

# NOTES FOR A CULTURAL AESTHETIC

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## 1. Introduction

In its search for universal knowledge, philosophy has become mired in its own presuppositions. Its illuminating principles have often turned out to be illusions, its eternal truths merely local knowledge, its moral imperatives the architecture of custom often disguising the interests of privilege behind the sanctimoniousness of ethical structures. Thus the ancient dialectic between the Stoics and the Sophists continues to replay itself seemingly without end. But surely we must come at some point to a re-structuring of the issues, a re-direction of the philosophic quest. Where might this lie?

Here we may find more answers than we might wish. It is important, however, to withstand the temptation to invent answers *ex nihilo*. Rather, we can use as our touchstone what is common and what is diverse in human experience, recognizing all the while that experience itself is never pure but historically and culturally conditioned. When we do this, the landscape of inquiry changes. It has, like the earth, no fixed and central point but can provide solid enough ground under foot to make it possible to build structures of human habitation and use. While these structures may not stand forever, they can serve our purposes well enough for a longer or shorter duration. How, then, can we characterize such experience?

## 2. Culture<sup>1</sup>

It is not possible to speak of pure perception as sensation untouched by our past experiences, education, and training, and uninfluenced by our ideas and other kinds of knowledge. Social psychologists, cultural geographers, and anthropolo-

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<sup>1</sup> Several of the following passages are adapted from A. Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (1991), Ch. 4.

gists have established the profound degree to which culture influences perception. Yet at the same time, aesthetic perception plays a foundational role. This is because the authenticity of aesthetic experience, through its directness and immediacy, provides a powerful means of reappraising cultural experience by digging beneath the layers of accrued meanings and cognitive habits. The aesthetic character of experience lies in *d i r e c t* rather than pure perception, in perception apprehended immediately and unreflectively. It is in this sense that we engage aesthetically with art and with environment, both. Perceptual engagement, conditioned by cultural and personal influences, is the catalyzing and unifying force of the aesthetic field (Berleant 1970).

Those influences on aesthetic experience affect the features that we find art objects exhibiting. They also influence how we enter into association with them. This, moreover, is not just a matter of the attitude of mind that we bring to the object. Our experience is as much an outcome of the bodily attitude we assume when we engage in an aesthetic exchange with it. Hence a history of taste must involve more than the growth of understanding and responsiveness; it must necessarily include recognition of changes in the ways we live, perceive, and act in our world. The history of style, then, is inseparable from a history of taste, and both are bound up in the history of culture. The influence of culture on art, indeed, the formative power of culture, is even more true of environment.

The environmental implications of culture are embedded in its very origins, for the word *culture* is etymologically derived from *agriculture* (Bonsdorff 1998: 133). While one must not read whole explanations into etymologies, the connection between agriculture and culture is a curious one. The kind of agriculture, that is, the methods of cultivation that are employed and the technology that is utilized, results in qualitatively different environments. That is why, apart from differences in climate and topography, the typical Danish agricultural landscape looks different from the Belgian. Similarly, industrial technology and methods have transformed the British and American agricultural landscapes over the last century and a half, as hedges dividing small fields are uprooted and land consolidated, while small family farms are increasingly being absorbed into the great tracts of factory farms.

Thus, in cultivating the land, agriculture domesticates the landscape, that is, makes it home. Speaking less literally, farming enables human habitation to establish itself, binding people to place. When hunter-gatherers turn to cultiva-

tion, they begin to transform the landscape, turning it increasingly into a humanscape. And this results in different human environments through the influence of many factors, not the least of which is the local culture, which itself evolves out of local environmental and human conditions. The relationship between culture and agriculture is strong and deep.

### **3. Environment**

In the human transformations of the natural landscape, then, lies a history of cultural activity far more pervasive than we usually realize. These alterations of the landscape assume patterns that have been guided by habit and local tradition, as well as by broader social and technological trends, for the cultural landscape began to replace the natural one with the emergence of human society. This human landscape of culture and history is embodied not only in cultivated fields but in places remote and wild. It appears not just in the bucolic countryside but in the forms of buildings and roadways as well. This cultural environment is found, moreover, not only in the physical configuration of our surroundings but in the haptic layer of sounds, smells, and substances that fill our ears and lungs and are absorbed deep into our bodies.

Architecture, for example, cannot be considered merely as the art in building but as the creation of the built environment. And because no aspect of the human habitat is unaffected by our presence, there is no exaggeration in saying that architecture and the human environment are, in the final analysis, synonymous and coextensive. A cultural aesthetic is at work here on a collective art. The siting of a building, for example, as much as its architectural design, is a physical statement of personal and cultural beliefs about the human place in the world. Buildings stand, indeed, as the embodiment of such beliefs. They depict the human abode in a variety of contrasting ways: aloofness, domination, separation, hostility, enclosure, balance, continuity, integration. Cities, too, embody the distinctive spatial and cultural experiences of different social and cultural groups and traditions and mainly economic arrangements shaped by a politics of expediency, cost, and profit.

In this sense of environment, people are embedded in their world, implicated in a constant process of action and response. It is not possible to stand apart. A physical interaction of body and setting, a psychological interconnection of con-

sciousness and culture, a dynamic harmony of sensory awareness all make a person inseparable from his or her environmental situation. Traditional dualisms, such as those separating idea and object, self and others, inner consciousness and external world, dissolve in the integration of person and place. A new conception of the human being emerges as an organic, conscious, social organism, an experiential node that is both the product and the generator of environmental forces. These forces are not only physical objects and conditions, in the usual sense of environment. They include somatic, psychological, historical, and cultural conditions, as well. Environment is the matrix of all such forces. As part of an environmental field, we both shape and are formed by the experiential qualities of the universe we inhabit. These qualities constitute the perceptual domain in which we engage in aesthetic experience, a domain shaped by the multitude of forces acting on it.

#### **4. A cultural aesthetic**

An environmental aesthetic becomes at the same time, then, a cultural aesthetic, an analogue of the cultural landscape of which anthropologists and geographers speak. Environmental aesthetics comprises not only a study of the perceptual features of the environmental medium, features that participate reciprocally with the people who inhabit it. It also includes the correlative study of the influences of social institutions, belief systems, and patterns of association and action that shape the life of the human social animal and give that life meaning and significance.

The cultural aesthetic is, then, the characteristic sensory, conceptual, and ideational matrix that constitutes the perceptual environment of a culture. It encompasses the typical qualities and configurations of color, sound, texture, light, movement, smell, taste, perceptual pattern, space, temporal sensibility, and size in juxtaposition with the human body, and the influence of traditional patterns of belief and practice on the creation and apprehension of these qualities. The human environment is always historico-cultural, and formulating a cultural aesthetic requires us to identify the configuration of perceptual features that is characteristic of a particular human culture at a given time. Certain places exemplify such an aesthetic: in a medieval Gothic cathedral appreciative perception through distancing does not occur. Here light filtered through stained glass windows, linear masses and volumes, the reverberations of chanting voices and or-

gan, the smell of incense, and the taste of wine and wafer combine to absorb the believer into a multisensory, multimedia environment. Another illustration of a cultural aesthetic environment is the Chinese scholar's garden of the eleventh to nineteenth centuries, which creates a harmony of spirit and place, man and nature. Studies in cultural aesthetics are an important way in which aesthetics can enter the social sciences.<sup>2</sup>

Thus one can also study aesthetics from an anthropological standpoint: the anthropology of aesthetics. This can supply the kind of factual information that is relevant to any cultural aesthetic theory. Such information consists in studying, not the art of different cultures, *per se*, but perceptual experience that is valued. Among the cattle-keeping Nilotes of the Southern Sudan, for example, there are no art objects and no tradition of art as such, yet in their appreciation of certain perceptual values we discover aesthetic values comparable to our own.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in African and Upper Paleolithic work, concepts such as beauty are irrelevant and we must develop a different, more inclusive way of understanding the aesthetic experiences of diverse cultures.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edward T. Hall notes this force clearly: "The relation between man and the cultural dimension is one in which both man and his environment participate in molding each other. Man is now in the position of actually creating the total world in which he lives, what the ethologists refer to as his biotope. In creating this world, he is actually determining what kind of an organism he will be." (Hall 1966: 4.) Yi-Fu Tuan recognizes the possibility of changing cultural beliefs by changing environment (Tuan 1990, Ch. 7; see also Berleant 1978).

<sup>3</sup> See Jeremy Coote (1992): "The cattle-keeping Nilotes of the Southern Sudan make no art objects and have no traditions of visual art, yet it would be absurd to claim that they have no visual aesthetics. In such a case as this, the analyst is forced to attend to areas of life to which everyday concepts of art do not apply..." (p. 245.) "The anthropology of aesthetics as I see it, then, consists in the comparative study of valued perceptual experience in different societies. While our common human physiology no doubt results in our having universal, generalized responses to certain stimuli, perception is an active and cognitive process in which cultural factors play a dominant role. Perceptions are cultural phenomena." (p. 247.) "The study of a/society's visual aesthetic, for example, should be devoted to the identification of the particular qualities of form—shape, colour, sheen, pattern, particular instances of the universal appeal of contrast, manifested here in the appreciation of black-and-white and red-and-white beasts in herds of mostly off-white, greyish cattle. Elements which have their origins in this 'bovine' aesthetic can be traced through the ways in which Nilotes perceive, appreciate, enjoy, describe, and act in their world." (p. 269.)

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Robert Plant Armstrong (1971). Considering primarily African and Upper Paleolithic artifacts, Armstrong shows that concepts such as beauty, truth, and

Once we leave modern Western cultures with their own highly restrictive cultural aesthetic, we discover that most historical and modern non-Western societies value experiences that resemble Western experiences of art but that range more broadly than those allowed by traditional aesthetic theory. Aesthetic experience pervades the many regions of life, from practical activities devoted to food gathering and craftsmanship, to ceremonial observances and other social occasions. We must abandon the ethnocentric assumptions of modern Western aesthetics that restrict art and the aesthetic to carefully circumscribed objects and occasions. The concept of art is more inclusive than Western aesthetics has allowed, and aesthetic experience far more pervasive.

### **5. Implications of a cultural aesthetic**

What can we infer from this brief foray into the idea of a cultural aesthetic? One thing is that an aesthetics of universal principles is a blind and empty hope. It is based not on an examination of art and its appreciative uses but on a tradition of philosophy in the West that has persisted in the Socratic quest for universal knowledge. Recognizing the formative influence of culture is more than acknowledging the various patterns and styles of the built landscape or the diverse traditions in objects considered artistic in some sense. To begin with a cultural aesthetic requires an empirical inquiry into the kinds and varieties of experiences associated in some way with artistic activities as they are understood most broadly. Just as we can study comparative religion, we can study comparative aesthetics without first having a definition of art. The phenomena of valued perception exist, and it is important to study their various cultural manifestations. The idea of a cultural aesthetic can guide such an inquiry.

I suspect that we may discover certain common features in people's activities and experiences with the many artistic forms, occasions we can call aesthetic, just as we can call others religious or social. At the same time, irreconcilable differ-

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excellence have little to do with the cultural experience and value of objects. To reveal the aesthetic of a specific culture, Armstrong develops the notion of "affecting presence" to denote the integration of human consciousness with objects. "Thus "art" becomes the work of "affecting presence" that embodies the mammalian, human, cultural, and autobiographical features of consciousness. These configurations are "mythic," and it is because of the value in which myth exists that the presence established is affecting."

ences may appear, and it is important not to privilege certain forms and activities and exclude or disparage others that do not fit these. Do a symphony concert and a rock concert have anything in common in their aesthetic? Do Italian Renaissance religious painting and late twentieth century political cartoons share an experience or function? The variation in cultural landscapes is but one particular manifestation of the variation in other creative formative activities, as humans shape their activities and landscapes in response to the wide range of forms and responses that the needs for survival and society take. But this is a hypothesis, not a principle or a pronouncement. What is needed is descriptive inquiry – one future for an empirical aesthetics.

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