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Chapter X

THE IDEA OF A CULTURAL AESTHETIC [1]

Introduction

In its search for universal knowledge, philosophy has usually been 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. 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.* Perhaps, however, we can use as our touchstone what is common and what is diverse in human experience, recognizing all the while that experience itself, phenomenology notwithstanding, is never pure but is historically and culturally conditioned.

When we search for the underlying common ground of experience, the landscape of inquiry changes. Such a groundwork has, like the earth, no fixed and central point, yet it too can provide solid enough footing to build stable structures of human habitation and use. While these

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[1] An earlier version of this chapter first appeared in *Koht ja Paik / Place and Location*, ed. Virve Sarapik, Kadri Tüür, and Mari Laanemets (Estonia: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2002), pp. 19-26 and is reprinted by permission.

structures may not stand forever, they are dependable enough to serve our purposes for the duration. How, then, can we characterize such experience? An answer may lie in the idea of culture.[2]

In this time of increasing international involvement, one cannot but be struck by the fact of sharply different traditions concerning art and its practice.[3] Recognizing that the arts are a salient part of every culture may lead us to wonder about their features and may make us curious about how and why the arts of other cultures differ from what we find more familiar. Perhaps we hope that the arts will offer us some insight into different cultures and their distinctive worlds.

This, then, is in part an essay in comparative aesthetics. Numerous examples of diverse artistic practices evoke our curiosity. Many of those I shall cite here are environmental and this is deliberate, for environments are a pervasive and powerful material embodiment of cultural practice and sensibility. They provide salient and inescapable evidence of this influence, and they bridge the distance sometimes assumed to lie, quite wrongly, in my opinion, between material culture and its artistic manifestations.

Culture

It is not possible to speak of experience as pure perception untouched by our past encounters, education, and training, and uninfluenced by the ideas and knowledge we have acquired. Social psychologists, cultural geographers, and cultural anthropologists have established the profound

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[2] 'Culture' is used throughout this essay in one of the anthropological senses of the term to mean the complex of social organization, institutions, belief systems, behavior patterns, and perceptual sensibility that gives to a social group its distinctive identity at a particular time and place.

[3] Several of the following passages are adapted from A. Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), Ch. 4.

degree to which culture influences perception. Yet at the same time, aesthetic perception plays a foundational role in understanding experience. This is because the authenticity of aesthetic experience, through its directness and immediacy, provides a powerful means of reappraising cultural experience by slipping beneath the layers of accrued meanings and cognitive habits. The aesthetic character of experience lies in *direct* 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.

These influences on aesthetic experience affect the features that we seek to identify in art objects. Questions concerning such matters as aesthetic qualities and expressive properties are not objective issues. Rather they emerge from a tradition that separates and isolates the aesthetic object before proceeding to analyze it, that subjectifies our experiences of that object, and that is then faced with the need to relate and reintegrate what it has thus torn apart. Cultural factors also influence how we enter into association with art objects. This is not just a matter of the attitude of mind that we bring to them. Our experience is every bit as much an outcome of our somatic involvement when we engage in an aesthetic exchange. 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 style and taste are bound up in the history of culture.

At the same time as different cultural traditions in the arts have become increasingly familiar, ethnic tradition has emerged as a powerful force in cultural identity. The arts are perhaps the most visible manifestation of that identity, and this raises a critical test for any theory of art that has empirical roots. How can we reconcile the differences in aesthetic perception and meaning, for example, in Chinese scroll painting and Western easel painting? In music the contrasts are especially striking, for the forms of that art encompass such disparate traditions as

African drumming, Javanese gamelon music, and American jazz. Within ecclesiastical music, the difference between Gregorian chant and the singing of Tibetan monks contrasts with their spiritual resemblance. And it would be hard to find a greater dissimilarity in music than that between the Mozart of late eighteenth century Vienna and the serialism of Schönberg, Berg, and Webern that emerged in the same city in the twentieth.

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 the very word, for the term 'culture' derives from 'agriculture'.[4] While one must not read whole explanations into etymologies, the connection between agriculture and culture has a curious interest. The kind of agriculture practiced — that is, the methods of cultivation employed and the technology that is utilized — produces qualitatively different environments. That is why, apart from differences in climate and topography, the typical Danish agricultural landscape looks different from the Belgian or the Japanese. 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 holdings are increasingly absorbed into the great tracts of factory farms.

In cultivating the land, then, agriculture domesticates the landscape, that is, makes it a human place. Speaking less literally, farming enables human habitation to establish itself, binding people to place. When hunter-gatherers turned to cultivation, they began to transform the landscape, turning it increasingly into a humanscape. This resulted in different human environments through the influence of many factors, not the least of which was the local culture, which itself evolved out of local environmental and human conditions. The relationship between culture and the agricultural landscape runs deep.

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[4] Pauline von Bonsdorff, *The Human Habitat* (Jyväskylä, Finland: Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy, 1998), p. 133.

Environment

In the human transformations of the natural landscape, then, lie a history of cultural activity far more pervasive than we may 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 begins to replace the natural one wherever human society establishes itself. This humanized landscape of culture and history is embodied not only in farmland and countryside but even in places remote and wild. In their climate, flora, and fauna, these bear the imprint of human actions, just as the forms of buildings and roadways do on the other end of the spectrum of human activity. This cultural environment is found, moreover, not only in the physical configuration and inhabitants of our surroundings but in the sights, sounds, smells, and substances that fill our eyes, ears, and lungs and are absorbed deep in our embodied consciousness.

Architecture, for example, cannot be considered merely as the art in building but as the creation of a built environment. And because no aspect of the human habitat is unaffected by our presence, it is no exaggeration to say 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. Indeed, buildings stand as the embodiment of such beliefs. They depict the human abode in a variety of contrasting ways, such as 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. They reflect their economic arrangements, in particular, whether shaped by a politics of expediency, cost, and profit or by collectivity, cooperation, and mutual support.

In this cultural environment, people are embedded in their world. We are implicated in a constant process of action and response from which it is not possible to stand apart. A physical interaction of body and setting, a psychological interconnection of consciousness 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, all dissolve in the integration of person and place. A new conception of the human being thus emerges. Humans are seen as organic, conscious, social organisms, experiential nodes that are both the product and the generator of environmental forces. These forces are not only physical objects and conditions, in the usual meaning of environment. As we have seen, they also include somatic, psychological, historical, and cultural conditions. Environment becomes the matrix of all such forces. As an integral part of an environmental field, we both shape and are formed by the multitude of forces that produce the experiential qualities of the universe we inhabit. These qualities constitute the perceptual domain in which we engage in aesthetic experience.

We have already spoken, for example, of the many different traditions that are embodied in gardens and landscapes. The contrast between the French formal garden and the English estate garden, between Versailles and Stourhead, is more than the distance of time and place. Symmetrical beds, clipped borders, and arabesque designs offer delight of a strikingly different sort from broad meadows punctuated with groves of trees, ponds, and streams. These traditions vary both ethnically and historically. Most interesting of all, they reflect different sensibilities, different significances, different influences, and different cultural roles.

Aesthetic theory can respond to these cultural influences in various ways. One is to articulate the perceptual motives and experiences of a particular tradition, to elaborate its distinctive aesthetic and, in its fullest development, to formulate an aesthetics of that culture. Such a cultural aesthetic theory lies in identifying 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, pattern, space,

temporal sensibility, and size in juxtaposition with the human body, and the influence of customary patterns of belief and practice on creating and apprehending these qualities.

Such an aesthetic theory is central to the cultural tradition, and making it explicit helps establish cultural identity. Aesthetic concepts and theory are thus never self-sufficient or self-contained but must be seen within a cultural framework. Cultural knowledge is needed to inform and appreciate the distinctly different sensibility that is embedded in a Japanese sand garden in contrast to a Chinese temple garden, or a French formal garden and an Italian garden; that informs Navajo sand painting, Indian sculpture, the subtly distinctive Buddha statuary of China, Cambodia, and India; that motivates American pop art and Aboriginal x-ray painting.

The human environment, then, is always historico-cultural. 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 reverberation of chanting voices and organ, the smell of incense, and the taste of wine and wafer combine to absorb the believer into a multisensory, multimedia environment. Another cultural aesthetic is embedded in the Chinese scholar's garden of the eleventh to nineteenth centuries, which evokes a harmony of spirit and place, of human and nature. A distinctive aesthetic animates the Japanese tea ceremony, which integrates all the senses in a carefully prescribed ritual conducted in a house and garden dedicated to the purpose.

While the aesthetic centers around perceptual experience, real, virtual, or imaginary, all experience, including aesthetic, is never entirely personal but is always part of a situational process. Further, the black and white outline of every situation is deeply colored by cultural influences. In fact, the very occasions that are seen or experienced as predominately or strongly aesthetic are established by the traditions and practices of individual cultures. At some times and places, aesthetic objects and occasions occur as part of ritual observances. These may be religious ceremonies in the widely different ways they are celebrated. They may be social rituals, from

inaugurations and graduations to sporting events. Performances, too, vary widely in form and character among different societies, as do the behaviors considered appropriate to them. Sometimes attending a performance requires contemplative withdrawal from overt participation, while in other circumstances and traditions it encourages active engagement and physical collaboration.

The settings for appreciation vary in a similar way, from concert halls and art galleries to a forest clearing with a fire burning in its center. The conditions for nature appreciation reflect the disparity in appropriate appreciation among different cultures. Think of the Chinese moon-viewing pavilion, scenic drives and outlooks in industrialized countries, sightseeing boats, mountain climbing, sailing, and hiking. Studies in cultural aesthetics are an important way in which aesthetics can join with the social sciences to their mutual benefit.[5]Ch. 5.

A cultural aesthetic

An environmental aesthetic thus becomes 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 reciprocate

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[5] 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'. E.T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) p.4. Tuan recognizes the possibility of changing cultural beliefs by changing environment. See *Topophilia*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974) Ch. 7. See also my 'Aesthetic Paradigms for an Urban Ecology', in *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992),

with the people who inhabit it. It must also be complemented by a 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.

We can, indeed, study aesthetics from an anthropological standpoint: the anthropology of aesthetics.[6] Here the search includes the kind of factual information that is relevant to any cultural theory. This is gained by studying, not the *art* of different cultures *per se*, but rather those *perceptual experiences* that are valued. The cattle-keeping Nilotes of the Southern Sudan, for example, possess no art objects and no tradition of art as such. Yet in their appreciation of certain perceptual values lies an aesthetic sensibility comparable to the Western one.[7] Similarly, in

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[6] See *RES*, a journal of anthropology and comparative aesthetics.

[7] See Jeremy Coote, 'Marvels of Everyday Vision: The Anthropology of Aesthetics and the Cattle-Keeping Nilotes', in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 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

African and Upper Paleolithic artifacts, concepts such as beauty are irrelevant, and we must develop a different, more inclusive way to understand the aesthetic experiences of diverse cultures.[8]

Once we leave modern Western culture with its own highly focused and restrictive cultural aesthetic, we discover that most historical societies and present-day non-Western ones value experiences that resemble Western experiences of art but range more broadly than those allowed by traditional Western aesthetic theory. In the former, aesthetic experiences pervade the many regions of life, from practical activities devoted to food gathering and craftsmanship, to ceremonial observances and other social occasions. In pursuing a cultural aesthetic, we must abandon the ethnocentric assumptions of modern Western aesthetics that restrict art and the aesthetic to the carefully circumscribed objects and occasions of museums, galleries, and concert halls. Art is more inclusive and aesthetic experience far more pervasive than Western aesthetics has allowed, and their forms and appearances exhibit endless variety. A culturally-engendered

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world'. p. 269.

[8] See, for example, Robert Plant Armstrong, *Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology* (Urbana, ILL; University of Illinois Press, 1971). Considering primarily African and Upper Paleolithic artifacts, Armstrong shows that concepts such as beauty, truth, and 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'. See also Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

sensibility demands a culturally-grounded interpretation.

Can aesthetics be trans-cultural?

In pursuing the idea of a cultural aesthetic, we can discern three levels of inquiry. On one, a cultural aesthetic denotes *experience* that is culturally conditioned, a reasonably distinct sensibility that characterizes the way things are perceived aesthetically. Where a Western observer may see a dry and trackless waste spreading behind Australia's fertile coast, the Aboriginal eye discerns traditional travel routes with sacred places inhabited by ancestral spirits. While the visitor to an unfamiliar city confronts a confusion of streets and throngs of oddly dressed people speaking an exotic tongue, the resident moves with the ease and confidence of familiarity. A Hindu worshiper does not find the four arms of Shiva to be bizarre appurtenances but grasps the distinctive significance that each of them carries. In these instances a cultural aesthetic is a dimension of a larger and more inclusive experiential complex of perception, imagination, meaning, and sensitivity, shaped and mediated through beliefs and traditions, customs and habits.

This chapter has been concerned largely with a second level of cultural aesthetics that rests on the need to recognize that aesthetic *theory* should be inclusive and pluralistic. Its concepts, structures, and interrelationships are dictated by traditions and practices, and they articulate the perceptual sensibility of particular cultures. Moreover, I do not refer here only to their arts, for this concept is itself part of a cultural sensibility. Just as the Renaissance ideal of beauty is located in time and place, so too are such basic aesthetic concepts as the Korean *meot* and the Hindu *rasa*.[9]

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[9] Frédéric Boulesteix, in 'The aesthetics of the plural Korean essence', holds that an object possesses *meot* when we perceive the internal movement that animates it, allowing us to join in its essential rhythms. 'Objects can contain *meot* and we become aware of their presence when our

A third level of cultural aesthetics is both intriguing and elusive. It is also easily misused. This is the idea of cultural aesthetics as a *metaesthetic theory* that searches for basic structures common to the aesthetic of different cultures. Can aesthetics be trans-cultural? Can the endless variety of aesthetic objects and occasions be regarded as variations on a theme? One consequence of a cultural aesthetic lies in recognizing that an aesthetics of universal principles may be a blind and empty hope. Formal principles like organic unity and perceptual principles like aesthetic disinterestedness are based not on an examination of art and its appreciative uses but on a tradition of philosophy in the West that has been guided by logical, epistemological, and metaphysical presuppositions.

The search for universality has persisted in the Socratic assumption that universal truths underlie the disconcerting variety of the empirical world. So to recognize the formative influence of culture on aesthetic experience is more than to acknowledge the diverse guiding principles that lead to the various patterns of the built landscape or the vastly different traditions in valued perceptual objects. It requires us to carry forward an empirical inquiry into the kinds and varieties of experiences associated in some way with aesthetic activities as these are understood most broadly. Just as we can study comparative religion, we can study comparative aesthetics on the artistic and theoretical levels without prejudging that inquiry by first establishing a definition of

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spirit perceives *the inner movement* which animates it, enabling us to incorporate into ourselves the rhythms of its *essence*.' ('Un objet possède du *meot* et nous prenons conscience de cette presence lorsque notre esprit perçoit *le mouvement interne* qui l'anime, nous permettant alors d'intégrer en nous les rythmes de son *essence*.') *The Great Book of Aesthetics*, Proceedings of the XVT International Congress of Aesthetics, Tokyo, Japan, August 2001, ms. p. 14. Also see Ynhui Park, '*Meut* as the Most General and Important Concept in Korean Aesthetics', *op. cit*. Grazia Marchianò develops the concept of *rasa* as 'taste raised as a paradigm of aesthetic experience' in 'A Quest for Higher Pleasure: The Indian Aesthetic Legacy', *op. cit.*

art. The phenomena of valued perception exist and it is important to study their various cultural occurrences. The idea of a cultural aesthetic can help guide such an inquiry.

But is some larger order hidden amid this cultural diversity? Can we develop concepts sufficiently inclusive as to accommodate these differences in principles and products and illuminate them within a general theoretical frame? Do the aesthetic of a symphony concert and of a rock concert share anything? Do Italian Renaissance religious painting and late twentieth century political cartoons involve a similar experience or function? Is the variation in cultural landscapes simply one expression of the variety of other formative activities, as humans shape their actions and landscapes in response to the need for survival and the demands and opportunities of their social world? I suspect that among the many artistic forms and occasions we can call aesthetic we may discover certain common features in people's activities and experiences. Perhaps the formation of dissimilar landscapes reflects similar fundamental human social needs and institutions.[10] Perhaps a similar structure informs aesthetic occasions in different cultural and historical settings.

A pattern may be discerned amid the rich diversity of artistic activities. This does not take the form of a common principle or articulated value but rather of a structural similarity, a cluster of factors that typically occur in different cultural traditions and practices. Its characteristic features commonly include a perceptual focus: a high level of sensory awareness seems to be central to all aesthetic events. While this usually involves direct sensation, aesthetic perception sometimes occurs in imagination or memory. Attention, moreover, is focused on an object, such as the conventional work of art, but it may also include or center around a performance activity that realizes in a particular form and on an individual occasion material created more or less abstractly, such as a play or a musical composition. It also includes work that realizes an artistic

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[10] See, for example, 'The Universality of Aesthetic Interest', in M. Rader and B. Jessup, *Art and Human Values* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), pp. 96-102.

plan, as in reciting a poem or reading a novel. Further, a creative contribution occurs in making, shaping, or selecting what is considered and what excluded. A correlative factor with these is the activity of appreciation through the active engagement and responsiveness of the participants in the aesthetic situation, including some form of somatic involvement that is part of perceptual awareness. This aesthetic engagement may include a cognitive component in the form of a mythical, religious, or other belief system that informs, interprets, or guides perception.

Such factors as these combine into an aesthetic field, which may be seen as the matrix in which those experiences we call aesthetic take place. Such a basis for generality in cultural aesthetics does not take the form of universal principles but rather of a structural similarity found in different cultural traditions and practices. Its frequency lends support to the hypothesis that a similar structure informs all or nearly all aesthetic events. What is needed, however, is a systematic analysis of those kinds of occasions.[11]http://cybereditions.com/spis/runisa/dll?SV:cyTheBooksTmp, 2001.). Also *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) and 'Re-thinking Aesthetics', in *Re-thinking Aesthetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, forthcoming 2004).

Although these observations are hypothetical, the evidence of cultural aesthetics seems to justify the quest for some kind of generality in aesthetic values. We can see a parallel here with ethical theory in the facts of normative behavior and ethical standards of judgment. In some respects the question in aesthetics is even more troublesome. In ethics, the issue does not lie so much in categorizing intentions and actions as moral as it does in determining *how* they are to be judged as normative or factual. With such diversity of traditions in artistic and aesthetic practices, even the criteria by which something is to be considered art or aesthetic is at issue. But what both

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[11] I have explored some of these issues in a number of writings. See, for example, *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Springfiled, Ill: C.C. Thomas, 1970) (Cybereditions:

ethics and aesthetics share seems to be the irreconcilability of the facts of relativism and the goal of generality. Yet the way to harmonize these conflicting factors is similar.[12] It lies in recognizing the singularity, the ultimate uniqueness of particular situations, and accepting the irreducible pluralism of cultural forms. Further, as the bedrock underlying moral diversity includes biological survival and the persistence of social order, aesthetic experience may reveal similar highly general features. Moreover, it acknowledges that whatever common structural pattern we may identify will be necessarily be abstract and non-legislative.

The expectation of some degree of generality in aesthetics is, then, a hypothesis, not a principle or a pronouncement. What we need to do is engage in the fascinating task of descriptive inquiry, exploring an empirical aesthetics as part of the study of cultural forms. The idea of a cultural aesthetic thus leads to an empirical project, one concerned with identifying what the aesthetic consists of in different cultures and with noting the varying sets of factors that make it distinctive in those contexts. A cultural aesthetics also suggests the delicate philosophical task of examining those empirical materials to see if any structural similarities lie embedded in them. Here is a program at once focused and constructive, and it may lead aesthetics to new ground.

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[12] See my essay, 'Leaving Relativism', in *Relativism and Beyond*, ed. Y. Ariel, S. Biderman, and O. Rotem (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 67-87.

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