

Aesthetics (Analytic)

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If Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, then aesthetics is a series of footnotes to Kant. This is as true of the analytic tradition as of the Continental. But there has been an important change of emphasis in the object of inquiry of analytic aesthetics, which predominantly concerns theorising about the experience and criticism of works of art. Kant's idea of aesthetics as primarily concerned with beauty, or heightened or intensified perceptual experiences of natural phenomena, has largely been eclipsed (but not entirely: e.g., Mothersill 1984). Analytic aesthetics, once considered the neglected step-child of analytic philosophy, is beginning to gain confidence as a significant area of study with much to tell us about human experience, art, taste, expression, representation, interpretation, intention, imagination and reason. In the 1950s analytic philosophers complained of the barrenness of aesthetics, but today as analytic philosophy enters an intense period of self-searching and reassessment, it is to aesthetics that one might profitably turn to gain a better understanding of the complex Kantian origins of the discipline. The most significant Kantian legacy in the aesthetic domain has been the idea of the autonomy of the work of art and our experience of it from other theoretical, practical and sensory aspects of human life.

To approach the topic of analytic aesthetics let us first ask, 'What is analytic philosophy?', before turning to the analytic approach to aesthetics, and the contribution of its Australasian practitioners. It is familiar that there is no dominant paradigm or practice of analysis engaged in by those who regard themselves as analytic philosophers. Analytic philosophy is closely aligned with the development and application of modern symbolic logic and with the attempt to adopt the methods of the natural sciences or to give them a certain metaphysical priority – which goes some way to explaining the lowly status aesthetics has been accorded in Anglo-American circles of philosophy for most of the twentieth century. However, it is not possible to define analytic philosophy in terms of some specific set of logical, metaphysical or scientific ideas or concerns. Analytic philosophy can be more fruitfully approached in historical terms as a movement having its roots in the early twentieth-century reactions of G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell to Kant and post-Kantian Idealists. Just how to understand this reaction is currently a subject of much debate (cf. Redding 2007).

Looked at from this perspective, perhaps the most characteristic feature of analytic philosophy has been a derisive attitude towards Hegel and his immediate successors, who were typically dismissed (often with little or no engagement with their texts!) as endorsing a hopelessly implausible idealism, understood in terms of an ill-defined dependence of reality on the mind. The recent (re)turn to Hegel and the sympathetic reinterpretation of his idealism by leading analytic philosophers such as Brandom (2009) and McDowell (2004) will be seen by some as the end, by others as a further incarnation, of the analytic tradition. The former group tends to look to social pragmatist themes as the way forward in a post-analytic age, whereas the latter group tends to look to a science-inspired metaphysics (often misleadingly called 'naturalism') as a new lease of life for analytic philosophy. Of course, one could also follow Bernard

Williams (1985) and dissolve much of the debate by conceiving of analytic philosophy as simply a matter of a certain style of writing displaying an overriding concern for argument, drawing distinctions and clarity of exposition.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), an early masterpiece of analytic philosophy, had the unintended effect of giving courage to the positivist conception of philosophy as primarily concerned with the logic of the language of science, a logic that, according to Wittgenstein (following Russell's Theory of Descriptions), was hidden by the surface grammatical form of language. Aesthetics, not being a science, suffered under this conception but it could approximate it near enough by concerning itself with an analysis of the logic of the language of criticism (cf. Beardsley 1958). It was this impoverished conception of analytic aesthetics, which sharply distinguished meta-criticism from art criticism and which tended to ignore the significance of history and society for an understanding of art, that spurred the Australian philosopher John Passmore to write "The Dreariness of Aesthetics" (1951).

It was the later philosophy of Wittgenstein (1953), however, that arguably had the greatest influence on the development of analytic aesthetics in the later half of the twentieth century. Some examples of significant themes associated with Wittgenstein's work include: (1) a family resemblance conception of art as an alternative to essentialism (Weitz 1956); (2) an anti-theoretical approach to aesthetics (Kennick 1958); (3) the idea that aesthetic concepts are non-rule-governed (Sibley 1959); (4) the radical idea of letting the object of interpretation (say, an artwork or a philosophical text) become a means of interpretation of that same object (Cavell 1969); (5) the importance of social factors in the definition of art, as in, for example, the Institutional Theory of art (Dickie 1974); and (6) the importance of the concepts of seeing-as and seeing-in for understanding pictorial representation (Wollheim 1980). A useful survey of contemporary work directly influenced by Wittgenstein is Allen and Turvey (2001).

But analytic aesthetics is a broad church and Wittgenstein's influence is now less evident. Although analytic aesthetics reflects the broader tendencies within analytic philosophy – it also has its social pragmatist and scientific naturalist camps – it is now too pluralistic and philosophically adventurous to be neatly summarised. Typical questions taken up by the analytic aesthetician include the perennial 'What is art?', the ontology of different kinds of art, the paradoxical cognitivity of aesthetic judgment, the nature of artistic intention and its relevance to interpretation, the objectivity of interpretation, and the relation between art and emotion (the artist's, the audience's). From the 1960s on there has been a general movement away from the idea that art can be understood in purely aesthetic terms (often invoking a special aesthetic attitude of disinterestedness) and a growing appreciation of the need to understand art against the historical and social background afforded by artistic tradition, practices and conventions of art making, public institutions of art interpretation and appreciation, and artistic intentions.

Analytic aestheticians are among the most open-minded in the analytic tradition. Its practitioners have long realised that the way forward for analytic philosophy might well lie in appropriating the insights of the Idealist tradition that analytic philosophy began by ostensibly rejecting. Consider one of its leading practitioners, Arthur Danto: even if he is a traditionalist who argues against anti-essentialist Wittgensteinians such as Weitz that art has a metaphysical essence (Danto's view is, roughly, that the essence of

art is ‘embodied meaning’, where the ‘meaning’ in question is contextually dependent on the relevant recent history and theories of art (cf. Danto 1961)); nonetheless, he also appropriates a version of Hegel’s idea of the end of art. According to Danto, the developmental history of art ends when Andy Warhol produces ‘Brillo Boxes’ in 1964, an artwork that is perceptually indistinguishable from ordinary physical objects, real-life Brillo boxes. Thereafter philosophy becomes self-conscious about the nature of art, which can no longer be understood in terms of manifest perceptual properties (cf. Danto 1997). Danto is also representative of many analytic aestheticians in having specialist art knowledge (in his case, of painting) and in being involved in the public discussion of art and its significance (Danto was art critic for *The Nation* from 1984 to 2009.) For discussion of Danto, see Goodrich (1991).

Recent work in the Australasian context is representative of the most interesting current trends within analytic aesthetics as a whole. In the first place, there has been a move to embrace interdisciplinary approaches to aesthetics drawing on work in other areas of philosophy as well as empirically-based research in the social sciences. This is evidence of a newfound confidence in philosophical aesthetics in the face of the old anxiety that aestheticians are really just philosophers of something else, which is merely applied to the case of art. Gregory Currie (2004) perhaps leads the way here in arguing that making headway with many of the problems of aesthetics requires substantial input from metaphysics, philosophy of language and mind, value theory and empirical research (say, into the activity of interpreting). This interdisciplinary approach is also evident in other notable work: Phillip Pettit’s (1983) appeal to considerations in the philosophy of language to argue for a sophisticated form of aesthetic realism; Eugenio Benitez’s (2003) argument for an intimate relation between ethics and aesthetics; and Denis Dutton’s (2001) discussion of aesthetic universals which makes significant use of research in anthropology and evolutionary psychology.

Another representative local trend is to consider special issues raised by particular arts that do not carry over to the general concept of art. This trend often goes with a conception of philosophy that does not see any point in drawing a sharp distinction between aesthetics and art criticism. Noteworthy contributions include: Catherine Abell (2007) and Jennifer McMahon (2006) on pictorial representation; Elizabeth Coleman (2005) on aboriginal art and the law; Stephen Davies (2009), Davies and Fisher (2009), and Paul Thom (1993, 1997) on music and the performing arts; Denis Dutton (1993) on tribal art; Patrick Hutchings (2005) on aboriginal art; and Michael Levine (2004) and David Macarthur on architecture.

A third trend worthy of note has been the renewal of interest in questions of taste and, in particular, those concerning beauty – a topic that has been out of favour for some time but which has never been absent from philosophical aesthetics since the time of Plato. John Armstrong (2004) and Jennifer McMahon (2005) are among those making valuable contributions to this literature.

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