

## REFLECTIONS ON CURRENT TRENDS IN AESTHETICS

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What I offer here are some informal observations, neither comprehensive nor systematic, on certain current trends in aesthetics, from the perspective of an editor of an aesthetics journal. My comments might be seen as a supplement to the survey I published in 2000, ‘*The British Journal of Aesthetics: Forty Years On*’ (BJA, 40, no.1, January 2000), where I looked at trends over a forty year period.

One very obvious and notable trend is the growing interest directed at particular art forms, including film, photography, popular arts, and dance, as well as the traditional arts of painting, music, literature, and architecture. It is not fortuitous that in three of the recent collections on aesthetics, the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (2001), the *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (2003) and the *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (2004) there are separate sections devoted to these individual arts. Surveys of aesthetics from 20 years ago would have been unlikely to have done this. Perhaps aesthetics is simply falling into line in this respect with other meta-enquiries in philosophy. No competent researcher in philosophy of mind, for example, could ignore empirical psychology as did Gilbert Ryle, say, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. In philosophy of science distinct specialities—philosophy of physics, philosophy of biology—have developed, just as in moral philosophy medical ethics, business ethics, even jurisprudence, encompass particular applications.

Attention to the individual arts has the benefit of bringing aesthetics closer to actual critical practice and encourages links with subject specialists, in musicology, film studies,

literary theory, and art history. It also puts salutary constraints on the grand designs of aesthetics, particularly attempts to develop overarching or all-embracing theories of the arts. But there are dangers too. One danger is that aesthetics becomes more parochial, more culture bound. When Anglophone philosophers talk about music or film or literature it is usually a pretty narrow band of works that are taken as paradigmatic—inevitably these are the works that the writers know, more often than not canonical works in the western tradition. Generalisations about these works and their properties are not always likely to carry over to works from different cultural traditions. It would no doubt be wrong to exaggerate concerns here because after all the western art tradition is a vast and important one and if philosophers can shed light on it some good is done. But the worry is that aesthetics then loses that great aspiration of philosophy, however derided, to be universal and timeless. It does seem as if universality goes hand in hand with abstractness. In other words, the more abstract the subject matter the more universal are the findings likely to be; an analysis of truth or meaning or ontology or symbolism or fictionality is inherently less likely to be culture bound than discussions of impressionist painting, avant garde film or the realist novel.

There is tension too, arising out of this worry, over the scope for using analytical methods when discussing individual art forms in any detail. Admittedly philosophers like Levinson and Kivy manage to combine fairly abstract philosophical analysis with informed discussion of particular musical works, as, to a lesser extent, does Nussbaum in talking of literature or Carroll in talking about film. But let me describe the tension like this. The more abstract the subject matter of aesthetics and the more analytic the idiom of debate the more respect aesthetics is likely to gain in the broader philosophical community. This abstract enquiry fits comfortably into other philosophical niches and manages a kind of universality. However, aesthetics of this kind wins respectability at a price, for it loses much of its distinctness as an autonomous area of philosophy and is in danger too of losing touch with the art forms it purports to analyse and the practitioners of those art forms. On the other hand, by immersing itself in the study of particular arts and perhaps thereby widening its appeal aesthetics can look less respectably philosophical and more culturally parochial. I think these observations point to a real dilemma for current aesthetics.

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Perhaps the most popular single area for submissions to the *British Journal of Aesthetics* over the past five years is the philosophy of music. I have no ready explanation for this except that some prominent aestheticians, both in the UK and abroad, have set the stage by publishing influential books on musical aesthetics: Roger Scruton, Peter Kivy, Stephen Davies, Malcolm Budd, and others. In fact there are many issues relating to music which come up regularly, including authenticity of performance and musical expressiveness. I am going to reflect briefly on one area, the metaphysics or ontology of music, which has seen a notable flurry of interest in the past three or four years. This topic is a typical example of aesthetics conceived as a branch of (analytical) metaphysics at the same time exemplifying the focus on a particular art form. Julian Dodd's paper 'Musical Works as Eternal Types' (BJA, 40, no.4, October. 2000) and Robert Howell's reply, 'Types, Initiated and Indicated' (BJA 42, no. 2, April 2002) revives a debate from 20 years ago between Jerrold Levinson and Peter Kivy. Dodd takes Kivy's side in attacking Levinson's 1980 paper 'What a Musical Work Is' where Levinson seeks to show how musical works can be *created* even though they are a certain kind of abstract structure.

Musical works cannot normally be identified with a particular performance or set of physical sounds—after all, the work seems to survive after any given performance is over. Nor can the work be identified with a physical score, which might be lost or destroyed without destroying the work. It looks as if a musical work has to be an abstract sound structure of some kind, rather akin to a mathematical structure. But abstract entities, such as kinds or universals, are usually thought to be timeless or eternal. No human being invented the circle or properties of the triangle. And just as we talk of mathematicians *discovering* abstract theorems rather than *creating* them, so, philosophers like Dodd insist, composers can only strictly speaking *discover*, not create, musical works conceived as pure structures. For Levinson, as perhaps for most of us, that conclusion is unacceptable, just too paradoxical. Surely composers must *create* their compositions. Levinson thus introduces the notion of an 'indicated structure', in contrast to a 'pure

structure', and a new ontological category of 'initiated types'. Indicated structures and initiated types, of which musical works would be an example, come into being at a particular point of time, indeed when they are indicated or initiated by a human act. Yet it is precisely this latter claim that Dodd challenges. If initiated types are indeed types and types are ontologically on a par with universals, and if universals are timeless, then initiated types too must be timeless so Levinson's creativity argument collapses.

It is surprisingly difficult to resist Dodd's conclusion, however counter-intuitive, although my support still goes to Levinson (who is also defended by Howell). One consequence of Levinson's view, though, I do dispute, namely that musical works, as indicated structures, are always *essentially* connected to their composers. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, on Levinson's view, could not possibly or metaphysically have been composed by anyone else. Even if some other composer had, coincidentally, come up with the very same sequence of notes, that sequence would not be identical with the Fifth Symphony. I accept Levinson's premise about different identity conditions being applicable to indiscernible objects or structures. If an identical sound sequence to that of the Fifth Symphony, without any connection to Beethoven, had been composed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century that composition would seem dated or a parody or a deliberate archaism, but these are hardly properties of Beethoven's work. So, having different properties, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century work and Beethoven's work must be distinct, even though they are identical structures. For Levinson they are the same pure structure but not the same 'indicated structure'. But accepting that conclusion does not compel us to accept Levinson's generalisation of the necessity of origins in musical composition. Here I think he is guilty of a one-sided diet of cases. Yes, the Fifth Symphony might be essentially connected to Beethoven but that is partly because of the iconic status of that work. Its core properties cannot be adequately characterised without reference to the unique circumstances of its composition. For less iconic works that simply might not be true. The crucial point about identity conditions for works is that they must be value preserving. For two structures to be the same work they must afford the same aesthetic value (sharing the same aesthetic qualities). For iconic pieces that value is partially vested in authorship but not so for all music where the same value and interest might be retained regardless of the composer.

We need not contradict ourselves stating of a given work that it *might* have been composed by any of a number of composers working in the same artistic milieu.

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Another major area that has captured the limelight in recent years—again the focus being on analytical aesthetics—is that of art and ethics, including a range of questions, in themselves not new, concerning the extent to which aesthetic judgments are, or should be, influenced by moral judgments. The stimulus for recent debate in the journals has been Noël Carroll’s ‘Moderate Moralism’ in the *BJA* from 1996, and Berys Gaut’s ‘The Ethical Criticism of Art’ in the Levinson volume *Art and Ethics* of 1997. These essays have set off a minor industry on the topic. Both writers see themselves as attacking a certain kind of aestheticism or formalism and both want to bring moral judgements into aesthetic value. At the heart of Carroll’s argument is a conception of narrative and narrative structure as essentially involving responses elicited from readers or viewers. Starting from the indisputable premise that narratives are incomplete without imaginative supplementation by audiences, Carroll argues that sometimes the requisite supplementation is of a moral kind, as when audiences are invited to take up a moral stance, approval or disapproval, towards the narrative content. If audiences are simply not able to adopt the invited moral stance—perhaps it conflicts too much with their own moral sensibilities—then the narrative aim has not been realised and the failure is an artistic one, not just a moral one.

The argument is ingenious but in the end I don’t think moralism, however moderate, is adequately defended. Carroll invites us to pump our intuitions by appealing to that good old standby, Hitler. Surely, he thinks, we could all agree that a sympathetic portrayal of Hitler as a tragic figure could never be great art. No-one could ever pity Hitler so a work that had that aim would be an artistic failure. But the case is not made, at least in principle, even if in practice it might be difficult to conceive of a worthwhile work as described. There is nothing in principle impossible about depicting the most extreme human evil as, say, a flawed human condition, somehow pitiable. Didn’t Milton offer a sympathetic portrayal of Satan or Shakespeare of Macbeth? The trouble is the issue gets

muddied by running it together with propaganda. I do find it inconceivable that a great work of art should actively promote the ideas of Nazism or should be Nazi propaganda. But the flaw here is not just that it is Nazism that is being promoted but that any view is being propagandised in art. Any work of art whose principle purpose is to promote some ideology or morality is potentially flawed as art. Dickens' *Hard Times* is an interesting case. Precisely because it presses its message home so relentlessly about social justice it exaggerates and distorts some of the central characters. Gradgrind's utilitarianism lapses into self-parody, Mr Bounderby the industrialist is unrelievedly wicked and Stephen Blackpool, the blameless worker, arguably too perfect. These are artistic flaws but we could hardly fault the moral content.

We must distinguish moral content in a work from moral response and moral insight. They don't follow from each other. Most great works of art have moral content, characterisable in moral terms, being about people and their motives and desires and choices. Carroll is right that in reflecting on this moral content readers need to, as he puts it, 'activate their moral powers' and they need to fill in details left implicit. Sometimes what readers are invited to imagine—and supplement imaginatively—is near impossible to do. In that sense they cannot enter into the world of the work. Sometimes this imaginative failure will be along moral lines. We are asked to imagine something so alien to our ethical presuppositions that we are not able to do so. This looks like an artistic failure and it is in just such cases that the moderate moralist sees moral judgements impinging on aesthetic ones. But this conclusion is wrong, except in a trivial sense that applies to all content. Suppose a work invites us to imagine a certain kind of furniture but for most audiences that is just impossible to do: the designs are too wacky, too unlike furniture, too void of practical function, etc. So the work in some sense fails. But it doesn't follow, except in a trivial sense, that furniture values are thus shown to be integral to aesthetic values and that along with moralism we must also acknowledge furniturism. In fact the same aesthetic failure is occurring in both cases: it is a failure of coherence, of imaginability. The work demands something that cannot be fulfilled. Works invite us to become immersed in their own worlds. But sometimes we cannot oblige: it is too boring, too fantastical, too repulsive, too much effort. Nevertheless, weaknesses in the presentation of moral content are no different in kind from weaknesses

in any other kind of content. To suppose otherwise is, I believe, the weakness of moralism.

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My third sample topic, currently prominent among submissions to the BJA, is the perennial theme of authorial intention in criticism. It might be hard to suppose that anything substantially new could emerge on this but the current fashion is to defend versions of intentionalism, in particular so-called *actual intentionalism*, proposed by the likes of Noël Carroll and Gary Iseminger, and *hypothetical intentionalism*, defended by Jerrold Levinson and William Tolhurst. My own view is that this debate is largely spurious. First of all, I think that actual intentionalism in practice collapses into hypothetical intentionalism. What does the actual intentionalist do other than form hypotheses about authorial intent on the basis of, to use Levinson's words, 'the evidence of the work and appropriately possessed background knowledge'? Secondly, I think that references to 'the meaning of a work' are entirely misleading. Works, such as novels or plays, don't have meanings in the way that sentences or words do. No philosopher would ever ask 'what is the meaning of Hume's *Treatise* or *The Critique of Pure Reason*'? Why should we suppose that the question makes sense applied to *Hamlet* or *War and Peace*? Third, and relatedly, references to utterer's meaning or utterance meaning—the difference is meant to capture the difference between actual and hypothetical intentionalism—are also inappropriate. No *work* is an utterance in the speech act sense for the appropriate idea of a context of utterance is missing. Finally, Carroll's crucial analogy between literary works and conversations strikes me as unconvincing. Think how odd it is to speak of *interpretation* in a conversational context. Only exceptionally would interpretation be needed for a remark in a conversation and it would usually arise only on occasions when conversations break down. Also the whole apparatus of literary critical interest in a work is missing from conversational exchanges; there are no themes to be elicited, symbols recognized, connections drawn, intertextuality noted. This is the very stuff of literary interpretation but *is quite alien to ordinary conversations*. What is missing from the current debate among intentionalists, which to my mind makes the

debate sterile, is any notion of the point of literary criticism or of some special interest or value attached to literary works. The search for conversation-like meanings is far too pedestrian an activity to begin to do justice to the kind of appreciation demanded of literature. In fact the reason why the intentionalist debate drags on is not because of the poor quality of the arguments (even if that is so) but, more fundamentally because the debate lies at a faultline between different conceptions of literature: as impersonal ‘imitation’ of timeless truth (classicism); as vehicle of personal expression (romanticism); as pure linguistic artefact (modernism). All such conceptions are still active.

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Other topics, even more briefly. There is nearly always something in my editorial postbag on fictionality. The hoary problem of fiction and emotion still inspires interest. Mind you, for all that’s been written I don’t think the last word has been said on that problem. I think it might help to have a new diet of cases—Walton’s obscure use of fear-for-oneself at horror films (rather than the more standard fear-for-others) has had a distorting effect on the debate. Historical definitions of art, as originally proposed by Levinson, are another favourite topic with regular supporters and detractors; this is the idea that starting from a body of work generally recognized to be art anything that is intended to be regarded as those other works are regarded is itself art. There is a nice recursive element in the definition that threatens, even if it just avoids, circularity. Carroll has refined the definition by introducing the idea of narratives about art. The difficulty for all such accounts is in establishing the right kind of relation between present and past works—insisting on continuities while allowing room for radical new departures. But if the narratives binding the history of art together allow for both the rejection of the past and developments from the past it is hard to see how any work that makes a claim to art could fail to be art. And that strikes me as too permissive.

One final topic worth mentioning as salient among recent trends is the aesthetics of nature or the environment. It is a positive move for aesthetics to look beyond philosophy of art, albeit recalling the Kantian origins of the modern subject. Up to some twenty years ago philosophers largely took it for granted that aesthetic appreciation of nature ran

essentially along Kantian lines, resting on judgements of free beauty regarding formal features of isolated objects largely independent of conceptualisation. The appreciation of nature, it was assumed, is radically unlike that of art in having no conventions or norms and not being tied to any established critical vocabulary or tradition. But Allen Carlson changed all that in arguing for a *cognitive* view according to which aesthetic appreciation of nature, to be serious and appropriate, must be informed by background knowledge drawn from the sciences, notably geology, biology and ecology. To appreciate nature and the environment as it is, we must be fully informed about how it comes to be as it is. The parallel drawn by Carlson is with Kendall Walton's insistence that aesthetic appreciation of art is possible only when works are perceived under the appropriate *categories*. Why do landscapes look as they do? What gives a mountain range its distinctive appearance? To explain our response to the appearance we must go deeper than mere appearance. The advantage of Carlson's view is that it relates aesthetics to practical and informed decisions about environmental planning, it connects to ethical concerns about ecological preservation, and it brings the aesthetics of nature closer to the aesthetics of art, where background knowledge is accepted as necessary. Also, significantly, it opens up the aesthetics of nature to analytic methods in philosophy moving it out of the realm of the purely subjective or impressionistic.

So a final assessment of the current state of aesthetics? Plenty of solid debate; no sense that aesthetics is losing its way or running out of steam; a seriousness of purpose well in evidence; high quality work being published and not only in the aesthetics journals; plenty of interest among publishers (look at the array of anthologies, encyclopedias, companions, handbooks, guides, as well as student introductions); reasonable job prospects for aestheticians, at least those well qualified and flexible in outlook; unequivocal institutional support in many cases; a subject well integrated into the philosophy curriculum; leading lights respected in the academic community; new topics and new ideas about old topics emerging all the time; and, what better evidence for its healthy state, a lively and engaged postgraduate population.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These reflections are a revised version of a talk given at a Postgraduate Conference on Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art, at the University of Warwick, in 2002.