

Aesthetics as Philosophy of Experience

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ABSTRACT. Analytic aesthetics has been dominated for more than fifty years by the problem of definition of art, but all the work done in this direction seems to have come to a dead-end. A mere classificatory definition of the work of art is impossible, given that, in a purely classificatory sense, any object produced by human hands can be considered a work of art and any further differentiation would reintroduce an evaluation. On the other hand, continental aesthetics, traditionally fragmented into different trends, seems to have found a relative wholeness by proposing itself as a general theory of sense and sensibility. But this position is open to radical criticism, too. It is possible to demonstrate that, despite the etymology, not all sensations are 'aesthetic', and that the inverse is also true, that is, not all aesthetic experiences are sensory or perceptual experiences. Both analytic aesthetics and recent trends in continental aesthetics underestimate the fact that in order to decide if something is or is not art, it must be experienced. Aesthetic experience is a form of reduplication or redoubling of the experience that normally appears, and in this redoubling cognitive and affective values of every day experience both lessens and intensifies. They lessen, in that aesthetic experience detaches from immediate purposes; they intensify in that this orientation in itself allows the nature of experience to emerge with a certain force. So, what is distinctive in our aesthetic experience is not sensation, but imagination, that is, our aesthetic experience deals essentially with meta-representations.

1. Analytic and Continental Aesthetics

The difference between Analytic philosophy and Continental traditions, which at one time was very marked, has undoubtedly been diminished. What was once a radical difference of method, interests and results is today a profitable dialogue in which the Analytic philosophers do not shy away from comparison with the great historical traditions of philosophy

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the pragmatists) while the Continental philosophers reject the possibility itself of a *philosophy of art* in favour of a general science of sensory perception.

A rapprochement of the two traditions can be brought about only by overcoming the positions in which each one has become rigid. Naturally, this goal cannot be pursued by nor for the willingness to find a common ground of discussion which would by all means be utopian, but for a much more substantial reason: each positions shows very evident limits. These limits do not satisfy and do not allow for an adequate explanation of aesthetic phenomena.

The various definitions of art proposed by analytic aesthetics have been the object of much discussion, criticism and timely objections. However, many more general arguments can be raised against them. It can be observed that having a definition of art does not seem very decisive for *effective* contact with a work of art. For example, no one really decides whether a piece of work is art or not based on a definition of art. Hegel reminds us that a substantial definition of art, which conserves the richness of the object, can only provide a conclusion drawn from its theoretical path, and veering from that path means to condemn it to being poor and insufficient. Nietzsche states that a definition can only be given to that which has no history, while a work of art is the most historical variable there is.

Notwithstanding the more internal objections to the proposed definitions, they can multiply. Looking at Dickie's institutional definition or Levinson's historical one, for example, it has often been noted that these are circular, not very informative and not very effective. for marginal cases (*outsider art* in the case of Dickie or *Ur-art* in the case of Levinson). It would be a good idea at this point to examine a point of great importance in terms of what I propose to consider in this paper.

These definitions and also Carroll's historical-narrative definition, which are presented as decisively classificatory and not evaluative tend to establish what art is independently of any form of value judgment. A *purely classificatory definition* is proposed. The institutional or historical theories of art *seem* to do without any evaluative criteria solely because they hide or displace the criteria by attributing them to others.

Let us look at the case of institutional theory and examine the strange

expression used by Dickie, “artefact [...] candidate for appreciation”.¹ This formula is chosen precisely in order to safeguard the fact that it is enough for the piece of work to be appreciated and that it is not necessary that it actually achieve an end. Yet, we can ask the question: what is being appreciated? Things can be appreciated for various reasons; for their usefulness, for their economic value, or for sentimental reasons. None of these reasons have anything to do with helping us recognize the object in question as a work of art, and the reason for this is quite evident. It is not just any type of appreciation that allows for the consideration of an object as a work of art, it is the aesthetic appreciation that does so.

Something is art because someone says it is. The institutional theory lacks restrictive and evaluative conditions because it unloads the weight of the evaluation on to others. The claim that a classificatory definition of art is reached by not only regarding accomplished works of art, but by also regarding those works of art that are not successful, is mere illusion. In a purely classificatory sense, any object produced by human hands could be considered a work of art and any further differentiation with the aim of truly considering what is a work of art, in one way or another, would reintroduce an assumptive evaluation.

Levinson's definition holds that in order for a manufactured piece of work to be considered a work of art it must be “intended for regard in any way pre-existing artworks are or were correctly regarded”. But far from simplifying things, this requisite merely complicates matters. It becomes immediately apparent that a work of art is regarded in many different ways and that often it has little or nothing to do with its artistic value. Levinson is therefore forced to add that what really matters is the way in which a work of art work is “correctly” regarded. The vagueness of this expression brings to mind a similar vagueness in Dickie's term “*appreciation*”. Clearly it is not enough to appreciate something for our consideration to be correct and become essential for the artistic value of the object in question. It must deal with an appreciation and a consideration that addresses the artistic aspect of the object.

Even the historical-intentional theory shifts the weight of the decision

¹ Dickie, G. (1974), *Art and the Aesthetic: an Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca: Cornell U.P.

² Levinson, J. (1979), ‘Defining Art Historically’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol.19, pp. 232-247.

of what is or what is not art onto someone else; namely who has decided in a previous epoch what art is. Even in this case, someone has made the decision and has evaluated what is and what is not art. It no longer deals with an imaginary world of art, but of judges and critics of the past. However, in this case, the motive that guided them or the criteria that was followed is not known. The problem of the choice and evaluation of what is uniquely art is avoided by transferring it to someone else, thus obscuring the procedure.

On the other hand the Continental thesis of aesthetics as a sensory theory seems to open itself to radical criticism. Proposing to consider aesthetics as a theory of sensation or perception without any other specification is plausible from an etymological point of view and can seem attractive because it offers aesthetics a vast field. However, the disadvantages far outweigh the advantages. One objection is that since there are already sciences that study sensation and perception, such as psychology and cognitive science, it is unclear how aesthetics can make a contribution, since a laboratory environment is needed in order to make observational experiments.

Even if philosophy could transform itself in perceptology, the fact remains that a theory of sensation does not exhaust what there is to say about art or natural beauty. Obviously artworks are learned through the senses and as Kant stated, if we were only rational beings, angels for example, we would not know what to do with art. Kant added, however, that even if we were purely sensory like non-human animals, we would have just as little need for works of art. The weak point in Böhme's atmospheric theory is that because we perceive "atmospherically" it is counter-intuitive to think that atmospheric perception is aesthetic perception. A horse or a dog perceives even more atmospherically than humans do, but it is difficult to think that they have more aesthetic experiences. It is more acceptable to think, without being blinded by etymology, that not all sensations are "aesthetic" experiences. Hearing a rustling in the dark is a sensory experience and very atmospheric, but it is not aesthetic in the sense in which one listens to a symphony; or to see a tree, a river or hills is a sensory experience but it is not the same as seeing a landscape. In other words, it is not an aesthetic experience. Of course, one needs to hear to listen to music and to see to admire a landscape, but there is more to it. If not, it could be

deduced that even grazing sheep see landscapes because they feed in the field and drink from the river.

The inverse proposition, which is never taken into consideration by supporters of the sensory theory, can be overlooked even less. In spite of the evidence and the etymology, not all aesthetic experiences are sensory or perceptual experiences. On looking at a painting, if perception is distorted or limited, or if for example, the viewer is colour-blind or visually impaired, the viewer does not come into close contact with the artwork. But, if a poem, or better yet, a novel is read, it is clear that sensation and perception do not play a large role. It is perhaps not by chance that the Baumgarten concept of aesthetics as sensory theory lasted *l'espace d'un matin*.

Although there are differences between the analytic mainstream and Continental aesthetics, the two are very close to what they both negate. Both schools refuse to acknowledge that value judgment is always at the base of aesthetic phenomena. The analytics deny it claiming that a merely classificatory identification of an artwork is possible, while Continental philosophers reduce the aesthetic phenomenon in a sea of sensory perception. Secondly, both schools contend that it is possible to identify a specific aesthetic experience. Dickie's, Levinson's and even Danto's philosophy of art presuppose the criticism of the aesthetic experience, which was widely held the analytical side. But even Bohme's position and in Italy Ferraris', eliminate every reference to the aesthetic experience. This seems to be resolved in the general sensory experience, where any difference between aesthetic experience and ordinary experience lies.

2. Sensory Experience and Aesthetic Experience

In order to determine whether something is or is not art, it must *be experienced*. The absurdity of wanting to decide why an object belongs to the class of "artwork" is that *artwork is not a class of objects and is not considered as such*. When we come across a work of art, we are never faced with a class of objects, but only a single object. And it is never said "this is art and this is not", as if the decision is made on the spot, on the basis of some predetermined criteria. On the contrary, there is the need to *immerse* oneself in the object, to be *invaded* by it, to remain in its presence for a while,

to re-examine it after a period of absence. If we claim to pronounce judgment, to decide whether something is art or not without having spent time with the object of our interest, our judgment seems more like a whim or a game, and not a true conviction. Only in certain circumstances do we have the opportunity to express our impressions by formulating true judgment. Much more often involvement with the object need not be translated into words. The fact that we return to observe the object in question, that we cannot detach ourselves from it, and that each time viewed something new is discovered which was not previously seen and that attracts our attention once again, is enough to demonstrate our involvement. Art must be experienced to know whether it is art or not, and to make a judgment on its artistic value without experiencing it, is not serious.

To disprove the belief that it is impossible to distinguish aesthetic experiences from sensory and perceptive experiences, it is enough to observe the differences in the usage in ordinary language, and between sensory and aesthetic predicates. To claim that aesthetic terminology, such as flamboyant, majestic, or elegant follow the same logic and the same conditions of usage as terms such as red, tall or heavy is certainly possible, but it appears counter intuitive. The latter are only etymologically "aesthetic" terms, because they deal with sensory perception, while the former are "aesthetic" in that they deal with how we react to certain objects and whether we consider them satisfying or not satisfying. The description of a landscape in environmental or biological terms; listing the flora and fauna, the types of rocks and sediments, the height of hills and the force of rivers, does not describe a landscape, but describes the physical environment. Describing a painting by giving its dimensions, indicating the type of canvas used, pigments employed to create the colors, etc. may be very useful for cataloging, but it cannot be said that the description permits the viewer to come into contact with the work of art and its aesthetic meaning. To use sensory predicates correctly requires not merely having no perceptual impediment; but to employ aesthetic terms correctly. the discernment called by a long tradition *taste* is required.

There are sensory properties that have nothing to do with aesthetics. Using another example, all sculptures have a certain weight and this weight is a sensory quality that can be observed through the senses, but it is not an aesthetic quality. Naturally it is said that the figures in a painting by

Tintoretto have a weight while those in a Botero painting do not. Thus an aesthetic judgment is made, but the weights are different. In one, weight is measured in kilograms and pounds. This can be determined and is enough to reject the equality between aesthetics and general sensory theory: *not all sensory judgments are aesthetic judgments*. This is understood by traditional good sense, for example taste, smell or touch, which exclude it from the ranks of aesthetic sense. It cannot be denied that these traditional senses can enter into a work of art or can be taken to an imaginative level. But a discriminating ranking needs to be established: otherwise it could be concluded that even sexual pleasure is an aesthetic pleasure, given that undoubtedly it is considered as such from an etymological point of view.

The opposite proposition, that *there are aesthetic judgments that are not sensory judgment*, is less obvious. And yet upon reflection it can be seen that this frequently happens. Literary works for example never or hardly ever lend themselves to sensory judgments. It can also be claimed that the phonosymbolic data of a poem regards the senses (although it is not clear to which sense, and above all why we cannot understand it if a poem is read in a language that is not known). It is however, evident that all the qualities that a literary text possesses regarding the construction, the plot or the psychology of its characters do not seem to have anything to do with the sphere of senses. There are many aspects that we cannot define as sensory even in painting and music which seem to apply directly to the senses. The boundless desolation of the "Dog" painted by Goya or the languid second movement of César Frank's Sonata for violin and orchestra are not sensory qualities in that it is possible to imagine a not very well educated spectator who can see and hear quite well finding Goya's paint simply extravagant or incomprehensible, and Frank's concerto boring or melodramatic.

3. Aesthetic Experience and Experience in General — The Role of Metarepresentations

Historically, cognitive aesthetics and aesthetic emotivism have more or less divided the field equally. The old theory of imitation linked imagination to knowledge, to the satisfaction derived from knowing and recognizing something. Aesthetics as a philosophic discipline was formulated by

Baumgarten in the form of *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*. With the Romantics, art took knowledge to a higher level, where it opened territories which are unattainable by common conscience and are interpreted as a form of intellectual intuition or as an organ through which philosophy produces its knowledge. Croce linked aesthetics to the intuitive knowledge of the individual and for theorists such as Nelson Goodman, art is essentially a way of viewing the world. In fact, it is one of the forms through which we *construct* the world, exactly as we say that we *construct* our world through science.

Accompanying the idea that art is knowledge, the idea that art has to do with our sentiments and our emotional states was no less persistent. In the 1 century CE the anonymous writer of *On Sublime* saw in the elevated style the echo of a *great soul* and its source was enthralling and inspired *pathos*. When the idea of imitation began to lose ground, during the 18th century, and later faced a great crisis during Romanticism, it was not by chance that the idea of art as *expression* and a manifestation of sentiments replaced it. For the Romantics it was the expressive paradigm of art, for which according to Wordsworth art is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. Propitiated by the discovery of *mirror neurons* by neuroscience, we have seen a return of *empathy* in aesthetics, the theory that was developed in the second half of the 19st century, which saw in aesthetic activity the *projection* of the internal mood in forms external to us.

It is cognitive science itself, however, which warns us of the dangers of separating knowledge from emotion, and which also warns us that if, on one hand, knowledge is always emotionally located and expressed, on the other hand our sentiments are always conditioned by a certain knowledge of facts. There is another fact that induces us to prudently manipulate both cognitive and emotivism hypotheses, and which forces us not to separate them but to join them. The aesthetic experience deals with learning, but does not necessarily produce knowledge, and the sentiments that art expresses are not exactly the sentiments that are aroused by the events and people that we encounter in real life.

Knowledge is not necessarily acquired through the aesthetic experience; rather we put in place a behaviour that is *only analogous* to cognitive behaviour. There are certain works of art which contain relevant knowl-

edge, for example the novels of Dickens or Tolstoy, but it is doubtful whether *Our mutual friend* or *Vojna I mir* are read for that purpose. For this purpose it would be far better to rely on texts of historiography or sociology. There are works whose direct cognitive content seem quite scant, such as lyric poetry or fantasy literature. There are entire artistic genres in which it seems impossible to say that something is learned, such as decorative art or instrumental music. In fact, those who defend the cognitive value of art normally think of literature or figurative painting, and rarely dance or abstract painting and stress that not all art is identified with fiction, but there are works that do not have a fictional statutes (for example portraits, satire or autobiographies).

On the other hand, the *sentiments* felt in the aesthetic experience seem to be identical to those felt in real life. Typically, this occurs in the reading of moving or frightening stories; one *really* does cry or is frightened. And yet it is enough to reflect a moment to see the difference between the fear caused by an aggression on a dark street and the fear felt while watching a horror movie. In the former, the emotion is immediately transformed into a correlated action, escape, while in the latter we remain comfortably seated. The first is a lasting emotion which takes time to recover from, while in the second case the fear disappears as soon as we get up from our seats in the cinema. The person who is moved in real life really suffers, while the actor who makes us cry may very well be very happy because he has filled the theatre or has received a million dollar cachet for the film that is being shot.

The aesthetic experience is therefore, on one hand, commensurate with experience in general, which share some very salient aspects while, on the other, it radically modifies the character of common experience. Aesthetic experience seems close to cognitive experience but at the same time real knowledge does not seem to be acquired. It seems strongly connotative in the emotional sense but “true” authentic sentiments do not seem to be felt. Thus, we should not look at the contrasts, but hold these two aspects together. It can therefore be seen *that aesthetic experience is a form of reduplication or redoubling of the experience that normally appears, and in this duplication the character of the experience both lessens and intensifies*. It lessens in the sense that the aesthetic experience detaches from the immediate purpose, without any identifiable goal to achieve. It intensify in that this

orientation upon itself allows the nature of the experience to emerge with a certain force. *Aesthetics does not differ from common experience, it is a different organization and finalization of this experience.*

This need to organize experience where there is no real need to do so is one of the salient characteristics of human behaviour. Take *decoration*, for example. The desire to decorate the body or the face or other common objects, is an impulse found in nearly all cultures. But what is ornamentation other than the possibility to find organization where one would expect to find a bare surface or simple naturalness? Without decoration it would seem empty and without sense, but organized with a decorative pattern, it becomes something within which the self can be found, because it is an organized experience and not one left to itself. Hegel was correct in his *Lessons on aesthetics*, where he related tattooing and even the most painful and apparent absurd transformations inflicted on the human body found in remote cultures, with the banal gestures of a child who throws stones into a lake or river merely to look at the concentric circles that are formed. According to Hegel, this gesture indicates the human desire to discover himself in natural foreignness, in other words, to extract the "spröde Fremdheit". It can be said that the secret incentive is not to leave the natural to imposed organization, but to order it according to our own organization, even where there seems to be no real reason.

Many elementary phenomena of aesthetics can be explained by the overlapping of organization created by man and apparently without any purpose or which is even counterproductive to the phenomena that follow a different logic. This is the case of *rhythm*, which segments time and finds in its recurrence a way to allow gestures to coincide with work to be done. This required structuring of the gestures needed to connect arbitrary structuring which is produced because it is needed to link the mechanics of the gesture or to compute these gestures in with others. An arbitrary structuring is associated with the necessary required structuralization that is produced, because it serves to lighten the mechanical nature of the gesture or to perform this gesture in sintony with other gestures. The same thing happens in verbal language with the metric structure or the repetition of sounds. Structure or organization, which has no communicative function in itself, is added to the words in order to bring a new order to the discourse, thus increasing its effectiveness.

This duplication of experience that comes through aesthetic activity is not only manifested as the duplication of form, but also as the duplication of content. It is not by chance that a great deal of aesthetic activity takes the form of fiction. The nature of redoubling experience, which has been indicated as the true essence of aesthetics, emerges. This invention or fiction creates a parallel world to the existing one. It is often said that art creates a second reality; a reality similar to the one that is known but which can subvert it completely. However, it is important that this other reality has its own rules, its own logic, its own coherence. In short, it must exhibit its own organization of experience, which is different from that of everyday life.

If aesthetic activity is thought of as a supplement to experience, we can better understand why the characteristics of ordinary experience are and are not those of aesthetic experience. This is because it appears in a different and modified form, and takes on the aspect of cognitive experience. As has been seen, art is often thought of as a cognitive experience, but it seems difficult to indicate what actual knowledge it produces. If art produces a parallel experience, a redoubling of experience, it is clear that art is not knowledge, but an *exercise of the conditions of knowledge*. It should not be expected to give cognitive notions or content (even if, as has been seen, this can surely come about *per incidents*) because its contribution to knowledge is different and infinitely more important. It does not consist of acquiring particular knowledge, but of *exercising* cognitive ability, in making it work in the absence of achieving any particular knowledge, and keeping the mind open and accessible to possible new knowledge.

A similar analogy can be made for the emotional aspects of aesthetics. On one hand the feelings that art produce (in this case the artistic experience is dealt with, which is not the whole of aesthetics but represents a substantial part of it) seem surprisingly similar to those experienced in the real world, but at the same time appear very distant from them. Hamlet is amazed that he can cry for Hecuba, but you do not cry as if her children were your own. Here the numerous attempts to draw a distinction between real and described feelings can be traced; indicating the latter as false or attenuated, or remote from real feelings. However we are dealing with represented feelings and not those actually felt, or better, felt only in that they are represented. These are figurative feelings, through which we learn how to confront situations that have not been experienced in real

life, or to compare our behaviour in analogous circumstances. Aesthetic activity seems more like a *parallel exercise of experience*, which operates in a “vacuum” but full on consequence. The duplication of experience not only allows us to keep our abilities efficient, but to create *anticipation* (learning to face various possibilities) of experience and at the same time an *intensification* (concentrating on particular aspects of what is happening), and a *reserve* of experience (through aesthetic activity it is possible to come into contact with many situations that have not actually been experienced).

There is an ulterior motive for distrusting the view that makes aesthetics the discipline that deals with sensory knowledge and reduces the aesthetic experience to a sensory experience. What characterizes aesthetic activity is *not* the fact that it is often realized through sensory perception, as much as the fact that it always deals with *meta-representations*, or representation that is not raised by the objects directly present, but produced in the absence of direct stimulus. *Without meta-representations there can be no aesthetic experience*. Neither can there be complex operations which require a meta operative ability (for example the making of instruments to produce other instruments) or language, which requires a distance from the things directly present. That is why we feel closer to the recent trends of analytical aesthetics (Kendall Walton e Gregory Currie) that insist on the role of imagination, than to the analytical attempts of the definition of art. But there is comfort in the ancient tradition that links aesthetics to imagination and fancy. The Aristotelian mimesis is much more knowledge of the possible than a pure replica of reality and in his tripartition of knowledge, Francis Bacon assigns poetry to imagination while Vico establishes a theory of primitive knowledge as poetic science, or as an imaginative organization of experience.

There is another aspect traditionally attributed to aesthetic experience that proposes aesthetics as a supplement to experience and aids comprehension. Although certain rigorist positions (such as Adorno's) deny this fact, the production of *delight* has always been associated with art and natural beauty. The Renaissance theorists of tragedy defined delight as the goal of art and distanced themselves from the didactic and rationalistic theories of the theater, going beyond even Horatio's *utile dulci*. In the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Kant analyzed the characteristics that distinguish aesthetic judgment through those of *Wohlgefallen* which procured beauty, while San-

tayana stated that beauty is nothing more than *pleasure* objectified. Today, if we see aesthetic experience as a parallel exercise of experience, it can easily be understood why it produces a characteristic delight. If it is perceived as an *off-line* experience, an experience with no external objectives, we can better understand why there is a need to confirm a different order, a confirmation which rests within the subject who performs it, in the form of emotional compensation. If aesthetic experience were aimed externally or aimed at reaching a specific goal, it could be measured by whether the goal in question is reached or not. Because it is an activity that reproduces experience and does not finalize it, there must be a different form of control than merely reaching the goal. In other words, in the case of aesthetic experience, *the achievement of goals is transformed into the pleasure obtained by the activity itself.*

4. Corollaries

If there were sufficient time we could consider certain corollaries of the position that have been sustained. Three of these corollaries are listed below:

1) First, the rejection of the notion of beauty, which has had an unexpected revival in aesthetics in the last twenty years. “Beauty” means only “the successful aesthetic experience”. Whether this success is assured by the fact that what is represented is pretty, proportioned, symmetrical, or significantly pleasant is totally secondary. There are many works of art, and many natural spectacles, that are not “beautiful” in the latter sense of the term, and yet produce aesthetic experiences, and viceversa, the use of “beautiful”, graceful and pleasant forms, do not assure aesthetic success in art. *Beauty in the descriptive sense is an extra-aesthetic value.*

2) Second, reassessment of the heuristic value of ontology of art for aesthetics. Ontology of art does not highlight any aspect that is *specific* to the work of art, but views the artwork within the ontological categories of objects which can be totally different from art. Even the most subtle distinctions revealed by the ontology of art can and do refer to things

that have nothing to do with art. Something very similar occurs in the definition of art, given that every definition that attempts to do without evaluation ends up defining artifacts in general and not artwork. The same thing occurs in ontology. Ontology of art as practiced in its various forms, is an ontology of artifact and not of artworks. Its assessment addresses characteristics that are common, but in different ways, in all things produced by humans.

3) Third, a warning to the numerous attempts to identify and overlap aesthetics and ethics and propose a tie between the two based on the content of the work of art. Each time art is assigned a moral task, it falls into the field of indoctrination, edification or falsity. *The relationship between ethics and aesthetics can be made only on a meta-theoretical plane.* There are analogies, better yet, functional homologies between how aesthetic experience works and how morality works, just as there is a relationship between the way in which aesthetic and moral judgments are made. For example, both aesthetic and moral judgment relate to an object or a single, individual case, and not to generalizations. If a particular painting is considered beautiful, we cannot generalize that judgment by claiming all similar paintings are beautiful. Moral judgment must always refer to a concrete condition in which the action takes place if it is to be considered an authentic moral judgment. Neither aesthetic nor moral judgment can be generalized.

Given the amount of space at my disposal I will not go any further into these points but lead into the conclusions of these observations. I would like to discuss the fact that the prospective I have tried to illustrate is compatible with a study of the origins of human aesthetic activity from an evolutionary psychological perspective. However, in a manner which is very different from many recent attempts to propose a type of neo-Darwinian aesthetic, in which aesthetics and its rise is strictly linked to sexual selection. Scholars such as Geoffrey Miller, Jean-Marie Schaeffer and (although only in part) Wilfried Menninghaus adhere to Darwin's hypothesis that aesthetic activity is compatible with the "low powers of reasoning" of birds, which are "the most aesthetic of all animals" , and have interpreted the sexual choice of female birds of paradise or bower birds in terms of "taste" and "aesthetic preference". I prefer to hold to the hy-

potheses prevalent among scientists that the characteristics that appear to us to be aesthetic are in reality essentially *indicators of fitness*.

The basic difficulty in the approach that links aesthetics and sexual choice is that the non-human animals in which aesthetic behaviour is observed are very far below human beings on the evolutionary ladder. If there were a continuity, we could expect to find what is considered aesthetic behaviour more frequently or higher up the ladder towards species more similar to humans. The opposite is true. This behavior seems particularly widespread in species phylogenetically distant from human beings.

Therefore, it is probable that in order to find the anthropological roots of aesthetic activity we must look in different directions; not towards “inferior” biological functions but toward superior cognitive functions. It is not enough that an activity be a source of pleasure for it to be considered aesthetic but the nature of the appreciation and the pleasure derived from the activity must be distinguished.

As difficult as it may seem to reach incontrovertible conclusions in this field based on our knowledge, it can be noted that the flourishing of “aesthetic” artifacts is one of the characteristics that distinguish the various abilities of homo sapiens compared with previous human groups, especially the Neanderthals. The explosion of figurative activity, demonstrated by cave paintings in various sites seems to have had its beginning about thirty, forty thousand years BC. It is fair to say that this explosion could not have been instantaneous, but that it was preceded by a preparatory phase.

If we consider that most recent research tends to place the origins of language about one hundred thousand years ago, it would therefore be possible to think that the refinement of technological ability, with particular stress placed on the meta-operative and not simply operative abilities of hominidae, and the rise of linguistic ability and the presence of “aesthetic” activity are related phenomena

In this hypothetical context, the idea of aesthetic activity as a *supplement to experience* seems to become more precise. Meta-operative abilities, language and the presence of aesthetic activities link all the attitudes that are present in *sapiens* and to which we have already referred to produce *meta-representation*, namely the representation of objects and states not perceived at the moment. Aesthetics is presented as a supplement, that is,

something that does not appear to be immediately tied to goals of action, and in this sense is “free” and “unmotivated”. This *supplement*, however, is absolutely essential because it frees up the space of evaluation which allows for the anticipation of possible scenarios, like that of the indirect use of instruments or reference points for a class of possible referents. At this point the supplement becomes essential because it opens a series of possibilities that have advantageous results on the evolutionary level.

We can better understand why it is reductive and basically mistaken to link aesthetic activity solely to sensory perception. It is not the refining of sensory capacity as such, that creates the traits of aesthetic activity, but the creation of a sort of redoubling of the sensory data. If the experience is created and concludes on the perception plane, it is not an aesthetic experience. This is why it is very necessary to be cautious in listing certain connected choices as aesthetic; such as in the sexual sphere and in the choice of partners in non-human animals. Where a piece work is of an imaginative nature, the envisaging of possible situations or the evaluation of alternative scenarios, we have the embryo of aesthetic activity. The exercising of this activity becomes essential for the development of cognitive ability, and permits the liberation from the worry of immediate aims and the distancing of purely instinctual reactions.

The extraordinary development of cave painting in the paleolithic era attests the ability to create fictitious situations, which is intimately connected to aesthetic activities, independent of fact that the painting in question had distinct magical or ritualistic aims. It is just this aim that presupposes a meta-representative ability that the figurative explosion both attests to and contributes to the expansion of. It is not entirely arbitrary, then, to create a link between the so-called “pre-historic” art and art of later ages, and, as has been said effectively, if it is only bombast to affirm that the Lascaux Caves are the Sistine Chapel of pre-history, it is more true to say that the Sistine Chapel is the Lascaux Caves of an infinitely more advanced and complex era.

References

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