

The Implications and Applications of Aesthetics

Meghan LaHatte

COM 484

Dr. Terry Schliesman

Western Colorado University

### **What is Aesthetics?**

Our modern civilization is built upon a rich history in art and culture. Whether it is through film, artwork, fashion, or even neighborhood HOA's, 21st century societies highly prioritize the visual elements that these concepts are comprised of. This prioritization of appealing visuals and philosophies can be seen as *aesthetics*. Most people assume that aesthetics only pertain to the beauty of high art, such as the highly esteemed works of Monet, Kandinsky, Picasso and so many more famous masters. However, aesthetics relate to a deeper philosophical concept that has shaped the preferences, tastes, and trends we see in modern society. In this paper I will be discussing the meaning of aesthetics, my interpretation of it, and how I have applied them to my own professional project.

To understand and curate an accurate definition of aesthetics, one must look at the philosophical and basic concepts that make up its foundation. The primary scholar of aesthetics is philosopher Immanuel Kant. In the late 18th century, Kant explained his view of aesthetics in his book *Critique of Judgment* (1790). In the first act of his writing, Kant focused on aesthetic judgement, stating that it is an assessment based upon a feeling of either displeasure or pleasure when absorbing material (1790). This polarization of pleasure can be felt when one watches a movie, tries on an article of clothing, admires the landscaping of a home, and so on. In Kant's ideals, the pleasure one feels is when they interpret something as beautiful or "sublime." The sublime feeling is typically one of feeling greatness, pride, or an overwhelming sensation whilst absorbing a given material (Kant, 1790). This feeling of beauty, pride, and connectivity is typically felt when absorbing "high art" such as the cinematic masterpieces of Wes Anderson or the politically radical art installations by Ai Weiwei.

Kant prioritized the relationship of beauty, nature, art, and their strong ability to captivate us. Kant writes in *Critique of Judgement*, “Nature is beautiful because it looks like Art; and Art can only be called beautiful if we are conscious of it as Art while yet it looks like Nature.” (1790) In Kantian aesthetics, there is a foundation of four basic elements one must consider when considering high aesthetic value. The first two elements are freedom from concept, and objectivity. Kant emphasized that aesthetics were separate from the art’s purpose, or concept, which made it “impure.” Within objectivity, Kant felt that the beauty aesthetics should be universal in that the absorption is of a unique individual experience. The other two elements are “disinterest” and “obligation” that emerge from the viewer. Essentially, this idea of disinterest is that the viewer finds something to be pleasurable because they interpret it as beautiful instead of vice versa. The obligatory aspect involves the viewer seeing the object as art itself with no other agenda (Slater, 2020).

Considering Kantian aesthetics and my own understanding of expression, form, and interpretation, I believe that aesthetics are a natural critical appreciation of any given medium as it pertains to the viewer. This definition emerges from a person’s natural ability to evaluate and interpret content with preferences to “high” or “low” art or quality. Humans have a wide range of unique preferences that can incite feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction when considering aesthetics.

### **Personal Interpretation of Aesthetic Value**

It is through my extensive education in art history, conceptual design, and communication theory, I am able to assess what is “fine” to me. I am simplistic by nature, and tend to appreciate quality over quantity, especially when it comes to art and literature. As an artist, I am constantly

considering aesthetic value in all aspects of my life. With my photography and graphic design background, I tend to evaluate objects and films by examining their visual strengths. For example, if I am viewing a flyer posted on a light post or a brochure at a visitor center, the first place my mind goes to is the design content. Rather than interpreting the words themselves, I tend to look at the layout of images, shapes, and their relationship to the typeface. After I have evaluated the visuals of the pamphlet, my “communicator” side of my brain kicks in. This is when I begin to interpret the text, and see if the message is properly conveyed by its matching visual parts. If I see a disconnection between the content and the message, I tend to feel negatively about the aesthetics of the document. However, if I see a strong and impactful connection between the two, I see the beauty of the given artifact. My drive for aesthetics and the human connection transcend into my professional work as well.

### **Professional Application**

For my Junior year at Western, I was accepted into the Geiman Fellows. Under the fellowship, students attend countless teamwork, leadership, and facilitation trainings in order to grow in interpersonal and professional skills. With the aid of philanthropist David Geiman the fellowship tackles a project based on a local or worldly issue each year. For our 2019-2020 project, my group underwent establishing the valley’s first Citizen Climate Lobby chapter, a grass roots organization that sparks climate action through political education and lobbying. This required months of gather resources, creating materials, building strong community relationships, and educating ourselves on the implications climate change.

As a core founder of the Gunnison CCL Chapter, I was tasked with being our visuals director. Essentially, I was in charge of maintaining a high quality of aesthetic material

throughout the project, while also building strong relationships between my cohorts and our audiences. As the visuals director, I designed and curated all of the materials we used to present and market our organization. This project required both digital and physical communicative elements due to the importance of grassroots outreach within the CCL. For example, one of our main methods of promoting the CCL was through tabling in the University Center. To successfully connect to the Western community, we needed a tangible incentive to attract students to our table. I did this by handing out handmade beeswax wraps, a sustainable alternative to plastic sandwich bags, to community members who signed up for the CCL. Along with the colorful beeswax wraps, I created paper handouts with helpful information about our organization. Both of these items needed to have strong aesthetic value in order to properly communicate our message and generate an appreciation for our materials. These handouts were successful as almost fifty students signed up for our chapter at the event and we were able to consistently keep numbers up by using the same methods.

Another major aspect of our program was writing letters to Congress and our state's representatives about climate initiative. As a group, we constructed two letters to Rep. Scott Tipton, one of which I spearheaded. Because Tipton is in the Republican party, I made sure that the aesthetics of the paper appealed to his interests. We used language and literary imagery to relate climate change to the ranching industry of Gunnison, and how all aspects of the local economy were built upon the valley's environmental quality. I wrote with respectful syntax, and an appreciation of his efforts in our local, state, and national governments. This letter served us well as we received a supportive response from him shortly after.

The CCL project required many different skillsets, but I found that I mostly applied my lessons from the Communication Arts programs. Through learning about social media and media theory in Dr. Taylor's Communication Arts class, which focused on the relationship of symbols in media, and the messages they give off, I was able to successfully run our social media pages, as well as spearhead outreach through contacting local individuals and organizations. My orating and presentation skills were also necessary, as I presented our project to City Council, the Western Executive Board, the Gunnison Climate Coalition, and a handful of other important sources in the valley. Not only did we have to focus on the visual material we would use to present, but we also had to rehearse our presentations constantly. My group did this in order to aesthetically please our audiences by emphasizing simple and understandable information that still illustrated a deeper knowledge and foundation of the CCL.

Overall, aesthetics are a fluid, immortal, and universal tenet of human nature. When considering judgement or finalization of a given project, one must consider the aesthetic implications of their material. As a communicator and an artist, I am constantly wondering how I can improve and promote aesthetically pleasing results, without controlling my audience. Individual preference is a dangerously steadfast aspect in life, but can open one up to the value of unique interpretation as it relates to aesthetics and art.

References

Kant, I. (1790). *The Critique of judgement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Slater, B. (2020). Aesthetics. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved September 23, 2020, from <https://iep.utm.edu/aestheti/#H10>