

IN SEARCH OF THE AESTHETIC

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Is there such a subject as aesthetics? The lack of any pre-philosophical route to its subject matter, the historicity of its favoured concepts and artefacts, and the ideological character of its inception all suggest that the aesthetic is an invented category, which identifies no stable or universal feature of the human condition. Against this I argue that ordinary practical reasoning leads of its own accord to aesthetic judgement, and that the experience in which this judgement is founded is rooted in our nature as rational beings. I go on to give a partial characterization of the experience, and to argue that our inherited concept of art, in which pictures, poems, works of music, and works of imaginative prose all count as works of art, can be vindicated, once we see art as a functional kind, whose function is to elicit aesthetic experiences.

I WANT to broach what seems to me to be the most important question of aesthetics, namely: is there such a subject? Is there any way of defining either a matter or a method of study that will isolate a realm of questions on the importance of which rational beings can agree, and which would occupy the place traditionally accorded to aesthetics among the branches of philosophy?

This question, you might think, could equally be asked of any branch of philosophy. Is there such a subject as ethics, as logic, as the philosophy of mathematics, or the philosophy of science? However, this is not so, and not only because of the obvious advances that have been made in all those areas in recent times. For those subjects are reflections on some pre-philosophically defined use of our rational powers. We all of us make moral judgements, deploying shared concepts of obligation, right, duty, and virtue. We cannot avoid these judgements or concepts, since our existence as rational and social beings compels us to make use of them. One only has to examine the credentials of these concepts to discover questions that all thinking people will acknowledge to be genuine questions, and also questions within the province of philosophy. And of course the same goes for the other branches of philosophy to which I have just referred.

When it comes to aesthetics, however, we find that we have no agreed pre-philosophical identification either of a class of judgements or a battery of concepts or a collection of states of mind that together might indicate a universally shared domain of rational thought and emotion. There are several reasons

why I say this. The first is the obvious one, that the term ‘aesthetics’ is itself a philosophical coinage, levered into the subject by Baumgarten in 1750 through a work ostensibly devoted to studying the relation between poetry and philosophy.¹ The term is taken from the Greek *aesthesis*, meaning (depending on context) sensation, perception, or feeling (as in ‘anaesthetic’). Baumgarten used the term to denote what he considered to be the distinctive feature of poetry, namely that it presents a form of ‘sensuous’ knowledge, through which we grasp particulars, as opposed to intellectual or conceptual knowledge which always generalizes. Truth in poetry consists in the truthful presentation of particulars—it is truth-to-life or *Wahrscheinlichkeit*. This means that the content of poetry is always at some level a perceptual content, and not expressible through concepts alone. Those suggestive ideas have since had a long history, reaching down to the aesthetic theories of Croce and Collingwood, to the criticism of T. S. Eliot, and to the ‘heresy of paraphrase’ of Cleanth Brooks.

Significantly Kant, when he turned his attention to some of the problems now studied under the rubric of ‘aesthetics’, did not use that term to define the subject, despite the long-standing influence of Baumgarten on his thinking. Kant had in fact already used the term in something more like its original Greek meaning, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the section described as the Transcendental Aesthetic is devoted to the *a priori* presuppositions of sensory experience.² When Kant turned his attention to questions that we now consider under the rubric of ‘aesthetics’, he defined the subject matter as that of ‘judgement’ (*Urteilkraft*), itself a densely technical term first introduced in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as part of Kant’s labyrinthine theory of the rational faculties. Aesthetic judgement was, for Kant, one of two kinds of judgement—the other being teleological judgement. In Kant’s usage the term ‘aesthetic’ denoted the sensuous aspect of our appreciation of beauty, which in turn is supposed to explain its ‘freedom from concepts’: in other words it was part of a theory designed to *explain* the phenomena that in Baumgarten are merely observed.

My second reason for doubt about the subject-matter of aesthetics is one that will be familiar to those acquainted with recent Marxist thinking, in particular the kind of modernized, or postmodernized Marxism that one finds in

¹ *Aesthetica* (1750; part II, 1758); cf. also J. G. Hamann, *Aesthetica in nuce* (1762).

² Kant explicitly repudiates Baumgarten’s use of the term ‘aesthetic’ at B36, though it is arguable that the First *Critique* contains an extended working out of the contrast made by Baumgarten, between the sensuous and the intellectual faculties. The influence of Baumgarten’s coinage has been denounced by Robert Dixon, in *The Baumgarten Corruption: From Sense to Nonsense in Art and Philosophy* (London and East Haven, 1995).

Pierre Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton.³ According to these thinkers the concept of the aesthetic is not even a piece of respectable philosophy. It is a piece of ideology, in the Marxist sense of that term. The concept is adopted not because it denotes some independently existing reality, but because it has a function in furthering certain economic and political interests. Marx's intention in *The German Ideology* and elsewhere was to distinguish two different modes of human thinking: the truth-seeking mode, which he called science, and the power-seeking mode, which he called ideology. Ideas and theories may be adopted because we believe them to be true, in which case they are put to the test in practice. Or they may be adopted because they serve the interests of a given class, which promotes them as part of the tendency to amplify its social power. We explain the advance of science by reference to the truth-seeking tendency of our rational faculties. We explain the growth of ideology by reference to the power-seeking tendency of our social interests. Ideology exists because of its function, even though those who adopt it believe that they adopt it because it is true. (That belief being part of their 'false consciousness'.)

Thus Bourdieu and Eagleton have tried to represent the concept of aesthetic value as a particular 'moment' in the unfolding of bourgeois culture, to be accounted for in terms of the transformations that produced the modern capitalist economy. When Kant presented his theory of the disinterested interest (which is roughly how he defined the aesthetic, or at least that part that is concerned with beauty) he was not, according to the neo-Marxist view, describing a human universal but merely presenting, in philosophical idiom, a piece of bourgeois ideology. This 'disinterested' interest becomes available only in certain historical conditions, and is available because it is functional. It has no claim to be either an essential part of our mental equipment as rational and self-conscious creatures, or a species of insight into ourselves or the world.

Why is aesthetic interest, as described by Kant and his followers, functional in 'bourgeois' conditions? Here is one suggestion. The 'disinterested' perception of nature, of objects, of human beings and the relations between them, confers on them a trans-historical character. It renders them permanent, ineluctable, part of the eternal order of things. Bourgeois social relations are thereby inscribed into nature and placed beyond the reach of social change. This 'making holy' of things is therefore an attempt to sanctify and immortalize a transient social arrangement. The idea of the aesthetic encourages us to believe that by isolating objects from their use, and purifying them of the

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London, 1984); Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1990).

economic conditions that produced them, we somehow see what they truly are and what they truly mean. We thereby turn our attention away from the economic reality and gaze on the world as though under the aspect of eternity, accepting as inevitable and unchangeable what ought to be subject to politically organized change. Moreover, while rejoicing in the fiction that both people and things are valued as 'ends in themselves', the capitalist economy treats everything and everyone as a means. That which is seen as most holy is at the same time treated as most expendable, and the ideological lie facilitates the material exploitation.

This way of undermining as ideology what proposes itself as philosophy (that is, as universal truth) is not confined to Marx. The same kind of argument occurs in Foucault, Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, and a host of lesser figures, seldom clearly or openly expressed, and often qualified to the point of near irrefutability. Obviously, we would need to ask whether and in what circumstances exposing the causality of a concept undermines its credentials, and whether functional explanations are ever sufficient to do this.⁴ But the argument at least shifts the onus: it is we who must justify the introduction of this notion of aesthetic interest, and show that there is some significant and philosophically puzzling reality that it serves to circumscribe.

The ideology argument connects with a more general worry, which is equally persistent and also equally difficult to express precisely. This worry arises from what we might call the historicity of the aesthetic. Whatever it may turn out to be, aesthetics concerns itself with states of mind, worldviews and artefacts that are immersed in, and take their character from, the stream of human history. The states of mind that are singled out as aesthetic interest are all laden with the culture and the historical circumstances of those who experience them. Works of art too are historical entities, addressed to specific audiences against a background of cultural conventions and social expectations. It seems implausible and presumptuous to assume that the kinds of interest that we have now in works of art are the kinds of interest that people have towards them at every period of history. And it is equally implausible and equally presumptuous to suppose that the artefacts that we treat as art will have the same or comparable significance to people of other cultures and at other times. The whole area of the aesthetic, as philosophers describe it, is in a state of historical flux, and the attempt to extract a description of some trans-historical, trans-cultural interest to be called 'aesthetic', and supposedly exemplified by rational beings in all the circumstances of earthly life, is founded on nothing more than a parochial refusal to look beyond our own perspective.

⁴ Some of the subtleties are introduced by G. A. Cohen in *Karl Marx's Theory of History, a Defence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1978).

Exactly what to do with this argument from historicity is a difficult question. But the argument constantly returns in aesthetics, often changing shape and emphasis, but always challenging us to find that trans-historical perspective whose possibility it denies.⁵

A further consideration is also relevant, which is that of the open-textured vocabulary of aesthetics, and the seeming difficulty of isolating any shared grammar or shared set of terms that will distinguish aesthetic from other forms of judgement. The eighteenth-century philosophers who set the subject in motion singled out the 'beautiful' as the focus of their concern. But it is abundantly clear that we use this term in all kinds of contexts that seem, on the surface, to have little or nothing in common. The beautiful move in chess or football, the beautiful proof in mathematics, the beautiful character and beautiful action – all these seem to be at best only tangentially related to the beautiful in art or nature. And human beauty is so deeply entangled with moral emotions and sexual desires that it would be quite misleading to think that it had any relation to the contexts typical of aesthetic judgement.

Moreover, in many cases where we might want to speak of aesthetic interest, beauty is no part of what we seek. No sooner had the beautiful taken its place among the objects of philosophical enquiry than thinkers found themselves wanting to distinguish the beautiful from the sublime, arguing that two different but related interests are evoked by each of them. More recent philosophers have gone much further in recognizing the multiplicity of critical categories, not merely the 'dainty and the dumpy' as Austin once put it, but the moving and the tragic, the melancholy and the obscene, the balanced, the melodious and the awkward. Some of the most impressive works of recent times have been downright ugly and even offensive in their raw-nerve impact—think of Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin*, Gunther Grass's *Tin Drum*, Picasso's *Guernica*. Attempts to single out a special 'aesthetic use' of terms—by describing them as articulating some quasi-perceptual judgement of 'taste', for example, in the manner of Sibley⁶—simply return us to our starting point. How do we know that there is such a faculty as taste, that it is a genuine and universal attribute of the rational mind, and that it tells us something important about its object?

In recent times philosophers have tried to duck out of questions about the aesthetic by turning their attention to art, and replacing the old pursuits of

⁵ A version of the argument, expressed in other terms, can be found in Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Relevance of the Beautiful', in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1986).

⁶ F. N. Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', *Philosophical Review*, vol. 68 (1959), pp. 421–450; 'Aesthetic and non-Aesthetic', *Philosophical Review*, vol. 74 (1965), pp. 135–159.

Kantian aesthetics with the philosophy of art. This is the direction in which Hegel turned the subject in his great lectures on aesthetics, which discuss the various arts as forms of consciousness, and subsume them under an overarching historical and conceptual scheme. Subsequent philosophers have taken the cue from Croce's *Aesthetic*, written a century ago, in which the theory of art as expression was put in the place of the Kantian theory of the aesthetic as the realm of disinterested interest. Croce proposes a unified theory of the arts, and one that distinguishes art from every other artefact, and the experience of art from every other kind of experience, in a manner that directly recalls Baumgarten's original thesis in *Aesthetica*. Needless to say Croce's theory does not work. But it bequeathed to subsequent philosophers of art an important distinction—that between representation and expression—that has served to focus the question of artistic meaning ever since.

The turn towards art does not really help us to escape the sceptical doubts already entertained. Art is just as much subject to historicity as any other cultural object; the assumption that other times and other cultures would understand art as we do is simply unwarranted; the very concept of art is arguably as much a philosophical—or at any rate intellectual—invention as that of the aesthetic. Do other ages and other cultures possess any concept that coincides with ours, and if they do, is this anything better than an accident? It has been plausibly argued (by Kristeller⁷) that our concept of art grew from the Latin idea of the *artes* or skills only in the eighteenth century, when the distinction between the 'fine arts' and the 'useful arts' gained currency—at the very time, indeed, that the term 'aesthetic' began to appear with something like its modern meaning in the works of philosophers.

These worries are compounded by the advances of recent analytical philosophy, which tell us to distinguish natural from non-natural kinds, and to recognize that the latter are determined by our interests rather than by a real common nature.⁸ Art is not a natural kind, nor even (it would seem, at least) a functional kind like table or knife. By what principle do we distinguish art from non-art, therefore, and what is the point of doing so? This question, pushed in the direction towards which it naturally tends, will lead us to the very same point as Kantian aesthetics—the attempt to define a specific kind of rational interest, of which art is the characteristic or central object. And on what grounds do we suppose that there is such an interest, and that it is connected with rationality as such, rather than with some fleeting stage of human culture?

⁷ For example, P. O. Kristeller, 'From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment', in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, vol. III (Rome, 1993).

⁸ See Hilary Putnam, 'Is Semantics Possible?', in *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers* vol. 2. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1975).

In the light of that consideration it seems to me that much of recent aesthetics has really been rather futile. In particular the constant wrangling over the definition of art, over whether found objects are works of art, whether John Cage's 4'33" is a work of music—even over whether works of art are types or tokens, whether notation determines identity, whether arrangements are identical with or versions of the originals, whether copies are versions or new works of art, and so on and so on—all such questions seem to me to get nowhere. For they can all be answered as you will, without casting any light whatsoever on why works of art are significant to us, and what kind of significance they have. Matters would be different if we had a viable account of aesthetic interest. For then we could define art as a functional kind, namely the kind designed as objects of aesthetic interest, in the way that jokes are designed as objects of amusement. That would enable us finally to bring a stop to arbitrary questions and nonsensical boundary disputes. But it would also land us back where we started, with the task of defining aesthetic interest as an important and non-accidental feature of the human condition.

That is why it seems to me that Kant's approach to the subject is the right one. We must try to isolate a mental act or state of mind that is in some way deeply implicated in our lives as rational beings, and which has the kind of consequence for us that would justify the emergence of aesthetics as a discipline. Now for Kant rationality was an all-or-nothing affair. Either you had it or you did not have it. If you had it, then you had every aspect of it: understanding, practical reason, and judgement. The first delivers theoretical knowledge, the second delivers practical knowledge (in other words, the moral law), and the third delivers—what exactly? Kant gave no clear answer to that question. But he clearly believed that all rational beings make, and must make, aesthetic judgements, and that in doing so they are, as he put it, 'suitors for agreement' with their kind.

Someone might object at this point that it is not true that all rational beings make, still less that they must make, aesthetic judgements. Many people seem to live in an aesthetic vacuum, filling their days with utilitarian calculations, and with no sense that they are missing out on the higher life. Kant's response to this is to deny it. People may seem to live in an aesthetic vacuum, he would say, only to those who believe that aesthetic judgement must be exercised in some specific area, such as music, literature, or art. In fact, however, appreciation of the arts is a secondary exercise of aesthetic interest. The primary exercise of judgement is in the appreciation of natural beauty. In this we are all equally engaged, and though we may differ in our judgements of taste in landscapes and the like, we all agree in making them.

Kant's emphasis on the appreciation of natural beauty is part of an attempt to avoid the historicity objection. Nature, unlike art, has no history, and its beauties are available to every culture and at every time. A faculty that is

directed towards natural beauty would have a real chance of being both a human universal, and founded in some universal claim—in other words, a claim of reason. Unfortunately Kant is open to the very objection that he is striving to avoid. Nothing is more time-bound and parochial in Kant than the interest in natural beauty, and the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, through which he attempts to explain its deep philosophical importance. Natural beauty, it might even be argued, was a discovery of the Enlightenment. It is the mastery over nature, its conversion into a safe and common home for our species, and the growing desire to protect the dwindling wilderness, that explains the sudden attitude to the natural world as an object of intrinsic interest, rather than as a means to our practical purposes. Kant's aesthetics is a product of its time in the same way as the poems of Ossian and Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*, just a step away from the romantic landscape art of Friedrich, Wordsworth, and Mendelssohn, and as time-bound in its focus as they are. Other eras and other cultures certainly have no use for the contemplative attitude towards the natural world. For most people in most periods of history nature has been harsh and inhospitable, something against which we must fight for our livelihood, and which offers no consolation when contemplated with the cool eye of the beholder.

Still, even if that is all true, there is more to be said in Kant's favour. Having identified aesthetic interest as essentially passive and contemplative, Kant was naturally inclined to identify its characteristic object as something not made but found. With artefacts our practical reason is often too vigorously engaged, he seemed to think, to permit the stepping back that is required by aesthetic judgement. And he made a distinction between the 'free' beauty that we experience from natural objects, which comes to us without the deployment of any concepts on our part, and the 'dependent' beauty that we experience in works of art, and which depends upon a prior conceptualization of the object.⁹ Only towards nature can we achieve a sustained disinterest, when our own purposes become irrelevant to the object of contemplation.

Kant is surely wrong in this; but by exploring his error I hope to underline the deep truth that he is trying to get across. *Pace* Kant, there is a kind of disinterested contemplation that is involved even in the most practical matters, and which is an integral part of knowing what we are doing and doing it well. Wittgenstein has a telling example of this.¹⁰ Suppose you are fitting a door in

⁹ The distinction here is not clearly drawn, and is also a matter of scholarly dispute among commentators. See *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1952), p. 70.

¹⁰ *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p. 13.

a wall and marking out the place for the frame. You will step back from time to time and ask yourself: does that look right? This is a real question, but it is not a question that can be answered in functional or utilitarian terms. The door-frame may be just what is needed for the traffic to pass through, it may comply with all requirements of health and safety, but it may simply not look right: too high, too low, too wide, wrong shape, and so on. Those judgements do not refer us to any utilitarian or functional goal, but they are rational for all that. They might be the first step in a dialogue, in which comparisons are made, examples urged, and alternatives discussed. And the subject matter of this dialogue has something to do with the way things fit together, and a hoped-for harmoniousness in the completion of an ordinary physical task.

That is the kind of example, it seems to me, that Kant ought to have used, in order to establish his point that there is an exercise of the rational faculties that points beyond purpose, and which involves a contemplation of the way things appear. For the example shows not merely that there is indeed such an exercise of the rational faculties, but that it forms an integral part of practical decision-making. There are other examples that bring the point home. Consider what goes on when you lay the table for guests: this is an example that Kant himself uses¹¹ as an illustration of what he calls ‘agreeable’ (as opposed to ‘fine’) art, though he does not perceive its centrality to his aims. In laying a table you will not simply dump down the plates and cutlery anyhow. You will be motivated by a desire for things to look right—not just to yourself but also to your guests. Likewise when you dress for a party or a dance, even when you arrange the objects on your desk or tidy your bedroom in the morning: in all these cases you are striving for the right or appropriate arrangement, and this arrangement has to do with the way things look. The examples point us to what I call ‘the aesthetics of everyday life’, a much-neglected topic, the neglect of which explains, indeed, many of the ways in which people misunderstand architecture and design.¹²

The examples do not yet take us very far. They tell us that there are choices remaining when utility is satisfied, that these choices concern, or tend to concern, appearances, that they can be discussed and to that extent are rational. But they do not tell us the real point or value of making these choices, whether they can be objectively justified, or what role they play in the life of a rational being. They might seem like a mere residue—something left over after the real decisions have been made, a way of arbitrarily settling for one among an infinite number of options.

¹¹ *Critique of Judgement*, pp 165–166.

¹² I have argued for this application of aesthetic reasoning in *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London and Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1979).

What more needs to be shown in order to resurrect the Kantian position? First, it seems to me, we need to show the place of those aesthetic choices in the life of a rational being. And it is helpful here to compare the situation of non-rational animals. They too live in a world of redundancies. A horse, faced with a level fence, has infinitely many places at which he can jump it. If he jumps it is because he wants to—whether to escape an enemy or to follow the herd. And his jumping can be explained on the usual belief-and-desire model of deliberative behaviour. But there is, for the horse, no answer to the question which place in the fence is the right place at which to jump, not because all places are on a par but because there is for the horse no such question. *We* can ask questions like that, since we have the habit of removing redundancies, justifying individual actions, doing not just what achieves our goals but what also achieves them in the most ‘fitting’ way.

This point can be brought out also through a comparison with birdsong. As we now know, birdsong has a territorial function, and is emitted at the times of day—after waking and before sleeping—when an active male needs to mark the boundaries of his patch. This function is not a purpose of the bird’s: he does not have purposes, even if he is motivated by desires, since his life is not lived according to any plans. Moreover, the song is underdetermined by the function, which requires only that the song be loud enough to be heard by competitors and potential mates, and recognizable either as the voice of the species or, when territories are close together and confined, as the voice of the individual occupant. The big predators do not benefit genetically from individual recognition, and of necessity have large territories and permeable boundaries. Not surprisingly their calls tend to be species calls, like those of the vulture and the hawk. Songbird genes, however, are benefited if individual calls can be selectively recognized by mates and competitors: for this marks an ‘evolutionarily stable strategy’ in the competition for mates and territory.¹³ Not surprisingly, therefore, these birds utter varied and variable calls, trying out phrases and notes before settling on a few characteristic turns of phrase which feature as refrains in their daily litany.

We hear these phrases as song-like, and we describe birdsong as a kind of music. But there is nothing in the bird’s behaviour that could conceivably lead us to say that he has chosen one note as the fitting successor to another, that he has hit on this phrase as exactly the right phrase for the context, that he hears one note as a continuation of the phrase that preceded it, and so on. None of those judgements has an application in ornithology, since they are

¹³ The concept of the ‘evolutionarily stable strategy’ is developed in Maynard Smith’s adaptation of game theory to cover competition at the genetic level. See Helena Cronin, *The Ant and the Peacock: Altruism and Sexual Selection, from Darwin to Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1991).

judgements that apply only to rational beings—beings who do not just hit on one of the infinitely many alternatives before them, but who seek out reasons for doing so, whether before or after the event.

How can a rational being close redundancies of the kind that lie open forever in the song of a bird? Let us return to the example of the carpenter. How does the carpenter choose among the possible doorframes that suit the given function? On the basis of what *looks right*. He is judging the object in terms of its appearance, and searching in this appearance for a reason that would justify his choice.

Note that this is not the only way of closing redundancies. The carpenter could search for reasons for his choice not in the way the door appears to him but in the way it is. He could describe its shape—a golden section rectangle, say—as being the right shape, regardless of how it looks. But why is it the right shape? One answer might be: religion requires that we build in golden sections. But if that is the *final* answer, then we have simply specified another functional requirement. In which case the redundancies will arise elsewhere—in the size of the door, perhaps, the materials to be used and so on. If religion specifies everything, so that there is no room for choice, then it simply eliminates the idea of the ‘right’ shape, the ‘right’ appearance. There is no independent right or wrong to an appearance, since the question cannot be asked. But in all actual human practice it always can be asked, and a religion that tries to prevent this will not appeal for long to those who are asked to build its temples. Normally, therefore, when choosing what they judge to be the ‘right’ shape for a door, carpenters are going by the way things look. When questions of function and utility have been answered, what interest is there left for a carpenter to address, other than our interest in the way things look?

Important consequences follow. When I choose a doorframe on the grounds that it looks right, I have to confront, whether from myself or from another, the question ‘Why?’ ‘It just does’ is one possible answer. Or I may make comparisons, search for meanings, look for customs and traditions that vindicate my choice. But what I cannot do is to assign to the appearance a merely instrumental value, for example, by saying that ‘doors of that shape attract older customers’. For that would be to abandon my initial judgement. It would be to rest my case not in the way the door appears to me, but in the utility of its appearing that way to others. It is to retreat to a judgement of utility, one that I could reasonably and sincerely affirm even if the doorframe looked entirely wrong to me.

Animals look at objects, searching for information as to threats and promises. But animals do not look at things as the carpenter looks when he is studying the doorframe. Every instance in which an animal is observed to be drinking in the look or sound of something can be equally described, without loss of predictive power, as a case of curiosity, of listening or looking out for

information. There seems to be nothing in an animal's behavioural repertoire that would enable us to say that it is *contemplating* the way something looks or sounds. It may be searching for information by looking and listening; or it may, like the blackbird, be making sounds instinctively, which will impart information to its conspecifics. But in all such cases the appearance of things is subordinate, in an animal's consciousness, to the information gleaned from it, or the instinct served in producing it. We, who can stand back and study appearances, and base our choices on what we then perceive, can make a place in our behaviour and in our lives for the pure appearance, as the carpenter does when he chooses a particular shape of doorframe.¹⁴

By contemplating the appearance of the doorframe, the carpenter finds the way to close off the redundancy of choices before him. Since the appearance has been detached in his thinking from the practical considerations that propose infinitely many doorframes as equally suitable, he is now launched on a path of discovery—to find the reasons that would justify *this* frame, and which would justify it on account of the way it looks. He will compare the doorframe with others, and also with the window-frames that are to be placed to either side. He will try to discover what 'fits' to other visual details in the building. He will be trying to 'match' the doorframe to the building as a whole, and also to the parts of it. One result of this process of matching is a visual vocabulary: by using identical mouldings in door and window, for example, the visual match becomes easier to recognize and to accept. Another result is what is loosely described as style—the repeated use of shapes, contours, materials, and so on, their adaptation to special uses, and the search for a repertoire of visual gestures.

So far you may think that nothing has been added to the deliberations of the carpenter other than a kind of game he plays with himself, by way of closing off the redundancies left by real practical choice. However, two considerations arise that will cast doubt on that response. The first is that the carpenter is not the only person who will have a view in the matter of the doorframe. Others too will look at and be either pleased or displeased with its proportions. Some of these will have an interest in the door, as future residents of the building to which it will be fitted. Others will have the interest of passers-by and neighbours. But all will have an interest in the way the door looks: and the less practical their involvement, the greater that interest will be. Here is the beginning of what game theorists call a 'coordination problem'.

One way of resolving such a problem is to strive for agreement: if there is a single choice—or a range of choices—on which we can all agree, then the

¹⁴ The argument of this paragraph is an application of the principle in animal ethology, known as Lloyd Morgan's Canon: see C. Lloyd Morgan, *Habit and Instinct* (London, 1896).

problem ceases to be a problem.¹⁵ Even in the absence of explicit agreement, however, a solution might emerge over time, as unpopular choices are rejected, and popular choices endorsed. Thus great innovators such as Palladio suggest forms and compositions that elicit the spontaneous approval of others, while the ordinary builders of streets adapt by a process of trial and error. Both processes add to the shared vocabulary of forms, materials, and ornaments. A kind of rational discourse emerges, the goal of which is to build a shared environment in which we can all be at home, and which satisfies our need that things look right to everyone. This aspect of the aesthetic—its socially derived and socially motivated status as a guide to our shared environment—is something suggested by, but not contained in, its nature as a redundancy closing device.

The second consideration is that the look of something, when it becomes the object of intrinsic interest, accumulates meaning. You can simply enjoy the look for what it is. But rational beings have an inherent need to interpret, and when the object of their attention is an appearance, then they will interpret the appearance as something intrinsically meaningful. Even so simple a thing as the design for a doorframe will be subject to this need. The carpenter will associate door-shapes with specific forms of social life, with ways of entering and leaving a room, with styles in dress and behaviour. It has long been noticed, indeed, that fashions in dress and fashions in architecture have a tendency to imitate each other, and that both reflect the changing ways in which the human being and the human body are perceived.

Taking those two considerations together, we reach the following interesting suggestion, which is that, whenever people attempt to close up the redundancy of practical reasoning by choosing between appearances, they are also disposed to interpret those appearances as intrinsically meaningful, and to present the meaning that they discover through a kind of reasoned dialogue, the goal of which is to secure some measure of agreement in judgements among those who have an interest in the choice. In saying this, we come very close to the eighteenth-century idea of taste as a faculty whereby rational beings order their lives through a socially engendered sense of the right and wrong appearance. And it is not at all unreasonable to suggest that we are beginning to locate a genuine realm of rational life that corresponds to the philosophical idea of the aesthetic, and which is both important in itself and philosophically problematic.

¹⁵ This is the thought behind the social contract, in both the Lockean and the Rawlsian versions. Contrast, however, the Adam Smith/Hayek view, that consensual orders emerge from choice, but are not the object of choice. A style in architecture is more like a 'spontaneous order' in Hayek's sense than it is like the planned order of the social contract. (See F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 2 [London:, Routledge 1976].)

In choosing the doorframe for the way it looks, the carpenter frees himself from instrumental reasoning. He finds himself making a choice, in which the object chosen is not the means to an end but an end in itself. His choice is not dictated by external constraints but springs from a sense of personal involvement. He is in a certain measure expressing and realizing his own nature, and the thing that he chooses belongs to him as his creation. This kind of choice may be described as 'sheer joy', meaning that it is imbued with the freedom of the chooser, and vindicates that freedom, by imprinting the mark of it on the world.

The door looks right to the carpenter who chooses it, and this 'looking right' leads him to interpret the appearance, by seeing things in it that it does not literally contain. The door has, in his eyes, a natural, easy-going, and honest appearance. It calls to mind the shape and style of a way of life. The doorframe is not just preferred but interpreted, and the interpretation involves metaphors, analogies, and oblique and associative references to things that have nothing in themselves that is door-like—honesty, domesticity, and so on.

Now it is surely obvious that, once this habit of interpreting appearances has arisen, there will arise also the habit of creating objects to be enjoyed for their appearance and whose appearance is to be interpreted purely for what it means and without reference to some (further) practical function. This, it seems to me, is the core of the artistic urge: the creation of an object of interest, whose meaning lies in its appearance and whose appearance is enjoyed for its meaning. If that is right, then we are one step on the way to defining art as a functional kind, and for ruling on all those problem cases, which will not be problem cases at all, now that we have a way of resolving them.

The example has crucially depended on the fact that, when issues of function and utility have been fully addressed, appearance is all that remains, so that an attempt to close off redundancies must find a solution in the *way things look*. And this interest in appearances seems to correspond to two of the conditions that Kant lays down for the aesthetic: it is bound up with sensory experience, and it is disinterested, arising only when our practical interests have been either fulfilled or set aside. Proceeding in this direction we move towards a believable conception of the aesthetics of everyday life, and one that might explain why aesthetic values are important, why we are always striving for agreement over them, and why they issue in a shared pursuit of order and style. However, if we cannot extrapolate from this case to the art-forms that have most significance for us, we have not succeeded in making the crucial connection between the aesthetic and the artistic—the connection that has underpinned the history of the subject.

Here we might do one of two things. First, we might abandon the search for a single thing called aesthetic interest, which will unify the various art

forms and provide a theory of their value and a foundation for critical judgment. That would be effectively to abandon the idea of aesthetics, as a distinct branch of philosophy. Secondly, we might search in our example for a thread that would lead us towards the various art forms so as eventually to tie even the most seemingly remote from our example—prose fiction—to the ‘disinterested interest in appearances’ that provides the core philosophical idea. This is the route that I wish to take. For it seems to me that the ‘interest in appearances’ that I have described is only a special case of a wider interest in *the way things present themselves*, and that this is an interest common to all rational beings.

Before pursuing that line, however, there is one more lesson to be drawn from the example of the carpenter. When focusing on the way the doorframe looks, his fundamental reaction can be expressed, as Wittgenstein points out, in such terms as these: ‘too high’, ‘too low’, ‘just right’—expressions with a normative force that prompts the question ‘Why?’ There are (very broadly) two kinds of answer that the carpenter might give to that question—supposing he answers it at all. One kind of answer we might call ‘formal’: it remains focused on the shape and size of the doorframe and simply describes and contextualizes it. The carpenter might say: ‘This is the shape that matches the windows, that best suits the style of the house’, and so on. The other kind of answer conveys an idea of meaning. The carpenter might say that the doorframe has a comfortable, serene, peaceful, or homely look. Here the descriptions are often metaphorical, imported from another and more central context. And they situate the object in the current of human life, endowing it with a moral or social significance.

When we say of a person that ‘she looks serene’, this can be taken in an epistemic sense, to mean ‘she looks as though she is serene’—that is, one can infer from her looks that it is likely that she is serene. But the phrase can also be taken in a non-epistemic sense, to mean ‘she has a serene look’, whether or not she is serene in fact. It is this non-epistemic sense of ‘look’ that is involved in the description of the doorframe. We are not interpreting appearances as a guide to reality, but looking for the meaning that they contain within themselves.

An experience can have meaning for us in one of two ways: the way of perception and the way of imagination. The way of perception is one that we share with the other animals. It involves the use of our sensory capacities to gain information about the world, and this information comes to us in two forms: as part of the way things appear to us, and as an inference from the way things appear. The object before me looks like a table, and here the information about the object resides in the appearance itself. I also infer from the appearance that someone has been trying to move the table. Distinguishing information that resides *in* an experience, from that which is inferred *from* an

experience, is one important task in the philosophy of mind. And I shall assume that we have an intuitive understanding of what the distinction involves.

The way of imagination is illustrated by pictures, as when I see a face in a portrait. This 'seeing in' is again the subject of much work in the philosophy of mind. As with the way of perception we can distinguish the content that is part of the appearance itself, from the content that is inferred, or rather imported, by association and reflection. We see the face, and we also tell ourselves a story about it. But in neither case need we be dealing with information about the real world. Someone might say, under the influence of philosophy, that we are dealing with information about an imaginary world, and that is all well and good, provided we remember that imaginary worlds are not necessarily possible worlds. What is important, however, is that we are, in such cases, seeing in two ways, which present different and incommensurable objects: one a physical picture, the other the face depicted in it. This kind of 'double intentionality' is exhibited only by creatures with imagination. And that means rational beings, like you and me.

When I see a scene in a picture it is as though I am being presented with a story. My visual experience contains a kind of narrative. This narrative is presented through the appearance of the picture. There is no other access to the story, no fact of the matter which can be approached independently, no way of discarding the picture and dealing directly with the world—the picture *is* the world. As with all fictions, it is not the literal truth of the picture that concerns us, but its 'truth-to-life', its *Wahrscheinlichkeit*, as Baumgarten said of poetry—its ability to present the object that it creates, in such a way as to make it credible. In his theory of the 'disinterestedness' of aesthetic judgement, Kant argued that disinterestedness must remain indifferent to the real existence of the object of interest,¹⁶ and fictions give a good example of what this might mean—though not an example that would have appealed to Kant, since they have, for him, at best 'dependent' beauty, and are only impure examples of the aesthetic.

Pictures interest me, however, for another reason. They offer a paradigm case of artistic representation, and they illustrate the way in which an interest in representation is quite different from an interest in the thing represented. Representation is a form of presentation, and it is not the thing itself, but the way that thing is presented, that captures our attention. A fictional world is being presented to us, and it is in and through the presentation that this fictional world enters our thoughts. Our interest in the world of the picture is at the same time an interest in the way the picture looks: the world and the appearance are one.

¹⁶ *Critique of Judgement*, p. 43.

Pictures enable us to build a bridge towards the problem case of prose literature. Literature has something in common with music: it is an art spread out in time, and the particles from which it is composed—words—also have a sound and in normal contexts are understood through their sound. In the case of poetry, therefore, it seems plausible to say that the sound of the verse is the focus of our attention. However, there is more to words than sound—in particular there is meaning. And words do not mean in the way that pictures mean, nor do they sound as music sounds. They are in both respects *sui generis*, and while the greatest poetry resists translation for the reason that word-sound and syntactical rhythms are exploited by the poet as independent sources of meaning—sources independent of the semantic rules governing the use of the words—it is of the essence of prose that it should be translatable: for it is using words according to their semantic rules, and these rules bring translatability as an inevitable consequence. If prose were not translatable, some of our most important experiences of art would be unavailable—for example, the experience of reading *Anna Karenina* in translation.

Interestingly, when the modern concept of art, as a unified sphere of human endeavour, began to emerge in the eighteenth century, prose literature was never mentioned as part of it. The emphasis was on painting, sculpture, music, and poetry—with architecture and dance sometimes thrown in as afterthoughts.¹⁷ This could be taken on the one hand as further proof of the historicist scepticism given earlier, according to which the subject-matter of aesthetics is too thoroughly subject to historical fluctuation to justify its status as a branch of philosophy or, on the contrary, as proof of the power of philosophy to discover connections that had not been noticed before. I take the second approach, since it is one that I believe can be vindicated not only in the sphere of aesthetics but throughout the discipline of philosophy, as this has shaped itself since Kant.

Interest in prose literature is not an interest in ‘the way the words sound’. But this does not mean that it is not an interest in appearances, in some broader sense of the phrase. Crucial to all experience of literature is the unfolding of a story—a story that is created by the words we read or hear, and has, or may have, no independent reality. We are not interested in the story told anyhow, nor in a résumé or outline—or if we are so interested, this is no part of our appreciation of the prose as art. We are interested in the narrative itself: the details brought before the imagination, the observations, imagery, reflections, and actions as they are invoked, and the pacing of the story. We are interested, in other words, in the way the imaginary world of the story is

¹⁷ See, for example, the Abbé Batteux, *Les beaux-arts réduits à un même principe* (1746), and the discussion in Kristeller, ‘From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment’.

presented in our experience, just as we are when studying a painting. And the same feature of double intentionality shapes our response, in which what is absent and imagined is conjured through what is present and believed.

There is another and more general question that is raised by my approach to the subject. In all the cases I have considered, from the simple case of the carpenter to that of the reflective novelist read in translation, I have tried to show that our interest focuses on the object, as this object is presented to us in experience, and that in doing so it looks for and discovers meaning. What kind of meaning is this, that is not detachable from its mode of presentation? Baumgarten was already pointing us towards this question—or rather towards this battery of questions—in his view of poetry as bound up with perceptions. Subsequent thinkers followed Batteux (himself influenced by Plato and Aristotle in their discussions of poetry and music) in referring to ‘imitation’ as the core of artistic meaning, and in attempting to stretch that term to cover the relation between painting and the things we see in it, between poetry and the things we understand from it, and between music and the passions. The notion of imitation, thin enough to start with, was worn so thin by this that it is not surprising if philosophers began to look for distinctions, rather than similarities, between the forms of artistic meaning. When Croce distinguished representation from expression, it was with a view to discovering a kind of meaning that is characteristic of art, and which would be wholly distinct from the kind of meaning that belongs to ordinary acts of communication, to journalism, photography, and entertainment. My own view is that we should look, not for a single kind of meaning exemplified by all the arts, but for a single kind of understanding, which we direct towards those objects that we appreciate aesthetically. I use the term ‘imagination’ to cover the various exercises of this ‘aesthetic understanding’, and try to show that ‘double intentionality’ is its guiding principle.

We have every reason to believe that there is such a thing as aesthetic interest, that it has the importance that Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers attributed to it, and that it is the locus of complex and interconnected philosophical problems. Indeed, we could say of aesthetic interest that it is very much a philosophical discovery: it always existed, but it needed philosophy to identify it and to clear it of the mental undergrowth. Having isolated it, however, philosophers can—I believe—make a real contribution to the self-knowledge of humanity, by showing the way in which aesthetic interest guides our choices, and the way in which those choices might, as a result, be justified. One conclusion to draw from the example of the carpenter is a conclusion already hinted at by Schiller, which is that, in one of its applications at least, aesthetic interest guides and mediates in our search for a common home. It offers us a way to focus on those aspects of our environment which survive the extinction of our present purposes, which have equal significance for all of

us, and which reflect back to us an image of our social condition and our commitment to living at peace with our neighbours.

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