

A Work in Progress

The following draft is for local critique and discussion.

A Critique of Art and Aesthetics

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that examines the nature of art and our experience of it. It emerged during the 18th century in Europe and developed in England as philosophers grouped together such fields as poetry, sculpture, music, and dance. They classified all the arts into one category and called them *les beaux arts* or the fine arts.¹

Philosophers began to say that reason by itself could not explain beauty. Beauty may have some rational properties, such as “order, symmetry, and proportion,” but it is really an experience not explained by reason alone. It is understood through intuition and experienced with human feeling and emotion. An aesthetic experience could include a mixture of feeling, such as pleasure, rage, grief, suffering, and joy.

Immanuel Kant interpreted aesthetics as a field giving priority to form over function. Beauty, he said, was independent of any particular figure with which it was attached. A horse might be beautiful apart from whether it raced well. He asserted that **knowledge is not something that is created merely by outside institutions but also by our natural constitution. The seat of judgement now moved from medieval reasoning toward the idea that human intuition could be a source of knowing.** And aesthetics began to develop as a university discipline.²

But in the minds of many critics today aesthetics does not belong as a university discipline. Art historians have claimed that there is no such thing as art, there are only artists. And postmodernists question whether aesthetics should exist as a university subject, whether it is a legitimate inquiry. As we shall see, some would deny that any universal criteria exist for judging art in all cultures and historical epochs.³

Many questions are under scrutiny by postmodernists and other critics.

What is art? What is an aesthetic experience? How can an aesthetic value be distinguished? What is so important about this experience? Why does an object become beautiful? How do we define beauty? How is art to be judged? How is a judgement the expression of an epoch? Is art independent of politics? How is a work of art produced?⁴

Is aesthetics a legitimate discipline for the university? This is the subject of our inquiry. We will suggest that the answers come slowly as we learn more about our nature and the universe.

First, we will look at **a critique of aesthetics from the standpoint of race, class, and gender. The critique below proposes to eliminate aesthetics as a subject in the university.**

Second, we will examine how a new aesthetics could be constructed as a university discipline. We will set forth a basis for its new agenda. The agenda begins with what we call theoretical and general aesthetics.

Third, we will conclude that art is a vital discipline for development in civil society.

I The Current Critique

Art! Who comprehends her? With whom can one consult concerning this great goddess?
Ludwig von Beethoven, Letter to Bettina von Arnim [August 11, 1810]

Postmodernists and other critics believe that aesthetics should be eliminated as a university discipline and give many reasons for their argument.

First, they argue that each type of art (e.g. painting, ballet, sculpture, music, and poetry) is so different that no one theory could explain them all. Each type has its own unique expression and its own principles for aesthetic judgement. All the arts cannot be explained faultlessly under one category.

Second, they argue that aesthetics is elitist because it claims and acts to set the foundation for all art. But no single group could be the judge of all art. Art is uniquely generated in social contexts with distinct values for people who are different in their ethnicity, race, and gender. People develop a special aesthetic on their terms -- like a Black Aesthetic, Feminist Aesthetic, Native American Aesthetic, African Aesthetic, and an Asian Aesthetic. There cannot be -- and should not be -- an overall aesthetic.

Put another way, no single exalted idea or master theme can comprehend the artistic experience of all people. Each group's artistic work is based on its own criteria of what is art. With one master discipline, each group becomes a "minority aesthetic," a "subcategory of the accomplished field."

Mary Devereaux suggests that feminist aesthetics is a fundamentally new approach to the field. A feminist aesthetics cannot simply add theories to the old aesthetics. To take feminism seriously requires rethinking basic concepts and recasting the history of the discipline." In particular, feminist theory involves a rejection of "deeply entrenched assumptions about the universal value of art and aesthetic experience." Feminism is a new paradigm, which requires examining to what extent, if any, the old model of aesthetics and the new are commensurable.⁵

Feminists have been unhappy with aesthetics for a long time. They note how white males formulated the norms for beauty in the 18th century. Aesthetics was designed for the "man of taste," i.e. intended for the "cultivated man." A gentleman could by such norms scrutinize an art object and thereby know what was "excellent," understand what was beautiful and what was not.⁶

Clyde R. Taylor, a black film scholar and literary/cultural essayist, argues that aesthetics deceives students into thinking that one worldview could explain all art. Art historians, philosophers, and anthropologists should not think that they could “absorb” all views. It is presumptuous to assume that a general aesthetics can interpret all art, at all times, everywhere.

Taylor asks, How could art critics who are born and raised in Europe judge sculptures created by people born and raised in Africa? How could anyone interpret the magnificent Kisongi-Ethiopian grave sculptures outside their native setting? How can anyone interpret such sculptures placed out of context in a British museum? Native sculptures should first of all be viewed and interpreted in their original environment.

Taylor argues that if you were to see the Kisongi-Ethiopian grave sculptures in their own setting, you would see that the meaning “dramatically overflows the presumptions of aestheticism.” Anthropologists should stop trying to reconcile these “inventions of early societies” with the modern logic of aesthetics.⁷

The revolutionary outcries of the late 20th century, “Black is beautiful” and “Fat is beautiful,” began the deconstruction of modern aesthetics, but the work is not done. The elimination of these old aesthetic norms continues, hopefully to end the deception begun in the 18th and 19th centuries. Taylor says:

I would recommend abandoning it [aesthetics] altogether in the conviction that the cultural-humanist goals of feminism might best be achieved without aesthetic baggage. Whatever is “lost” by the abandonment of aestheticism would be more than regained in the wider pursuit of cultural liberation.⁸

In sum, critics argue that there is no table of universal norms. And there is no basis for establishing them. The problem is not simply its elitism that de-legitimizes the aesthetic. It has no conceptual foundation. It has no “universal norms and values.” Without universal criteria for judgement, there is no discipline.⁹

Now a wider argument begins against aestheticism.

The Political Factor: Nationalism

Critics argue that aesthetics takes a political form that is repressive. It advances with the power of big nations over the small nations and it sets the norms. It keeps nations from developing their own norms and way of life.

Frantz Fanon once described how the European aesthetic acted like an “internal psychic policeman” in African colonies. The educational system in Algeria, he said, transferred “the structure of moral reflexes” to the colony. It did not honor local art. Its purpose was to cultivate local respect for “the established order.” Under colonial rule, European standards for art created an atmosphere of inhibition. Art taught in the schools eased the task of formal control by the French over the colony.¹⁰

Now there is globalization. Critics today speak of multinational corporations spreading uniformity in art and culture around the world. People are tuning their radios, TVs, and computers everywhere into western music, stories, and films. This is a worldwide 'commodification' of culture, a homogenization of values degrading local art.

Critics see a great irony in all this.

Professionals claim aesthetics is a discipline above politics and beyond ideology. They assume that art can be judged by universal criteria. But the evidence is not there. There are no universal criteria. And without them, a general aesthetics should not be taught in the university.¹¹

The Religious Factor: Universalism

There is more to say. In France, socialist critic Régis Debray today argues that art is supplanting the "decadent institutions of religion." Art is spoken of as a "universal" in a desperate attempt to find unity in the world. Art has become sacred, replacing religion.

In ancient times, Debray says, the god was sacred in the temple. In the classical age, the king was holy in his palace. In modern times, the people's representatives were sacrosanct in their parliaments. In the postmodern age, which he calls Late Modernity, art has taken its hallowed place in museums and exhibitions.

The "religions" of the world found their sources for the sacred in the clan, the tribe, and the city, the nation and civilization. Now Art is proposed as a global religion embracing all gods, styles, and civilizations. Debray argues,

But "universal" art does not exist. The idea amounts to a desperate religion trying to fill the postmodern hollow of the soul yearning for unity. Art can only be semantic, vernacular, local. Global culture is only a fetish, nothing more than a totem without a tribe, thus lacking virtue, thus lacking value.¹²

The great mythic poem Mahabarata may be a "binding agent" in the religious life of India, but not in Paris. The great French dramatist Racine has a role to play in the life of France, but not in Benares. Debray says finally:

The end of the polytheism of the ancients reveals features that are not unrelated to our own Christian millennium. Huge cities; a growing demand for entertainment; a passion for games, for spectacles, for the unusual; a fusion of the masculine and feminine worlds; the personification of animals and of nature; the worship of childhood; the cult of novelty, of change, of excitement; and eroticism permeating all aspects of life.¹³

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu agrees. He describes this bourgeois "disposition" toward aesthetics as class based, lacking universality, affordable by people who live above the "imperatives of daily survival." The aesthetic disposition of the Renaissance distinguished the privileged and promoted their view of art, and now this domain continues to oppress people around the world.¹⁴

In conclusion, critics make a strong argument. They do not believe that the aesthetic experience is a universal part of human nature. All statements are ironic; no statement can claim identity with all possible truth. Aesthetics as a discipline

should therefore be eliminated because of its universalistic pretensions. Art interpretation can then move back into what is called its “indeterminate multiplicity.” Postmodernists want people to appreciate the richness of invention that is possible in a world not constricted by “Euro-bourgeois taste norms.” Politics should not – and cannot --exercise control over meaning in every human expression.

With the onslaught of these criticisms about the politics of art, aesthetics is at best a “local theory,” not a general theory. It is not a discipline that belongs in general education. In this cauldron of criticism, aesthetics becomes a discourse of many schools of thought with no general basis for judgement.

Is this the end of the story?

II Dialectics: A Perspective without Foundation

I am little concerned with beauty or perfection. I don't care for the great centuries. All I care about is life, struggle, intensity. I am at ease in my generation.

Émile Zola, My Hates [1866]

Dialectics is a perspective in philosophy that considers the problem of differences and contradictions. It encourages criticism, and it is a basis from which to assess the problem. Below we note a few scholars who take this dialectical perspective on aesthetics and art.

The British literary critic Terry Eagleton writes about the aesthetic:

The aesthetic, then, is, from the beginning a contradictory, double-edged concept. On the one hand, it figures as a genuinely emancipatory force - as a community of subjects now linked by sensuous impulse and fellow-feeling rather than by heteronomous law, each safeguarded in its unique particularity while bound at the same time into social harmony. ...On the other hand, the aesthetic signifies what Max Horkheimer has called a kind of ‘internalized repression,’ inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony...¹⁵

Sociologist Arnold Hauser says art is dialectical. Art is like culture as it is based on contrast, opposition, and contradiction.

Spontaneity and resistance, invention and convention: dynamic impulses born of experience break down or expand forms, and fixed, inert, stable forms condition, obstruct, and enhance each other. It is the riddle of Kant's pigeon – the atmospheric pressure which seems to hinder its flight is what makes it possible. Artistic expression comes about not in spite of, but thanks to, the resistance which convention offers to it. The artist must possess a formal language, which is not too flexible, so that others will understand him and he can understand himself.

Hauser sees art as an example of Hegel's Aufhebung: a simultaneous development and destruction of “valid conventions, symbols, and schemata.” He argues that without seeing this creative-destructive process, no understanding of art is possible. Art has its role in producing a continuous “hypertrophy of forms,” he goes on, which is part of the human condition.¹⁶

We will begin with this perspective. We think that art is part of the battle for emancipation while it remains equally a prisoner of institutions. If aesthetics is to develop as a legitimate field for discourse, it must speak to its politics of gender, race, and class.

First, we will visit the established theory. Then, we consider a new agenda.

II Theories of Art

What is art? The answer has puzzled many thinkers for many centuries. Our review below is cursory, but essential to start our discussion. Our focus below is on western thought; later we introduce views from eastern thought and other outlooks to build a new aesthetics. We begin with the ancient Greeks.

Mimetic theories. *Art is an imitation of nature.*

Plato said that art makes a copy of nature. This would seem simple enough, but it is really complex. A “copy” can mean a “re-presentation” of nature or an interpretation of nature. Plato argued that artists make copies of nature, but nature is a copy of great Forms. Forms refer to great Ideas or Principles hidden from sight, indeed, behind the creation of things as we perceive them. In other words, the things that people perceive in the material world are shadows of great Ideas that cannot be witnessed by human eyes.

Aristotle revised this notion slightly. In the art of playwriting, for example, a specific work of art represented a higher idea. A tragic play exemplified the more elevated idea of someone falling from a higher to a lower estate. The play gives particularity to this abstract idea. Aristotle also saw the higher Form in nature itself, as the form of an oak tree is hidden in its seed.

Shakespeare correspondingly suggested that art imitates nature. Hamlet’s speech referred to the purpose of a play as “... to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature.”¹⁷

We will also revisit this notion of imitation when we consider how scientists view the universe today.

Expressionist theories: *Art represents the inner life of the artist.*

Leo Tolstoy said that art evokes a feeling to be shared “by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words.”

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.¹⁸

Many artists are in concord with this theory. The nineteenth-century expressionists and post-impressionists (e.g. Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Munch) took this position as they opposed the Realist and Impressionist tendency to copy nature.

Idealist theories: *Art is based on intuition.*

Benedetto Croce said that art is pure “intuition,” that is, a “feeling that is given some form.” Art is based on “inspiration” from which a representational form is produced. In philosophical sense, art is an act of the spirit, going beyond the power of reason and the materials themselves.¹⁹

Psychological theories: *Art is symbolic of a hidden nature.*

Art is an expression of concealed desires. For example, Freud argued that art was stimulated by the desire to win honor, power, riches, and fame.²⁰ So, art could be the expression of neurosis. These psychological theories assume that the writer, poet, and painter – like everyone else -- disguise their emotions. Then, they project them into their art.²¹

Hermeneutic theories: *Art is an expression of the artist's intent and social setting.*

Frederich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey emphasized the intent of the artist. It is essential to get the artist's own interpretation, they argue. The right interpretation of a "text" -- which refers to any symbol that requiring interpretation such as a poem, a painting, a novel, or a score of music – then demands reconstructing the historical setting and the artist's original scheme.

Formalist theories: *Art is an organic unity, self-contained, self-justifying.*

Monroe Beardsley and William Wimsatt argue that the intention of the artist is not available with any accuracy or even desirable as a standard for judging a work of art. The interpretation should be on the form of the work itself, not based on the artist's motive or the historical setting. The meaning of a work of art is in its form -- the relationships between the work's elements, such as the combination of colors, the clarity of the words, pitch of the sounds, and the nature of the rhythms. Roger Fry and Clyde Bell argued this position in music theory and Eduard Hanslick made the same argument in visual arts.²²

Observer theories: *Art is in the eye of the beholder.*

The meaning of art is not in the form (or structure) of the art nor is it in the creator's intent. It is found in the response of the onlookers and audience. The viewers are the real judges of art. A work of art may have its historical meaning, but each observer is the real and final interpreter.

Beauty theories: *Art is based on a sense of beauty.*

Theories of art as beauty were popular in late 19th century Europe, partly a reaction to utilitarian beliefs and "the ugly industrial age." Many philosophers still support the idea that art is grounded in a sense of beauty – or that art exists for the sake of beauty.²³

Life without industry is guilt, industry without art is brutality. John Ruskin, Lectures on Art [1870] III, The Relation of Art to Morals.

*The Beautiful, contemplated in its essentials, that is, in kind and not in degree, is that in which the many, still seen as many, becomes one.*²⁴

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Pragmatic theories: *Art is explained by its function and consequence.*

A work of art is explained not by its beauty or form, but by its effect on the audience or its creator. In this sense, art is many things. Art is an escape from reality. Art achieves an ideal. Art is a source of pleasure and delight. Art promotes the community. Art is instructive, didactic, or propagandistic. Art is therapeutic, i.e. a mode of healing. Art is a means of communication.²⁵

All these theories carry truth. But they also illustrate the problem of a complex subject. Art cannot be defined by categories that separate its dynamics in society. We shall argue that defining art by “categories” is part of the problem.²⁶

III Building a New Aesthetics

We want to build on these theories but correct the problem. A dialectical perspective includes these old categories but interprets their dynamics. The purpose of art in this view is to create an aesthetic field that is conscious of politics and related to emancipation. And we want to speak to the problem of universals.

The philosopher D.W. Gotshalk points to the dynamic interaction between categories based on universal criteria. He sees these criteria in terms of the interaction of materials, form, expression, and the function of art in society. For art criticism, each of these aspects of art has its own dynamics, but they are also powerfully interactive, and they need to support one another.²⁷

In other words, Gotshalk proposes that art criticism should be based on the action within and between these old categories. As we shall see, his position offers us a basis for starting a new agenda for aesthetics.

I summarize below a few of Gotshalk’s points about his criteria for judging art. We start with the material dimension, which avoids the error of idealism.

The materials of the artist – the pigments, tones, timbre, marble, etc. – are part of the artist’s tools, and usually involved with the artist’s intent. The proper resolution in the differences in these materials (as red vs. blue in painting, or as faster vs. slower in music) is critical to understanding a work of art. In painting, pigments have different hues and values of intensity that must be brought together to create an aesthetic experience. In music, tones contrast in pitch, timbre, and volume and they must find an aesthetic connection. In sculpture, marble has its contrarities in grain, color, texture, and sheen, etc. In creating a work of art these contrasting qualities must join aesthetically.²⁸

Gotshalk moves to make a connection between the materials and other categories such as its form and expression. He gives many illustrations that we will bypass, but the aesthetic use of the “tools” is of course not enough. We need criteria on the aesthetics of the form to take the next step in judgement.²⁹

The form of the art faces the problem of tension and its resolution. Space and time, causality and teleology, are universal forms, he argues like Plato, which are “the structure of human existence.” Art enhances these forms. These universal (“cosmic”)

forms are the basis for creating the specific artistic form, which is a “purification and vivification on a small scale of them.” The task of art is to give the forms some “intrinsic perceptual value” and to generate the aesthetic experience. Then, what are the principles that express these “forms?”

Gotshalk says that the form of every work expresses a combination of principles. The principles include harmony, balance, centrality, and development. A work of art – a poem, a play, a painting, and a sculpture -- exhibits some unity based on these principles, which are universal to art. Gotshalk illustrates in detail how such principles operate, and I summarize only a few of these points to offer the flavor of his argument.

Harmony, for example, achieves a unity by recurrence in the artwork. Balance achieves unity by contrast; certain items oppose and equalize each other. (The opposing items form a system of neutralizing tensions to produce that unity, and the dynamics remain.) The principles of balance and harmony are the reverse of each other, as balance emphasizes “diversity in unity,” and harmony emphasizes “unity in diversity.”

The principle of centrality then becomes evident when “an ensemble of items is so connected that one item or group is given aesthetic dominance over the others,” which remain important but subordinate to it. Many great artworks illustrate this principle, e.g., Giotto’s “Madonna Enthroned” (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) with its dominant mother and child; in music a certain tone or chord may dominate over the others, e.g. the chord for oboes in the third measure of the four-measure figure that opens Wagner’s Tristan Prelude.

The principle of development may supercede “centrality” in its aesthetic value as in a short story that does not have a high point but reveals progressively a character, a mood, or a situation. Development thus contrasts to the other principles. It is based on novelty as opposed to harmony’s dependence on repetition; it is based on disequilibrium as opposed to balance, which is based on equilibrium. Again, centrality is based on hierarchical order, but the principle of development is an arrangement of items as prior and posterior, not as superior and inferior.

This is a quick summary of a rather complex discussion on principles. The four principles of harmony, balance, centrality, and development have their derivatives, such as recurrence, similarity, gradation, variation, modulation, symmetry, contrast, opposition, equilibrium, rhythm, measure, dominance, climax, hierarchy, and progression. They are the chief principles of form that are used by artists for the enhancement of perception.

Now “form” must connect dialectically with “expression” in the work.³⁰

By “expression” in a work of art Gotshalk means “its great wealth of content – the feelings, ideas, character, and personality – lying behind the material surface” and within the structural form. The artist introduces expression consciously or unconsciously. Principles in the use of “materials” and “form” should then support that expression. For example, in dance a nimble body is needed to express eloquent sensations of weight and lightness, thrust, rising and falling, floating, soaring and sinking. In music, a careful combination of instruments is needed to express sparkle, gaiety, swiftness, melancholy, yearning, or uncertainty and power. In painting, certain colors and texture are needed in

the right combination to express tenderness, bleakness, or loveliness. The right form in a marble statue is needed to express coldness, grace, or twisted rigor. And so on.³¹

Lastly, the dynamics between the materials, form, and the expression of art must be assessed in relation to its function in society. Gotshalk's analysis is important here, but critics can fault it easily. I think that Adorno and other members of The Frankfurt School examine the connection of art to society with more accuracy. We will return to this aspect later.³²

But we should anticipate here some of the political issues that lie ahead. Gotshalk's principles stand solidly in the field of aesthetics, but there is more to say about art in terms of subcultures, including those of gender, race, class, and nationality. Each culture requires study for how aesthetic principles apply in their context. This means linking aesthetics with sociology and anthropology to study the variable norms.

The classic principle of "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" has a major role to play in this new agenda. The "beholder" is not just an individual, but groups where important bonds and norms are created. Sociologists study this variability through qualitative studies. As we shall see, beauty can be virtually anything if you have the eyes to see it. But seeing beauty requires entering into the life of the group. And this involves the method of participant observation.

Thus, we begin to anticipate a few of the issues. Our question now is whether it is possible to develop a new aesthetics.

I think that an entirely new field of aesthetics should be constructed in a way that connects with political issues. To deal with the politics of art and advance its emancipating role, we must address its connection with the university.³³

IV A New Aesthetics

We will look at three domains for a new field for aesthetic studies. First, we will examine what we call "theoretical aesthetics." This domain connects art with university subjects in fresh ways, notably for our purposes with philosophy, and the physical and social sciences. Second, we will examine how a "general aesthetics" brings this interdisciplinary outlook to the fine arts. Third, we will see how aesthetics is a subject of everyday life, not just an arcane topic for the elite or just for faculties and students in universities. It should address the politics of gender, race, class, and nations.

The direction we take in these different domains will require some readers to suspend belief about what is possible. It is like imagining how an organism would be created in a universe of molecules. The transition could be that difficult. A new aesthetics is about building an entirely new place for art in the life of the university and society.

Notice. Art is the grammar of life. There is an art to everything. There is an art to living on the street safely, an art to running a school well. There is an art to raising

children sensitively, and managing a business with intelligence. And there is an art to the study of every subject in the university. In this study of art in the university we look at theoretical aesthetics.

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¹ In the Middle Ages, scholars classified seven arts (grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) some of which evolved into sciences and others grew to become the liberal arts as distinguished from the professions. The title of the Abbe Charles Batteaux's work *Les Beaux Arts reduits à un même principe* (1746) shows the direction of thought on his new idea that all the arts could be reduced to a principle. Batteaux listed the seven "fine arts" as architecture, dance, music, oratory, painting, poetry and sculpture. The single principle to which these arts could be reduced assumed that art imitates nature and expresses some form of beauty. His term "fine arts" survives but the issue is whether they can be properly categorized under one category and understood by one principle. Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism & Postmodernity*, Macmillan, Houndmills, England, 1986), p. 144.

The philosopher Jürgen Habermas connects the birth of 18th century aesthetics with the separation of modern rationality into diverse spheres of "autonomous competence," a "dissociation" that gave rise to the concepts of art, politics, and science. All these fields of thought were then considered to be activities with their own logic and internal legitimacy.

² The skepticism about beauty in the Renaissance culminated in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant's contribution to aesthetics. Kant analyzed the "judgment of taste," that is, the judgment that a thing is beautiful. He asserted that the judgment of beauty is subjective, rather than being some objective feature of things. Earlier theories of beauty had held that beauty was a complex relation between parts of a whole called "harmony." From the time of ancient Greece, a common assumption was that beauty applied not only to art, but that it manifested itself in moral character and in natural and artificial objects. By the end of the 18th century, however, the range of accepted beautiful things became more restricted to natural things and art.

While theorists of beauty had admitted that the perception of beauty always gives pleasure to the perceiver, Kant turned the pleasure into the criterion of beauty. According to Kant, people can judge a thing beautiful only if they take pleasure of a certain kind in experiencing it. Kant contends that aesthetic judgements are distinguished by intuition and contemplation of an object's appearance, not by personal needs or wants, or by the object's usefulness. "Art, as human skill, is distinguished from science (as ability from knowledge)... as technic from theory (as the art of surveying from geometry)... There is no science of the beautiful, but only a Critique.

Kant's distinction arose from the Greek term *kalon*, which is often translated as beauty. But *Kalon* did not refer to a thing's "autonomous" aesthetic value, rather to its "excellence." Excellence was then connected to its moral worth and usefulness and thus comes close to Kant's concept of dependent beauty (e.g. a beautiful horse) as opposed to free beauty. Free beauty for Kant is judged in terms of its appearance, not in connection with the function or usefulness of a thing. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement, transl. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) pp. 162-83.

The history of the arts in the West made it clear that there is much more to art than beauty alone; for some people art may have little to do with beauty. Until the 18th century, the philosophy of beauty was given more attention than the philosophy of art. Aesthetics incorporated some classical Greek ideas but also introduced ideas associated with the notion that all art could be seen in one field. The idea that all artwork could be appreciated, and judged by one discipline was a new thought. I draw this notion from the Grolier Encyclopedia, <http://pratt.edu/~arch543p/help/aesthetics.html>

³ European scholars sought to overcome the dominant Christian view of art and referred often to Greek literature to gain legitimacy. The Greek tradition gave aesthetics an aura of authority, but the Greeks never used the word. Scholars had to invent the field. Art for the Greeks was techne, which referred to a skill connected to a craft like carpentry or architecture. Poetry was connected with drama and religion. Beauty for the Greeks was a subject for speculation connected with morality. The Greeks had no overarching field called art and no independent study of it, as is true today.

The Europeans constructed aesthetics with the assumption that "high art" represented the highest stage of civilization. Civil society is beyond barbarism. But Walter Benjamin was later to say aphoristically, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." He meant that civilization itself expresses violence through its institutions and advances the worst forms of barbarism in its types of modern warfare. Walter Benjamin, Illuminations (NY: Schocken, 1969), p. 256.

Modern art arose from the quest of scholars in the Enlightenment to rise against the despotism and aristocratic opinion. Jean Jacques Rousseau emphasized the idea of organic growth as opposed to the more mechanical ideas that had dominated art. The idea arose that the artist "creates" by blind necessity, like Nature itself.

Toni Morrison's novel Beloved reveals how slavery -- at the time aesthetics was born in philosophy -- was barbarian. Aesthetics was born while philosophers thought civilization was at its highest stage. This is irony when civil society carries barbarian practices. As we see later, the contradiction of civilized vs. barbarian remains, each image in tension, and each informing the condition of the other.

⁴ Articles in philosophy have appeared seeking to determine the status of aesthetics today as a university subject. During the fall of 1998 the American Society for Aesthetics conducted a survey of the chairs of philosophy departments in North America in order to gauge the status of aesthetics (or the philosophy of art) in the American academy. In

particular, the survey was designed to ascertain what proportion have philosophers of art on staff, what aesthetics courses are offered, what the demand for those courses is, and how many graduate departments are training students with a competence in aesthetics. One hundred and fifty departments returned the survey—a very high response rate of 41 percent. Half the institutions surveyed have a course in aesthetics taught outside philosophy, usually in fine art, literature, film studies or music, though some courses are also taught in departments of architecture, anthropology, sociology, psychology and education. Sixty-three percent of departments report that aesthetics is covered sometimes or often in their lower division philosophy courses. Forty-five percent of philosophy departments offer at least one lower division course in aesthetics and 11 percent offer more than one. The average enrolment is 27 students at an average rate of one and a half sections per year. The vast majority (85 percent) of departments offering any course in aesthetics offers a generic course. Of this group of 129 departments, 50 offer philosophy of literature, 20 the history of aesthetics, 18 philosophy of film, ten the philosophy of the visual arts, eight feminist aesthetics and a handful each offer music aesthetics and environmental aesthetics.

“Aesthetics in the Academy: Survey Results in Brief,” <http://www.aesthetics-online.org/academy/survey-results.html>

⁵ One question is whether traditional aesthetics accidentally or necessarily associated itself with patriarchy. Another question is whether the ‘gender-neutral’ aesthetics of the traditional model can be reformed, or must it be rejected?" Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, ed., Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995); reprinted in the Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2002). Curtis Brown Art, “Oppression, and the Autonomy of Aesthetics,” <http://www.trinity.edu/cbrown/papers/artoppression.html>

⁶ Susan Kappeler starts with challenges to the male construction of beauty, arguing that pornography is a deception. Pornography is not an art form, rather, a problem in “gender representation.” Kappeler sees pornography as a violation of civil rights. There is no “aesthetic disinterestedness” but a blatant sexual desire expressed in this so-called “art.” Kappeler argues that women are commodified in commerce. Pornography is an injury to women who become the object of the male gaze. It cannot be defended under the claim of “art” or the “aesthetic experience.” Susan Kappeler, The Pornography of Representation (Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 101.

The Enlightenment linked European thought to the idea of man-in-general and imperial conquest. Aesthetics disconnected art from a broad a portion of humanity, leaving out women and children. It became associated with the colonization of peoples in Africa and the Americas. Sylvia Winter, “The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism,” Boundary 2 (Spring/Fall, 1984). An aesthetic perspective became the basis for assessing foreign policy. Laura Kipnis, “Aesthetics and Foreign Policy,” Social Text 15 (Fall 1986), p.90.

⁷ Clyde R. Taylor, The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract – Film and Literature (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1998)

⁸ *ibid* p. 102.

⁹ The problem is not simply that “aristocratic white males” formulated the subject with a European worldview. It is rather that professionals should not maintain colonies “whose fates are determined by some ‘mother idea.’” The best thing to do: Drop aesthetics as a discipline and start over with localized concepts of art and beauty. The color/gender/ethnic aesthetic movements have made their case. Overturn the discipline.

But another question is also whether the emancipator mission should be the salvation of a group larger than the Black community. James Emanuel raises this question in “Blackness Can: A Quest for an Aesthetic,” in Addison Gayle, ed. The Black Aesthetic (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. 218.

Many writers want to eliminate “dependence upon European thought.” In a book of interviews with Black women writers, Ntosake Shange says, “We do not have to refer continually to European art as the standard. That’s absolutely absurd and racist, and I won’t participate in that utter lie. My work is one of the few ways I can preserve the elements of our culture that need to be remembered and absolutely revered.” Claudia Tate, ed. Black Women Writers at Work (NY: Continuum, 1983), p. 184. Quoted in Taylor, *ibid*. p. 99. My thanks to Clyde Taylor for providing me with these references.

Critics argue that there is no other category that can replace aesthetics. Taylor does not accept the substitution of “multiple aesthetics” for aesthetics. Multiple aesthetics only perpetuates a system of thought without legitimacy. There are no universal concepts that could serve as the foundation for the bridging term of aesthetics to designate a field of knowledge.

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (NY: Grove Press, 1966), p. 31. The story could go on today with the argument about internal colonialism in which an independent government in Algeria maintains a table of norms over its people.

¹¹ Jacques Maquet, The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). Maquet argues that the ornamental dimension of art exists for its own sake apart from function. He compares the character of artifacts around the world. His conclusion: a universal value can be found in art.

¹² Debray is a former key adviser to French President François Mitterrand and one-time comrade of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. See Régis Debray, “Universal Art: The Desperate Religion,” <http://www.npq.org/issues/v92/p35.html>

In the fall of 1991 the “World Arts Summit” was held in Venice under the auspices of the World Economic Forum. The Forum’s Manifesto for a Global Society in Venice includes the elite international business community. They envisioned “the creation of a worldwide spirit of unity through the inevitable diversity of cultures.” Their promotional said “Art is the language of culture, the one form of creative expression that allows us to communicate and to build real worldwide bridges.”

¹³ As global business aligns with professional artists making big money, the postmodern critic screams. Professionals then set all the norms and become in effect “the guardians of all valuable assets.” Global business and international collectors would in their vision unite all nations through art. They assume that art can “restore the bridges that have been broken between individuals and cultures.” But critics argue that art cannot be the unifying principle. DeBray, *ibid*.

¹⁴ Bourdieu describes taste, “in all its meanings from choices in art through choices in dress, furniture, to taste in food, both as a unified subject matter and as a method for producing and reproducing power differences among social classes.” Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). He also focuses his analysis on language, claiming that meaning, both linguistic and literary, depends on the same activities of power and social differentiation. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991). This book includes articles published as far back as 1975. Bourdieu protests popular theories of culture, aesthetics, and literature. He sees these discourses creating hierarchies of domination. He examines aesthetic “taste” with its variety of meanings, from choices in art through choices in dress, furniture, and food. Taste is a subject and a method for reproducing “differences in power” among the classes of society.

Jean Baudrillard would describe this distinction based on a “political economy of signs.” Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of Signs* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981).

¹⁵ Eagleton continues abstractly, ‘Deep’ subjectivity is just what the ruling social order desires, and exactly what it has most cause to fear. If the aesthetic is a dangerous, ambiguous affair, it is because ... there is something in the body which can revolt against the power which inscribes it; and that impulse could only be eradicated by extirpating along with it the capacity to authenticate power itself.

Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, 1991) p.281.

Since the death of the Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams in 1988, Eagleton has been regarded as the premier literary critic. His Marxism has gone through three distinct phases. In the first phase he tried to reconcile Williams's humanist Marxism with the values of his own Roman Catholic upbringing. Five years later he rejected the humanist Marxism in favor of a post-Althusserian “science of the text.” His position shifted again after another five-year hiatus, when he called for a “revolutionary criticism” that explicitly seeks practical social goals as the end of literary study rather than mere knowledge of the text.

¹⁶ Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) pp.21-22.

¹⁷ Traditional aesthetics in the 18th and 19th centuries was influenced by the concept of art as imitation of nature. Novelists such as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens in England and dramatists such as Carlo Goldoni in Italy and Alexandre Dumas fils (the son of Alexandre Dumas père) in France presented realistic accounts of middle-class life.

Painters, whether neoclassical, such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, romantic, such as Eugène Delacroix, or realist, such as Gustave Courbet, rendered their subjects with careful attention to lifelike detail.

In the 19th century avant-garde concepts of aesthetics began to challenge traditional views on representational art. French impressionists, such as Claude Monet, denounced academic painters for depicting what they thought they should see rather than what they actually saw—that is, surfaces of many colors and wavering forms caused by the distorting play of light and shadow as the sun moves.

In the late 19th century, postimpressionists such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh were more concerned with expressing their own feeling than with representing objects in the world of nature. In the early 20th century cubist painters such as Pablo Picasso developed this structural interest further, and the expressionist concern was reflected in the work of Henri Matisse and other fauves and by the German expressionists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The literary aspects of expressionism can be seen in the plays of August Strindberg in Sweden and Frank Wedekind in Germany.

¹⁸ Leo Tolstoy, What is Art? Transl. Almer Maude (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1960). Art theory is an “explanation” of our feeling toward things, seeking the meaning of images for which we have passion or some aesthetic feeling.

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling – this is the activity of art. p. 123.

¹⁹ Croce argues that art is not merely a physical fact, or a utilitarian activity, or a moral act, rather, a high spiritual endeavor. Critics argue that his idealism failed to appreciate the reality and vital role of materials in shaping a work of art. The sculptor’s clay is in the reality of art not the same as some clay on a hill. The architect’s blocks are special, not the same as the rocks on a mountain. And they argue that Croce views art as standing apart from the influence of society, as though it were in a social and political vacuum. Benedetto Croce, “Intuition and Expression,” From The Breviary of Aesthetic (Translated by Douglas Ainslee) in Melvin Rader, A Modern Book of Esthetics: An Anthology (NY: Henry Holt, 1935), p.159-178.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis (NY: Boni & Liveright, 1921), p. 327.

²¹ Sigmund Freud believed the value of art to lie in its therapeutic use: It is by this means that both the artist and the public can reveal hidden conflicts and discharge tensions. Fantasies and daydreams, as they enter into art, are thus transformed from an escape from life into ways of meeting it.

In the surrealist movement in painting and poetry, the unconscious is used as a source of material. The stream-of-consciousness technique of fiction, notably in the novels of the Irish writer James Joyce, was derived not only from Freud’s work but partly from William James’ The Principles of Psychology (1890).

²² Monroe Beardsley and William Wimsatt, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in W.K. Wimsatt, 1966. See W.K. Wimsatt, Hateful Contraries (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1966).

²³ Immanuel Kant laid the foundations for seeing beauty as the basis of art. Kant postulated the separation of aesthetic standards from morality, utility, or pleasure. J.W. von Goethe, J.L. Tieck, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle in England amplified Kant’s idea. Madame de Staël, Théophile Gautier, and the philosopher Victor Cousin, who coined the phrase l’art pour l’art (“art for art’s sake”) in 1818, popularized the movement in France. In England, the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, from 1848, sowed the seeds of Aestheticism, and the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and Algernon Charles Swinburne exemplified it in calling for the ideal of beauty. The attitudes of this movement were also represented in the writings of Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater and the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley in the periodical The Yellow Book. The painter James McNeill Whistler raised the movement’s ideal for a cultivation of refined sensibility to its high point. The critics of this Aestheticism included William Morris and John Ruskin and, in Russia, Leo Tolstoy, who questioned the value of art divorced from morality. Yet the Kantian movement focused attention on the formal aesthetics of art and contributed into the art theories of Roger Fry and Bernard Berenson. For more on this story, see Laurie Spiegel. <http://retiary.org/ls/index.html>.

²⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as quoted in W.K. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1954), p. 81.

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In traditional aesthetics it is frequently assumed that art objects are useful as well as beautiful. Paintings might commemorate historical events or encourage morality. Music might inspire piety or patriotism. Drama, especially in the hands of such artists as Bertold Brecht and Henrik Ibsen, would criticize society and lead to revolution or reform.

²⁶ From a dialectical perspective, here is a condensed criticism. The *beauty* theories isolate art from what is ugly or repulsive, but as we shall see, art is linked with them. The *pragmatic* theories isolate the effect of art from the cause, but cause and effect are intricately inter-woven in judging art. The *formalist* theories isolate a work of art from the artist’s intent, but the artwork and the intent are closely connected. The *hermeneutic* theories, conversely, emphasize artist’s intent, but isolate it from the form, but form and intent are coupled closely. The *psychological* and *observer* theories look at the art as isolated from society; but works of art are intricately joined with the context of society. The *mimetic theories* isolate the real world from the ideal, but these two worlds are also closely inter-bound. We argue that all these categories of art are inter-bound and that a new aesthetics is needed that speaks to our very nature.

²⁷ Art criticism in this sense is “the exegesis, immanent description, and judgement with a view to rendering a documented and suggestive estimate of the aesthetic values of works of art.” Its most basic task is judgement. Exegesis relates the aesthetic properties of a work to the work’s causal origin and setting. Description relates these properties to the actualities of a work’s being. Judgment relates them to the best possible relevant values

and is therefore the definitive element in an estimate of the aesthetic excellence of the properties.

²⁸ D.W. Gotshalk, Art and the Social Order (NY: Dover Publications, 1962) p. 99.

²⁹ Gotshalk gives many illustrations here. One example: “The languorous lines, the balmy color, the soft full shapes of Giorgione’s “Sleeping Venus” (Zwinger Gallery, Dresden) fit into and reinforce the form and expression of sumptuous repose in the figure of the Venus.”

³⁰ Gotshalk again gives many illustrations. For example in Giotto’s “Death of St. Francis” (Santa Croce, Florence) the figures in the painting surround the horizontal body so that they lead in “slow, intense rhythms toward the haloed head of the saint, accenting the quietly intense sorrow that is expressed by each attendant figure.” Equally, in Tschaikowsky’s Fifth Symphony, the recurrence of the signet theme in the various movements accents the expressive (emotional) qualities of this figure upon the whole work.

³¹ Gotshalk goes on at some length on this point. A novelist needs the right words to give a clear outline of his or her view on love, honor, ambition, death, the church, God, communism, and the universe. In other forms of expressiveness, an artist may represent the essence of persons, places, events, and incidents, and offer a social expression – the nature of a people, an age, and a milieu, etc.

³² Gotshalk’s analysis on the function of art in society is not adequate and needs to be supplemented by the work of critical theorists. The Frankfurt Institute of Social Research and its “critical theory” is an important body of art criticism. Max Horkheimer was the main figure in this school, but the dynamics of art in society is best examined by Theodore Adorno, Aesthetic Theory. Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 [Formerly trans C. Lenhardt (New York, 1984). Walter Benjamin follows perceptively with writings that include The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 1928. Major essays include "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," 1929; "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1934/35. The Arcades Project was posthumously published. Benjamin takes seriously the notion that capitalism contains its own subversion. He argues that there is no civilization without barbarism. The aspect of his dialectic that is notable for our purposes is in his acknowledgment that “commitment gains force only by preserving its negative dimension.” See John Parker, “The Dialectics of Allegoresis: Historical Materialism in Benjamin’s Illuminations Other Voices,” v.1, n.1 (March 1997) <http://www.othervoices.org/parkerj/benj.html>

³³ For example, the study of political science represents principles in the art of government, the field of economics represents the principles of the art of enterprise, the school of law represents the art of litigation, etc. As we shall see, art and aesthetics is

linked to every subject in the university. Students are taught to isolate art from these subjects.