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Aesthetics and the Representation of Discovery

I

Aesthetics in its philosophical sense has its origins in the seventeenth and eighteenth century rationalist and empiricist assertions of the primacy of individual experience. The details of this have been worked out in the last thirty years by scholars such as Jerome Stolnitz and George Dickie,¹ and we have come to an increased appreciation of the complexity of those origins. In particular, concepts of taste, aesthetic experience, and the emergence of an aesthetic attitude have their origins in the primacy of individual perception in epistemology, in the emergence of individual feeling and emotion as legitimate parts of value systems, and in the turn to the natural sciences as the model for explanation.

The systematic linkage between science and aesthetics is obvious in many instances. Both Leibnizian rationalism and Newtonian empiricism find their aesthetic counterparts in A. G. Baumgarten's »aesthetics«² and Francis Hutcheson's »sense of beauty«³ respectively, for example. From these philosophical investigations there has emerged a parallel recognition of the cultural shifts that shape this modernist aesthetic. Taste as a metaphor for aesthetic perception and value can be linked to renaissance art theory. The

¹ Stolnitz, J. (1961). »Of the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'«. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (winter): 131-143. Stolnitz, J. (1961). »On the Significance of Lord Shaftesbury in Modern Aesthetic Theory.« *The Philosophical Quarterly* 2, 43 (April): 97-113. Stolnitz, J. (1961). »Beauty: Some Stages in the History of an Idea.« *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, 2 (April-June): 185-204. Stolnitz, J. (1978). »The 'Aesthetic Attitude' in the Rise of Modern Aesthetics.« *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (Summer): 409-422. Dickie, G. (1984). »Stolnitz' Attitude: Taste and Perception.« and Stolnitz, J. (1984). »The Aesthetic Attitude in the Rise of Modern Aesthetics – Again.« *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (Winter): 193-208. Dickie, G. (1974). *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press. Dickie, G. (1996). *The Century of Taste*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

² Baumgarten, A. G. (1954.). *Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus)*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

³ Hutcheson, F. (1725). *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. London, J. Darby.

individualism of reformation theology and the political breakdown of divine authority motivate a move away from religious and court patronage in the direction of a more mercantile art world. Critical notions of history go hand in hand with the rise of the novel as a fictional form of historical narrative. Individual experience of nature finds its expression in a desire for the picturesque, which in turn helps shape the aesthetic categories of expression and imagination that lead to romanticism. The details of aesthetics as a philosophical language and as a mode of awareness can be traced in almost every level of culture from the lending library and reading public to the world of landscape gardening.

Among the areas yet to be adequately explored, however, is the interrelation of aesthetics with the process of discovery. Several aspects here deserve attention. First, philosophers such as John Locke, who provide the empiricist foundations for aesthetics,⁴ are actively involved in the entrepreneurial aspects of discovery. Locke, in his role as advisor to the first earl of Shaftesbury, provides the political foundation as well as participating as a director in the Carolinas colonization. The connection with aesthetics here may at first seem tenuous, but it becomes clearer when one examines the stylistic and architectural elements in starting a new town or plantation. Just as landscape gardening provided a model for assimilating nature to the new aesthetic of sense and sensibility, so the new world provides a means of turning Newtonian mechanism and invention into aesthetics expressions. London's squares and Edinburgh's New Town set the model for the aesthetic assimilation of an urban environment. The carefully laid out towns of Charleston and Savannah are works of art whose material is the new land itself.

Second, the fascination with travel literature, both actual and imagined, brings discovery into literature. In much the same way that picturesqueness helps introduce distance into the rural landscape in such a way that landscape itself becomes art rather than agriculture,⁵ travel provides distance from the ordinary and thus aestheticizes the otherness of the world. The step to imagined and impossible voyages (Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver, for example) is the logical aesthetic extension of this fascination with the new and physically distant.

⁴ Townsend, D. (1991). »Lockean Aesthetics.« *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, 4 (Fall): 349-361.

⁵ Barrell, J. (1990). »The Public Prospect and the Private View: The Politics of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain« in *Reading Landscape: Country - City - Capital*. Ed. S. Pugh. Manchester, Manchester University Press: 19-40. Townsend, D. (1997). »The Picturesque.« *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, 4 (Fall): 365-376.

A particular exemplification of this impulse can be found in the history of cartography and the place of maps in the popular culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Discovery both produces and relies on map making, and map making, in its turn, evolves in the context of mathematically sound science. Latitude, longitude, and projection are the cultural equivalent of freeing perspective and color from religious iconography in renaissance painting. Even in the most utilitarian maps, there is an underlying aesthetic of fascination with and thrill in the unknown and new combined with a scientific attitude toward geographical knowledge and information.

E. H. Gombrich sets out an important contrast between maps and pictures: »Maps are normally designed to impart information about the invariant features of an area, in other words they leave 'appearances' on one side. There are no maps of Vienna in moonlight or of the museums out of focus. Nor would it be welcome if maps aroused unexpected visual sensations such as flicker. . . . We speak of reading a map, and its foremost requirement is indeed that it should be as distinct as possible. Where such differentiation fails the use is put in jeopardy.«⁶ But maps are not independent of the conventions of representation by which they are read. So maps, like pictures, depend on background information. But in contrast to some ways of regarding pictures, maps serve to correct an extreme relativism about representation. »The great variety of styles we encounter in the images of past and present civilizations cannot be assessed and interpreted without a clear understanding of the dominant purpose they are intended to serve. It is the neglect of this dimension which has suggested to some critics that the range of representational styles must somehow reflect a variety of ways in which the world is seen. There is only one step from this assumption to the assertion of a complete cultural relativism which denies that there are standards of accuracy in visual representation because it is all a matter of convention.« Gombrich continues »Once more it is useful at this point to refer to the example of the map. For it is hard to be completely relativistic about maps. There can be mistakes in maps which can be systematically rectified. . . . This technique [surveying], moreover, has nothing to do with the way the world is seen, for the surveyor who wants to map the invariant features of a region can and will never rely on that elusive guide, his visual impression of the landscape.«⁷ Thus maps have an informational function and a representational function. They differ from pictures in not relying on appearances, but

⁶ Gombrich, E. H. (1982). »Mirror and Map: Theories of Pictorial Representation.« *The Image and the Eye*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 183.

⁷ Reinhartz, D. (1997). *The Cartographer and the Literati – Herman Moll and His Intellectual Circle*. Lewiston, MA, Edward Mellen Press, 188.

they share with pictures our need for prior information about the keys and conventions if we are to read them accurately.

The analogy between pictures and maps used by Gombrich reveals the duality in the representational qualities of maps. They are not limited to their informational function. The interesting question is whether this is simply comparable to any utilitarian object becoming an aesthetic object, or whether there is something specifically in maps that plays a role not only in their own aestheticization but in the conceptualization of the aesthetic more generally at the point in time – the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – that philosophical aesthetics takes shape. I think that the latter is the case.

II

The dual aspect of objects such as maps leads inexorably to the separation of the aesthetic and utilitarian that slowly and gradually takes place in the eighteenth century on a broad scale. David Hume and Adam Smith still regard beauty as having its roots in function and use, but by the end of the century, beauty is »all ye know and need to know.« It stands alone once again as it did in its Platonic forms, but now it is located wholly within the sensitive realm of individual feeling.

One aspect of the separation of the utilitarian and aesthetic can be seen in the way that maps are produced and used. Color serves the function of delineating areas, but its appeal goes beyond its utilitarian function because the map becomes an item of display. If one examines a typical late medieval map of Oxfordshire, for example, one finds representations of villages crowded together so that their sole use is to reinforce the written names. While the representation is pictorial, it makes little allowance for display. On the other hand, a Herman Moll map as discussed by Dennis Reinhartz⁸ is a form of display, designed as much for the eye as for guidance in location. It is an example of the engraver's art. Moll is an entrepreneur with his own shop, engraving maps for an audience that will never use them as guides to travel but wants to participate in the new knowledge that they represent. Maps assume a decorative role; they occupy a place on the wall of the Dutch burgher depicted by Vermeer not only as a representation of Dutch colonial expansion and wealth but also as a mark of taste. The new itself takes on value and confers on its owners and discoverers the kind of reputation for good taste recommended by Balthazar Gracian.⁹

⁸ Ibid., 23-28.

⁹ Gracian, B. (1945). *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*. New York, The Macmillan Company.

In renaissance painting, flora, fauna, and landscape come to play an important role in exhibiting color and form for its own sake rather than its religious and mythical significance. What begins as background becomes eventually itself the object of the painting. An eye for detail and direct observation of nature so that individual plants and places can be identified transform painting into an individual exhibition of knowledge, skill, and taste. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the decorative embroidery of maps draws another element, the newness of the unknown and its subordination to exploration and conquest, into the aesthetic realm.¹⁰ While this is only one aspect of the aestheticization of nature, it exemplifies particularly well the way that aesthetic categories emerge from the seventeenth and eighteenth cultural shifts in economy, science, and philosophy.

Out of these shifts in cultural perception and intellectual assignment of evidential importance emerges Immanuel Kant's concept of the aesthetic as a fully disinterested form of pre-theoretical and pre-practical intuition. »Interest« is a complex concept, however. Jules Lubbock points out one complication in the development of different concepts of »interest.« Lubbock distinguishes between an emerging market economy based on competitive consumption and the earlier economy based on a »stable but prosperous rural economy.«¹¹ In the latter economy, consumption by the landed gentry was a public obligation. Both private and public interest had to be defined differently than they are in the economy of competitive consumption. Lubbock observes: »It seems incorrect to say that the difference between then and now is that the 'concept of a great nobleman serving the public for duty rather than gain' did not then exist. There is strong evidence of a sense of duty amongst leading statesmen and lesser gentry. But perhaps they did not possess our clear-cut distinction between the public interest and the private interest of a leading figure who was a member of the government. This blurring of distinctions is clearly seen in Burghley's gardens, one of the rare arts in which he seems quite genuinely to have delighted, so much so that one of his few relaxations was to travel round his gardens on a donkey. Such gardens as these were ornamental, 'the purest of human pleasures ... the greatest refreshment to the spirit of man' but they also had a scientific and commercial importance.«¹² For Burghley, private consumption was a public obligation. In contrast, a new distinction between public and private interest develops in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Interest is con-

¹⁰ See, for example, the Sheldon Tapestry map of London mentioned by Jules Lubbock. Lubbock, J. (1995). *The Tyranny of Taste*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 82.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹² *Ibid.*, 68-69.

ceived as private interest, and public interest must be defended as disinterested in the private sense. One may not profit from public responsibility, but one is also not privately obligated to spend for the public good. Public life and private character are separated in a way that disturbed the third earl of Shaftesbury.¹³ Public, moral disinterestedness continues to develop into the notion of »aesthetic disinterestedness« that is finally fully conceived in the early nineteenth century.

Utilitarian objects such as gardens and maps appeal both to the eye and the ends for which they are made. But the complex relations of personal, individual pleasure, private interest, and public interest introduce tensions, particularly when private and public interest are separated by the market economy. Lubbock argues that »good design« – the valuing of an object for its quality and style – is dependent on an ideological conservatism that seeks to stabilize society by maintaining class distinctions and an agrarian, non-commercial economy. A new taste for mass-produced goods that appeal to a more common taste and the economy that makes them affordable to a wider group promotes the commercial interests of London against the country and of the lower and middle classes against the luxury-affording aristocracy.

What follows for a range of art objects and objects of pleasure is that in order for them to continue to serve their aesthetic function, they must be distanced from their utilitarian functions because aesthetic appreciation brings them into conflict with the commercial economy and its new way of distinguishing between private and public interest. In that economy, instead of luxury being a social obligation so that wealth will trickle down to the peasantry, luxury must be justified by its own ends. That cannot be done if its social consequences are considered. Esoteric, individual pleasure conflicts with social need. The demands of the masses threaten the social stability based on landed obligations to consume so that others might work. If one belongs to the rising classes, then luxury is increasingly seen as the illegitimate ends of the ancient regime that exists at the expense of the lower and middle classes. If aesthetic pleasure is to be retained by anyone, it must be reconceived as an end in its own right, freed from the interest of either luxury or utility, and that is just what the rise of modern aesthetics does.

What this means, of course, is that while aesthetic pleasure is a reality in both earlier and later ideologies, and in fact may be fairly close to a universal wherever the exigencies of survival permit, our conceptualization of

¹³ See, for example, Cooper, A. A. Earl of Shaftesbury (1964). »The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody« in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. J. M. Robertson. Indianapolis, Bobbs, Merrill. II.

it as disinterested and autonomous – the root meaning of »aesthetic« that emerges from the eighteenth-century theories – must be viewed with some skepticism. Whether one is considering gardening or maps, the utilitarian and aesthetic are not independent of each other nor of the context in which they emerge. They are, if one will allow a bit of jargon, different actualizations of possibilities inherent in aesthetic objecthood.

The case of maps is especially clear. A map is at once a picture and a guide. It is used to plan such things as gardens and new towns – to map out a landscape – and it is used to provide travel directions and conceptual schematizations of a world not immediately known. As a picture, a map invites embellishment and imagination. Herman Moll drew maps not only of real places but of imagined ones. A map's representative function is satisfied best by making it a thing to be viewed, and that easily includes viewing it independently of its guiding function.

But as a guide, it also is a conceptual scheme. The importance of different projections depends both on how they make the map look and the information that they can convey. Before satellites, no one actually was able to view the patterns and topography of the earth. How lands and routes are conceived requires a symbol-system for the mind to employ. When the unknown is labeled, »there be dragons,« more than simply a confession of ignorance is implied. One is moving into the chaos of the ill-formed from the cosmos of the ordered world. Neither as picture nor as guide is there any conflict between the functions and the pleasure that eventuates from a picture and from the ordered conceptualization of space. The purely utilitarian aspect of a travel guide may be served as well by an unembellished map as one artfully colored and decorated, but the utility itself involves conceptualization. One does not simply travel from A to B but from London to Edinburgh – places of the mind as much as geographical locations.

The tensions arise because conceptualization itself is not neutral. Terry Eagleton is right to remind us that the aesthetic autonomy that results is not itself autonomous.¹⁴ One factor in the larger picture of middle-class, mercantile appropriation of the symbols of power and art that contributes to the aestheticization of the middle class's own material interests can be found in maps used for display and decorated for aesthetic effects. Everyone can adopt this symbol of power and conquest without having to consider the actual consequences of colonial and mercantile conquest.¹⁵ If a map becomes

¹⁴ Eagleton, T. (1990). *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 3.

¹⁵ In the same context, and as a part of the same aesthetic movement, one might consider Thomas Lawrence's portrait of Queen Charlotte – at once a royal portrait in the tradition of court painting and a representation of the German hausfrau, stripped of regal trappings. (It is also an entrepreneurial effort on Lawrence's part that failed.)

a symbol of the breaking out of the old world into a wider new world; if it is connected with the making of new fortunes, independent of the old order and the old landed assignments, if it is an instrument of commerce and thus opposed to the stable, agrarian society longed for by the old order, then thinking in terms of maps and what they show is a threat to that old order. If a map belongs to a class and an economic ideology, then it is never just an autonomous conceptual structure. To hang a map on the wall or to use it as the cartoon for a tapestry is to make a statement, to identify oneself with the aspirations of the explorers and commercial interests that depend on its information. But it does so in a way that does not require the risk and danger of exploration, any more than the fictional worlds of the novel require one to experience the real vicissitudes of society. Tom Jones would certainly be hanged in that world.

Yet as a picture and as an ordering device, a map cannot be limited to a single ideology. The kind of reductionism that would make any symbol nothing more than an expression of some political or economic ideology ignores the phenomenology of the aesthetic. To save the aesthetic, therefore, one must move the symbol from its ideological and utilitarian setting. That is already implicit in the detachment that arises from display. To hang the map on the wall, to include it in a painting, to weave it into a commercial product is already to detach it from its basic informational and utilitarian function. Thus the aesthetic in its modern signification emerges from the tension between what the map is and what it must be in order to be enjoyed.

That too results in a conceptual ideology, however. Modern aesthetics is not a simple analytical detachment. The promotion of the aesthetic as an autonomous realm is a »saving of the appearances« that is fundamentally in conflict with its own origins. The result is the kind of nineteenth-century aestheticism and twentieth-century anti-social and avant-garde movements in art and philosophy that deny the context of the object. Ultimately, such detachment makes the aesthetic irrelevant and unable to fulfil the expressive function assigned to it. If we cease to care what maps are maps of, they cease to be maps. Then not only the utilitarian function but the enjoyment that belongs to their aesthetic appeal is lost.

III

What is needed is to extract from this economic, political, and ideological mix a coherent philosophical argument as well. A first attempt at that

might consider that maps and other forms of symbolic appropriation of the trappings of upper-class power are a form of symbolic action along the lines of speech-act theory or the theory of conferral advocated by George Dickie.¹⁶ They serve not merely to represent, as Gombrich argues, but also to create a relationship between an audience and what becomes a form of expression. The imitative aspect of maps, found in their utilitarian function to represent invariant properties, gives them legitimacy as forms of representation. But imitation theories of art belong to the ideal world that supports the aristocratic power structure. The rights of the aristocracy are based on a complex chain of being that gives legitimacy to their right to rule. For the new map-makers and map-users, however, the maps work to shift power to those who appreciate them. They empower the entrepreneurs, and they allow others to exhibit them and participate vicariously in this expansion of the world. As such, it is not their imitative possibilities but their expressive ones that are important. It does not matter much to the aesthetics of maps whether they are accurate or not. It matters a great deal how they look, including what they are taken to bring forward. An imaginary landscape will do as well as a real one if the object is to express and evoke feelings, so Salvatore Rosa, Claude Lorraine, and the seventeenth-century Dutch genre and landscape painters create the kind of landscape that will be picturesque. Gardens imitate art. Maps work the same way. They create an imaginary world of expansion and feelings of excitement. Then bourgeois life imitates art in this respect as well.

Underlying this analysis is something important about the relation between representation, fiction, and the functioning of language and symbols. I have argued elsewhere (without much success, it must be admitted), that metaphors and fictions work by creating quasi-imperative rules that guide the player – that is, the person who seeks to understand something metaphorical or to participate in a fictional world – and that those imperatives take precedence over the normal structure of indicative description and assertion.¹⁷ One of the basic powers of symbolic construction is this kind imperative activity that both establishes and teaches the rules by which one is allowed to understand a world. Because those rules are both constrained by reality and subject to modification arbitrarily within limits, they account for the dual nature of metaphors as at once non-literal and legitimate forms of speech. Similarly, they account for our ability to instantiate fictions and

¹⁶ Dickie, G. (1974). *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press and (1984). *The Art Circle*. New York, Haven.

¹⁷ Townsend, D. (1989). *Aesthetic Objects and Works of Art*. Wakefield, NH, Longwood Academic Press.

incorporate them into our emotional lives in spite of the absurdity pointed out by Colin Radford.¹⁸

I now suggest that in the transitional period when aesthetics becomes aesthetics in its modernist sense and ceases to be the neo-Platonic theory of beauty, the transformation of symbols of power by quasi-utilitarian forms such as maps, gardening, and royal portraiture act as part of this larger symbolic construction. They provide forms by which one is enabled to play the games coherently in a new way. Or, to adapt Dickie's vocabulary, they are part of the institutional shift that confers authority on one part of symbol users to establish new ways of using old symbols and creates new symbolic forms as well (e.g. the novel and the reading public, the bourgeois theater in place of the masque, history instead of allegory, etc.) Unlike Dickie's earlier versions of the institutional theory, I argue that not just anyone can practice this conferral. The authority required comes from the economic and material realities of a culture. But what is created as a result of that authority is itself implicated in an expanding ability to practice such conferral and to establish the rules of the metaphorical and fictional games. Those metaphors, fictions, and symbols, reciprocally, empower that portion of a culture that creates them.

The important thing is to recognize that this is not simply a cultural relativism. It all takes place within very real constraints. Some of those constraints are physical – as physical as the plague that undermined the medieval synthesis or the map-maker's surveys. Other constraints are economic, the no less real constraints of the theories and systems of exchange and wealth. Art exists in every situation thus far known to us. The aesthetic theories that arise in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries supply one form of art and appreciation, one based on individual sensibility and aesthetic autonomy. That does not make that appreciation and autonomy any less real, however. One cannot do everything at any time. But at any time, there will be something that art is capable of doing. I am arguing that if we look at what is actually happening in the artworld in relation to its economic, cultural, and social context and simultaneously at the way that representational and referential systems work, we will be able to see, judge, and appreciate the art that belongs to that particular artworld. That is at once the timelessness and the timeliness of art. It is not bound by its point of creation, but it depends on that point for its concrete form, and without that concrete form, there is no art.

¹⁸ Radford, C. (1975). »How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?« *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 49: 67-80 and Radford, C. (1977). »Tears and Fictions.« *Philosophy* 52: 208-213.

Maps are thus both one of the ways that we determine what is actually happening and one of the clearest instances of how it can happen. It would have been pointless and unthinkable to treat maps as objects of decoration for the bourgeois until the bourgeois were in a position to change the economic and political rules. Once they were, maps also become a means of advancing the new order, including a new aesthetic sensibility. One might compare them to what goes on with book illumination as it moves from sacred to royal and then profane contexts and finally issues in the traveling libraries and reader subscriptions of a reading public. The aesthetics of disinterestedness and aesthetic attitudes is at once the reality and the ideology of that new, modernist order.

