepts of aesthetics and art. The difficulties are nicely illustrated in a debate that took place between prominent anthropologists on whether aesthetics can be considered a cross-cultural category (Ingold, 1996). Proposing the motion, the anthropologist Howard Morphy argues that aesthetics is a cross-cultural category due to it being concerned with “the human capacity to assign qualitative values to properties of the material world.” For Morphy, “[a]esthetics is concerned with the whole process of socialization of the senses with the evaluation of the properties of things” (Ingold, 1996, p. 258), a process that he suggests is applicable to all cultures. In response, the opposing camp in the debate counters that the term aesthetics cannot be separated from its socio-historically specific, eighteenth-century European conceptualizations, and is therefore unsuitable for application beyond this context. The opposing camp won the debate convincingly. Nevertheless, the term “aesthetics” continues to be used in anthropology in a socially situated sense, broadly in line with Morphy’s proposals, wherein “aesthetics” is considered to refer to the socialized values and expectations held by people regarding the sensory qualities of their own cultural practices and objects (Pearson, 2020).

In this paper I discuss the aesthetic notion of disinterestedness, which has been the focus of counterarguments from anthropologists as well as from Skov and Nadal (2020). In addition, I examine shared arguments for the disentanglement of art and aesthetics. My goal is to highlight the potential for common ground between anthropology and neuroaesthetics, notwithstanding the considerable differences in their respective epistemologies and methodologies.

DISINTERESTEDNESS

The notion of disinterestedness can be traced back to the 18th century ideal, expounded by Immanuel Kant, that judgments of beauty are necessarily disinterested; that is to say, the object should be appreciated for its own sake, without the observer having any interest in relation to the object, its uses and any moral good that might come from it (Kant, 1790/1911, pp. 202-210; Berleant, 2017, p. 10). Such disinterestedness can only be achieved when an observer takes a contemplative stance towards an object, and has no interest in the outcomes of the encounter. It thus effectively excludes all cultural practices that have overt functional or participatory aspects – the majority of cultural practices across the globe. While Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790/1911), does mention other categories of experience, including “delight in the agreeable” and “delight in the good,” these are never referred to as “aesthetic” and exist largely to delimit that which is excluded from “judgments of beauty” (elsewhere referred to simply as “aesthetic judgments”). Thus, in Kant’s critique, it seems that aesthetic judgments must have the quality of disinterestedness.

Anthropologists and sociologists typically view Kantian aesthetic notions as reflecting the ideals prevalent in their social and historical context, rather than as being relevant universally. For example, Pierre Bourdieu explains disinterestedness and related ideals as products of a particular socio-economic

context, designed to elevate certain cultural practices and modes of interaction above others, and with them, certain social groups (namely the bourgeoisie) above others, thus fulfilling a function of legitimating social differences (1984, pp. 4-7).

But what do publications in the field of neuroaesthetics say on the matter? As Martin Skov notes, when the field arose, one of its main aims was to test existing models of aesthetics (2019, p. 230). Someone engaged in contemplation of an artwork may feel they are immersed in appreciation of the object for its own sake, without any other interest, but is this really the case? According to Skov, evidence from neuroscientific studies suggests that aesthetic appreciation is not a matter of disinterested contemplation, but rather that multiple forms of interest and contextual influences are at play. Summarizing, he argues, “aesthetic appreciation does not come down to computing aesthetic judgments to a perceptual input. It comes down to assessing what value a stimulus has for the organism, in its current context, relative to previous experiences, its homeostatic state, and behavioral options” (Skov, 2019, p. 222). Thus, in practice, aesthetic judgment appears to be fundamentally self-interested and context dependent; the way in which we respond to an art object varies greatly depending on our current regulatory needs and also the contextual information provided. Evidence for this latter point can be found in studies examining “framing effects.” For example, a study by Kirk et al. (2009) demonstrates that participants’ assessment and experience of visual art depends on whether they are told the art is from prestigious art galleries, or made by the researchers.

Of course, neuroaesthetics deals with evidence regarding what people experience and believe rather than with ideals, and so it would be easy for those supporting Kantian notions such as disinterestedness to counter with the claim that participants in neuroaesthetics studies merely fail to appreciate the art correctly – they fail to reach the ideal. But, in response we might ask, what is the point of a model of aesthetic experience centered on an ideal that is rarely realized?

The arguments presented by Skov (2019), highlighting the significance of context and assessment of value in aesthetic experience, support dominant approaches in anthropology where aesthetics is typically conceptualised as bringing together the perceptual with the social through the attribution of value. As Morphy proposes, aesthetics is concerned with “the incorporation of perceivable properties in systems of value and meaning that integrate them with cultural processes” (2005, p. 54). From this perspective, disinterested contemplation can be viewed as an ideal existing within a system of value and meaning found in one particular cultural context, but which might be absent in other aesthetic systems.

THE DISENTANGLMENT OF ART AND AESTHETICS

Another key point of agreement between Skov and Nadal (2020) on the one hand, and anthropologists such as Morphy (2005) on the other, is in their respective proposals that the concepts of art and aesthetics need to be disentangled in order for work in their fields on aesthetics to progress.

In a recent article, provocatively titled “A Farewell to Art,” Skov and Nadal (2020) note that “empirical aesthetics and neuroaesthetics study two main issues: the valuation of sensory objects and art experience,” and that the two issues are often treated as if they were “intrinsically interrelated” (2020, p. 630). They argue that although the two issues do overlap in many cases, the idea of their interdependence is a misconception that confuses the field. In an earlier publication, they explain that current evidence points to art-related pleasure as being indistinguishable at a neurobiological level from other forms of pleasure (Skov and Nadal, 2018). Thus, they view the notion that art-related pleasure is fundamentally different to pleasure derived from other objects as responsible for holding back research in their field, acting as an erroneous basis for the construction of studies and isolating neuroaesthetics from other disciplines within the broader fields of psychology and neuroscience (2020, p. 631).

Similarly, in anthropology, Morphy proposes that the first step in using the concept of aesthetics cross-culturally is to disentangle aesthetics from art (2005, p. 52). Noting that the concept of art is a product of recent Western history, Morphy argues that the notion cannot be used in an unmodified way in cross-cultural analysis due to its appropriative nature: “It swallows up the products of other places and other times and transforms them into commodities to be viewed, understood and valued in ways unrelated to the intentions of their producers” (2005, pp. 52-54). In line with the approach suggested by Skov and Nadal for neuroaesthetics, much of the current work on aesthetics in anthropology looks beyond art-analogous objects, instead focusing on everyday and social aesthetics (e.g. Coleman, 2005 and 2018).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In conclusion to this brief discussion, I ask what can be understood from this convergence of arguments found in two such otherwise distinct fields. It is my hope that the socio-historical insights of disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, and experimental studies in neuroaesthetics, might support each other in contributing to understandings of aesthetics that shift away from certain Kantian notions that tend to either exclude most of the world's cultural practices, or force them to be understood with reference to Eurocentric concepts. There is still much work to be done towards decolonizing concepts of aesthetics, and I hope that the convergence of arguments noted in this paper bodes well for this movement.

NOTES

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