

Why Do We Need a Theory of Art?

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Abstract

This paper argues that within the class of aesthetic judgments, interesting variations occur depending on whether the judgment refers to an artwork or not. Additionally, it is suggested that in order to understand and satisfactorily explain these variations, one needs a convincing specification of the notion of "art". Thus, the main thesis of this paper is that a general theory of aesthetic judgments needs to be supplemented by a convincing and theoretically fruitful theory of art.

1. Introduction

What is art? This question can be answered by defining "art/artwork", i.e., by citing individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for attributing the term "art/artwork" to an object. Even though such a definitional project has been the center of attention in the philosophy of art for a long time, today this project seems to have gone out of fashion. There are at least three reasons for that.

First, in light of the many failed definitional attempts, it is questionable whether the definitional project can ever be brought to a successful conclusion. Second, there are many interesting questions with respect to art that might be answered independently of a satisfying definition of "art." Third, the philosophy of art is a subdiscipline of a more general aesthetic science. This more general theory is concerned with questions, which do not refer to art in particular, for example: Are our aesthetic responses to the world accompanied by a special sort of experience? What differentiates aesthetic from nonaesthetic judgments and how can we explain certain semantic and pragmatic features of aesthetic judgments? Interest in these general aesthetic questions has increased because developments in other fields beyond philosophy (for example, psychological aesthetics or linguistics) have raised the hope that real progress with respect to these general aesthetic questions could be achieved through interdisciplinary effort. However, because a definition of "art" does neither seem necessary nor particularly helpful in order to address these *general* aesthetic questions, the interest in such a definitional project declined.

The aim of this paper is to bring the project of defining "art" back on the agenda of aesthetic theorizing. In particular, I will question the last point just made. I am convinced that, despite first appearances, answering some general aesthetic questions would in fact profit a great deal from a convincing definition of "art." This thought seems especially true with respect to the general topic of aesthetic judgments. I will argue that within the class of aesthetic judgments, interesting variations occur depending on whether the judgment refers to an artwork or not. To understand and explain these variations, a convincing theory of art—that is, a convincing definition of our concept of "art," would in fact be very useful.

Thus, the main thesis of this paper is that a general theory of aesthetic judgments needs to be supplemented by a convincing and theoretically fruitful theory of art. In section 2, I will start with some preliminary remarks. In sections 3–5, I will then discuss three variations within the class of aesthetic judgments that call for a theory of art.

2. Aesthetic Judgments

I will concentrate on aesthetic judgments that can be expressed by uttering sentences of the following form "X is ϕ ," where "X" stands for a singular term and " ϕ " for an aesthetic predicate. Of course, differentiating aesthetic from nonaesthetic predicates is no easy task, but one can at least give a list of paradigmatic examples:

ϕ : beautiful, graceful, dynamic, vibrant, moving, somber, and so on.

This short list already illustrates how diverse and varied aesthetic predicates and judgments are: some are metaphorical (e.g., "X is moving") and some nonmetaphorical (e.g., "X is graceful"); some are evaluative (e.g., "X is beautiful") and some are nonevaluative (e.g., "X is dynamic"); and so on.

Let me briefly explain what I mean by "evaluative" here. The utterance of "X is beautiful" is evaluative in the sense that by uttering this sentence, the speaker conveys that she appreciates the perceptual experience of X. This conveyed information might be part of the semantic content of the sentence "X is beautiful," as contextualists or speaker subjectivists with respect to judgments of beauty would claim, or it might be conveyed pragmatically via some kind of Gricean implicature or via some other process, as some objectivists or hybrid-expressivists could claim. Fortunately, in the context of this paper it is not important to decide which of these theories is correct.

That "X is beautiful" is evaluative can be illustrated with the following sentence:

(1) This flower is beautiful, but I don't appreciate how it looks.

Uttering (1) is highly inappropriate for the following reason: Uttering (1) is infelicitous because by uttering the second conjunct of the sentence, the speaker denies something that she conveys by uttering the first conjunct of the sentence. In this respect, judgments of beauty are comparable to judgments of gustatory taste:

(2) This apple is delicious, but I do not appreciate how it tastes.

However, not all aesthetic judgments are evaluative in this sense. Uttering a sentence of the form "X is dynamic," for example, is not evaluative because uttering (3) is not necessarily infelicitous:

(3) X is dynamic, but I don't appreciate how it looks/sounds.

That aesthetic judgments of the form “X is ϕ ” vary along theoretically important parameters—evaluative versus nonevaluative or metaphorical versus nonmetaphorical—, depending on which aesthetic predicate one inserts for “ ϕ ”, is a well known fact. However, what is less well known is that there are also interesting variations depending on the kind of object to which one attributes the aesthetic predicate. In the context of this paper, variations depending on whether “X” refers to an artwork are especially important because explaining these variations would benefit from a satisfying definition of “art/artwork.” In the following sections, I will discuss three variations of this sort.

3. Evaluative Character

As specified above, the aesthetic judgment expressed by “X is beautiful” is evaluative. However, this is only true as long as “X” in the statement refers to a non-artwork. As soon as one substitutes “X” with a singular term referring to an artwork, the aesthetic judgment seems to lose its evaluative character. This result can be illustrated with the following quote by Thomas Mann: “Schönberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* is [...] beautiful, but [...] insubstantial” (quoted in Schmidt-Schütz 2003, 196 [my translation]). There is nothing linguistically wrong or infelicitous with the above quote. Changing the quote along the lines indicated in sentence (5) would not make it infelicitous either:

(5) Schönberg’s string-sextet *Verklärte Nacht* is beautiful, but I do not appreciate how it sounds—it is insubstantial.

This observation can be interpreted in at least two ways:

(a) The difference between (1) and (5) illustrates that judgments of beauty with respect to artworks are not evaluative at all. In contrast to “Natural object N is beautiful,” the speaker of “Artwork A is beautiful” is not conveying the information that she values the sounds/looks of A. This is why an utterance of (1) is infelicitous, whereas an utterance of (5) is not.

(b) The difference between (1) and (5) illustrates that one has to differentiate aesthetic from artistic evaluations. If someone utters the sentence “Artwork A is beautiful,” she is still conveying the information that she values the sounds/looks of the artwork in an *aesthetic* respect; however, she is not conveying the information that she values the sounds/looks of the artwork in another respect—namely, *artistic*. This is why, in contrast to an utterance of (1), an utterance of (5) is not infelicitous.

Depending on the preferred interpretation, the topic to be explained varies, but both explanatory attempts would benefit from a theory of art: By following option (a), one has to explain why an evaluative aesthetic judgment turns into a nonevaluative one as soon as it refers to an artwork. Because this variation depends on whether the judgment refers to an artwork, the features responsible for this effect are probably the features (or are closely related to the features) responsible for something’s being an artwork. Thus, explaining the variation would benefit from a theory of art specifying which features are necessary and sufficient for an object to be classified as an artwork.

By following option (b), one has to explain how aesthetic and artistic values are related so that an artwork can have one without the other. Artistic values are values that an artwork has as an artwork. Thus, our understanding of artistic values and their relation to aesthetic values would surely profit from a theory of art.

4. Sensitivity to Reference Classes

Some aesthetic judgments are sensitive to reference classes in the sense that whether an utterance of the sentence “X is ϕ ” is correct depends on the reference class relative to which the utterance is made. Take a look at the following sentence, where “S” refers to a specific natural object such as, say, a sunflower:

(6) S is graceful.

The utterance of (6) might be correct if the sentence is uttered in a conversational context in which the salient reference class is the set of sunflowers. Compared to other sunflowers S might in fact be graceful. However, in another context in which the salient reference class is the set of *all* flowers—including lilies, roses, and so on—uttering (6) would be incorrect. After all, compared to roses and lilies, S would not be graceful. In this respect, at least some aesthetic judgments are comparable to judgments of the form “X is small/tall” (see also Walton 1970, 355).

Presumably, not all aesthetic judgments are sensitive to reference classes in this way. Let us call the judgments that are sensitive to reference classes “aesthetic judgments_{RC}.” Are there any variations with respect to the feature of sensitivity to reference classes, depending on which kind of object—artwork or natural object—judgments_{RC} refer to?

Consider the following sentence:

(7) Piet Mondrian’s *Boogie Woogie in New York* is vibrant/energetic.

Prima facie, it seems as if (7) exhibits the same kind of sensitivity. Uttered in a context in which the reference class is the set of De Stijl paintings, uttering (7) is correct. However, in a context in which the reference class is the set of *all* paintings (including works of abstract expressionism), uttering (7) seems incorrect. After all, compared to works of abstract expressionism *Boogie Woogie in New York* is rather static.

However, the difference between (6) and (7) is that, in contrast to judgments_{RC} about natural objects, we tend to think that in judgments_{RC} about art, certain reference classes are privileged over others. We regard a conversational context in which the question is whether Mondrian’s *Boogie Woogie in New York* is vibrant as defective if the salient reference class is not the class of De Stijl paintings, but a class that includes paintings of abstract expressionism (for a similar point, see Walton 1970, 356 ff.).

That we indeed regard some reference classes as privileged can be illustrated by our behavior. Why do we read books on art, attend courses in art history, or take guided tours in museums? We do these things (i.e., we turn to experts with respect to art) at least partially in the hope that their expertise (e.g., their knowledge of artists’ intentions, developments in art history, etc.) will help us to pick the privileged reference class in relation to our judgments_{RC} about art.

Why do these variations occur (i.e. why do we treat some reference classes as privileged) if our judgments_{RC} refer to art? How should we explain the way in which some reference classes are privileged? What features fix the privileged classes and how? All of these questions are concerned with an effect that depends on whether an aesthetic judgment_{RC} refers to an artwork or not. If we knew which features were necessary and sufficient for an object to be classified as an artwork, we could investigate which features or combination of these features are responsible

for the characterized effect. This in turn would allow us to characterize the effect in more detail, thereby gaining a more robust understanding of it. Thus, our understanding and explanation of the described variation in aesthetic judgments_{RC} would profit from a convincing theory of art.

5. Psychological Data

It is unclear whether experimental aesthetics is concerned with aesthetic judgments as I have introduced them (see section 2). Research participants in these studies are rarely asked to judge whether a certain object is beautiful/graceful/vibrant and so on. Instead, in most studies in visual aesthetics, the participants are asked to rate certain visual stimuli with regard to liking, interest, and affect on a seven-point scale ranging from one (*not at all*) to seven (*very much*); or they are asked to list the stimuli in order of preference. To differentiate the judgments that are expressed by these ratings and preference orderings from aesthetic judgments in a more strict and traditional sense, I will call them “aesthetic judgments_{psy}.”

In visual aesthetics, interesting effects with respect to aesthetic judgments_{psy} have been established (for an overview, see Palmer *et al.* 2013). One explanation of these effects is based on the fluency theory, which claims that the more fluently perceivers can process a visual stimulus, the more positive their aesthetic judgment_{psy} will be. The fluency of processing depends on perceptual aspects—in this case, fluency “reflects the ease of low-level, data-driven operations that deal primarily with surface features of the stimulus, or its perceptual form”—as well as conceptual aspects—“referring to the ease of high-level operations concerned primarily with categorization” (Winkielmann *et al.* 2003, 199-200).

The fluency theory can explain and predict a whole set of interesting effects: (i) preference for larger, more symmetrical, more contrastive displays (see Silvera *et al.* 2002; Reber *et al.* 1998); (ii) preference for displays of categorical prototypes (see Halberstadt 2006; Farkas 2002); (iii) preference for displays seen more often (see Cutting 2003); and (iv) preference for certain spatial compositions (see Palmer *et al.* 2013).

Even though some of these effects also show up with respect to aesthetic judgments_{psy} concerning artworks (especially (ii) and (iii)), the main thesis of the fluency theory is highly problematic if we apply it to those judgments_{psy}. First, the recent history of art can be viewed as a continual process of violating conventions of prior art practices. If the fluency theory were correct, then this process has to be understood as a process of continually producing aesthetically unappealing works of art.

Second, in opposition to the fluency theory, experimental studies have shown that, at least with respect to *artworks*, participants actually tend to *prefer* stimuli that are *not* easily processed. Even though participants rated certain artworks harder to process and more ambiguous, they nonetheless preferred them to easier-to-process, unambiguous artworks (see Jakesch and Leder 2009; Muth *et al.* 2015).

Note that the rated ambiguities are very different in kind. Sometimes participants describe them as switches between multiple inconsistent interpretations, as a complete

lack of a consistent interpretation, or as a case of visual indeterminacy (for an interesting classification of these ambiguities, see Muth and Carbon 2016). Despite these differences, a visual display that is experienced as ambiguous in any of these senses is harder to process than one that is not. Nonetheless, with respect to displays that were known to be artworks, high ratings of ambiguity correlated with positive aesthetic judgments_{psy}. This is an interesting variation within aesthetic judgments_{psy} and it depends on whether they refer to artworks or not.

Why do people tend to aesthetically prefer artworks that are hard to process, whereas with respect to non-artworks, it seems to be the opposite? Again, attempts to answer this question about aesthetic judgments_{psy} would surely profit from a convincing theory of art. On the basis of what else should we try to explain the abovementioned variation? If we knew which features are necessary and sufficient for something's being an artwork, we could investigate which features or combination of these features are responsible for the characterized effect, thereby gaining a better understanding of it.

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