
EMERGING CONCEPTS OF BEAUTY IN AESTHETICS

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Abstract: Aesthetics is the study that sets out to answer the question: "What is art?" The outstanding thinkers of the twentieth century have endeavoured to analyse the problems of art from diverse reference-frames. Freud looks upon aesthetics meaning entirely from view point therapeutic. For Sartre art is essentially strife for freedom. It is a struggle for authentic existence. Beyond their time and space, they are mere cultural artifacts. And For Spangler, every art work acquires meaning from its cultural prime-symbols. According to him aesthetic object is not universally significant. On the contrary, Croce believes in arts autonomy, For Prof. A. Zis aesthetics is the study of beautiful in all its manifold forms with the elucidation of nature of art and the laws of its development. Aesthetics, in fact, is the systematic experience of the imaginative appeal of a work of art. If something is beautiful it may be important in itself but to a person it can be important as an experience. Key Word: Aesthetics, Architecture, Art, artifacts, Beauty, Croce, Freud, Sculpture.

Broadly speaking Aesthetics is

"a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of art, beauty, and taste, with the creation and appreciation of beauty"¹.

To begin with a workable definition of aesthetics, it may be stated that aesthetics is the study that sets out to answer the question: "What is art?" The history of aesthetics is replete with variety of answers to this question though no single answer is exhaustive. It is either too wide and includes in its domain even things that are not art, or it is too limited and is applicable to every few artistic creations. Therefore, the central problem that throws light upon the notion of aesthetic meaning is that of the art object. The others are of secondary importance as they reveal various aspects of the notion of art object. The outstanding thinkers of the twentieth century, namely Benedetto Croce, Jean Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud and Oswald Spengler, have endeavoured to analyse the critically examine the problems of art from diverse reference-frames; we can, therefore, hope to arrive at some new insights by bringing them together. But even by doing so we cannot expect to arrive at permanently valid conclusions. The possibility of absolute conclusions in philosophic contemplation looks preposterous; it is more so in aesthetics since as a philosophic discipline it is still in its infancy. Some idea of the explorations can be deduced from the theories forwarded by philosophers mentioned above. Sigmund Freud looks upon aesthetics meaning entirely from view point therapeutic. Art for Freud is meaningful not because of its structural coherence or isomorphism with nature, but because of its being an index of the hidden dimensions of human psyche, art, science and mathematics are equally significant. His major interest in aesthetic meaning therefore lies mainly in its being one of the ways of embodying the unconscious. In this sense, neither the aesthetic nor the cognitive is looked upon as it is but it reveals something hidden. The aesthetic meaning as

approached by Sartre is diametrically opposed to that of Freud. For Freud, man's instincts being eternally the same, art is externally the same, art is externally communicable. Sophocles' Oedipus Rex is as communicable to us as Shakespears's Hamlet or Dostoevsk's Brother Karamazov. But for Sartre art object does not communicate any unconscious content. What it communicates is a consciously intended content, the commitment of the artist. In this way Freud seeks in art-work latent and unconscious meanings, such meanings as are not consciously intended by the artist. Artistic communication between the artist and the spectator, for him, is a vicarious satisfaction of inhabited impulses. Each in its own way portrays the dormant and universal incestuous desires. Art work loses its meaning and significance out of the context of its age, which implies that the artistic symbols are essentially temporal. Art for Sartre is essentially strife for freedom. It is a struggle for authentic existence. As the type of struggle would vary with historical situations, art works are meaningful only with reference to certain time events. Beyond their time and space, they are mere cultural artifacts. They may be interesting so far as they reveal the sentiments, feelings, customs and conventions of a people but beyond this they do not communicate anything. Spangler looks upon aesthetic meaning from different angle and dimension, although he does share Sartre's temporal view of aesthetic meaning, as he adds to it the notion of cultural prime symbols which is nothing but the Destiny of Cultures. For him every art work acquires meaning from its cultural prime-symbols. According to him aesthetic object is not universally significant. In fact, it is essentially temporal: going with the growth and decay of culture, art symbols also lose their meaningfulness after a certain period of time. He thus freed aesthetic meaning from individuality and subjectivity and gave it an elective status within the reference frame of culture. On the contrary, Benedetto Croce's whole

treatise on the aesthetic however is a vindication of its autonomy and uniqueness. According to him the aesthetic and the linguistics as forms of expressions, are essentially one. Both aim at the uniqueness and individuality. Thus rules have the status in both art symbols and verbal-symbols. For him the syntax and grammar of verbal-symbols do not make them different from art symbols. Consequently, Croce denies the possibility of synonymy of two verbal-symbols thinking them to be essentially unique and untranslatable. A glimpse of these divergent points of view shows how the problem of aesthetic meaning has been discussed from different angles. Perhaps no single viewpoint can be considered absolute. One can build up a more comprehensive notion of aesthetic meaning by picking up the relevant issues from these theories and synthesizing them. Aesthetics as an independent discipline is of a very recent origin, though speculations upon the nature of art and beauty date back to almost the same time as the early cosmological speculations of ancient civilizations. Out of the plethora of information available about man's reflections on beauty and art, much can be dispensed with as native. Every branch of knowledge and experiences examines the universe of man from specific angle, it will not be wrong to say that aesthetics looks at the Universe of Man not only for revealing what is beautiful in his universe but also for realizing the good in it. It is not content with,

“Desiring the flower without the plant whose roots
are deep in earth”²

The human spirit pervades the flower as much as it pervades the space and time in which the flower grows.

Croce stresses this point and writes: The vital condition of art's autonomy is simply the essential unity of the human spirit which, in its various activities, is never disintegrated so as to let each drift in isolation, but is itself always present as the pilot at the helm.³Croce believes in arts autonomy. It is possible by the manifestation of the unity of all responses of the human spirit. If the human spirit disintegrates or is seen piecemeal, art loses its autonomy. The human spirit becomes sublime and unified by multifaceted effort which is guided by moral and philosophical ideals. Art in this process becomes complex and its complexities may be partly, if not fully, removed by an aesthetic analysis of it. Apparently the word aesthetics involves not only the idea of beauty but also many other aspects. Understanding the subject is to reach a definition. If aesthetics is not confined to one particular experience, are we to think that the term is beyond definition? At least one thing is certain — it that the aesthete is guided by the rules of consistency of aesthetics. But inconsistencies prevail over most

definitions of aesthetics. To be aware of such inconsistencies we may examine the following definition of aesthetics:

“Aesthetic theory is a branch of philosophy and exists for the sake of knowledge and not as a guide to practice”⁴.

In this definition Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923) considers aesthetics as a branch of philosophy, but more important is his view that aesthetics helps in exploring knowledge and not in guiding practice of its theory. This view has already been refuted by Croce who strongly believes that “Art is neither the slave nor the handmaid of morality or philosophy⁵. The closest and nearly a very precise definition of aesthetic which includes all the principles involved in it is advanced by Prof. A. Zis., which runs as: Aesthetics is concerned both with the study of beautiful in all its manifold forms and also with the elucidation of nature of art and the laws of its development⁶. The definition stresses ‘the study of beautiful, ‘the elucidation of nature of art and the laws of its development’. Both nature and human world are full of objects that excite our senses. They are said to be beautiful in that they enchant the soul of man and to make it rapturous. Long ago Edmund Burke (1729-1797) expressed his view that beautiful produces rapturous state in the mind of man. Prof. Zis emphasizes manifold forms of the beautiful. It is in nature that these forms may be witnessed in the murmur of casket or in the song of bees or of the nightingales. The human hands have also created beautiful objects like superb paintings, masterpieces of sculpture and architecture, dance and other manifestations of the beautiful. The second point raised in the definition is elucidation of nature of art. This amounts to an explanation of the processes of art. How a work of art is produced, How it is different from mechanical and technological products what is its scope. The last point stressed in the definition is the laws governing the development of art. It is true that no law can be fixed before creating a work of art: for a work of art is spontaneously produced. There is something like automation in this process. We discover the laws of it in the classic production of art, for instance, if we have to determine the proportions, contours and colours used by the artists of Ajanta Cave in India. To sum up it may be mentioned that aesthetics deals with the perception of the beautiful in all its various connotations. It has a wide scope and may include in its realm both the precepts and the practices of creating beauties. Robert Bridges (1844-1930) in his “The Testament of Beauty” (1929) expresses: Beauty is the highest of all these occult influences, The quality of appearances that thru’ the sense Awakenth spiritual emotional in the mind of man and Art,

As it createth new forms of beauty,
 “Awakeneth new ideal that advances the spirit
 In the life of Reason to the Wisdom of God.”⁷

The contemplation of beauty is responsible for the awakening of a spiritual emotion in the mind of man and awakens new ideas and enriches the life of reason which ultimately leads us to appreciate and understand the wisdom of God. Art aims at creating beauty and ugliness, beatitude and boredom of enabling us to apprehend the ultimate reality. The experience of art is imaginative; it is influenced by thoughts, feelings and emotions. How a synthesis of these elements is reached, is the subject matter of aesthetics. This means that aesthetics is the systematic experience of the imaginative appeal of a

work of art. If something is beautiful it may be important in itself but to a person it can be important as an experience. So, aesthetics provides an analysis of the experience of a work of art. The central thing in any discussion about aesthetics is therefore, an experience of an object, whether beautiful or otherwise, and this view is supported by Harold Osborne in these words:

“...when we say any aesthetic object is well or ill constructed, that it is dramatic or insipid, that it has or has not arrhythmic symmetry, we are not describing anything that we have perceived in the object but are talking simply and solely about our own emotions as we contemplate the object.”⁸

References:

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6. Prof. Zis, A Foundation of Marxist Aesthetics (Moscow: Progress Pbulisher, 1977) p.8.
7. Quoted in E. F. Carrot’s Philosophies of Beauty (Oxford: Clarendon Press, First Pub. 1931 this edn. 1962) p.331.
8. Harold Osborne, Aesthetics and Criticism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1955) p.211

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