

The Ethics of Aesthetics

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Abstract. The article explores the relationships between aesthetics, ethics, and new media art by discussing the process, influences, and consequences of aesthetic judgements. The text proposes that the aesthetic judgements of artworks created in any medium, including new media, function as mechanisms for propagating certain ethical values.

Keywords: aesthetics, ethics, promotion, new media art, function of art

1 Introduction

When an artwork is examined according to its mechanism, we pursue an understanding of what it is. When an artwork is examined according to its function, we pursue an understanding of what it does. This article will outline a perspective for distinguishing the function from the mechanism of artworks created in any medium, including those created with new media technologies. Using this perspective, the text will explore the relationships between aesthetics, ethics, and new media art by discussing how people decide that particular artworks are good, the influences of their aesthetic judgements, and the consequences of their judgements.

2 Aesthetics

A primary goal in the field of aesthetics is to investigate *aesthetic judgements*, the decisions people make when they decide “What is art?” and “What is good art?” [1] Although some writings on aesthetics are prescriptive in their approach, this text will not provide a precise definition of good art, nor will it advise readers to use specific criteria for judging art. Instead, it will discuss how people make aesthetic judgements.

The Institutional Theory of Art, set forth by George Dickie in 1974, proposed that “works of art are art as the result of the position or place they occupy within an established practice, the artworld.” [2] According to this theory, the established network of curators, galleries, and museums that sell and exhibit professional artworks are responsible for determining what is art and what is not. The classification used within this text is derived from Dickie’s theory: a work will be designated as an artwork according to its capacity to promote the artworld, providing it with more prestige, power, or whatever the artworld considers valuable. Using this classification, the specific aesthetic features within a work, its medium, and its style are less indicative of a work being art than its capacity to promote something within the artworld.

A primary problem that results from using a specific aesthetic criterion for judging the quality of an artwork is the evaluation of the criterion itself. If beauty is selected as a primary aesthetic criterion, the evaluation of an artwork's quality is determined by the definition of beauty. The primary aesthetic question "What is good art?" becomes dependent on the question "What is beauty?" The subjectivity of defining good art is replaced with the subjectivity of defining beauty.

In this text, the subjectivity of aesthetic judgements is acknowledged by replacing the primary questions of aesthetics with the following: "What are the criteria for something to be art?" and "What are the criteria for something to be good art?"

2.1 The Process of Aesthetic Judgement

The *process of aesthetic judgement* is a conceptual model that describes how people decide on the quality of artworks created in new or traditional media. The model examines how people decide if artworks are good or bad, if they have high aesthetic value or low. The model is a conceptual tool for enhancing a person's ability to recognize the function of aesthetic judgements. Although the model considers aesthetic judgements to be fundamentally subjective, it outlines a general process that can be applied to judgements of art created in any style or medium.

Some readers may argue that objectivity exists in the judgement of art because they believe that certain aesthetic perspectives are inherently better than others, such as the notion of "disinterested attention." [3] This text will not present any aesthetic perspective as being inherently better than another, but it will provide information pertaining to why certain perspectives are portrayed as being better.

An artwork is comprised of a collection of characteristics called aesthetic features that can influence a person's liking or disliking of an artwork, its aesthetic value. [4] The loudness of sound, a particular sound editing software, or a work's production costs can all be aesthetic features within a sound installation. A broad definition of aesthetic features is used to support the perspective that a compositional element is any characteristic of an artwork that can influence aesthetic judgements, including characteristics that some writers consider to be context or extrinsic features.

The specific qualities that a person associates with good artworks are determined by a person's aesthetic perspective, an idiosyncratic collection of criteria that defines which aesthetic features must be present for artworks to be judged as good. The judgement of an artwork is dependent on its aesthetic features and the aesthetic perspective used by a person for judging it. Using this model, disagreements on the aesthetic value of a work are viewed as the consequences of people using different aesthetic perspectives.

An aesthetic judgement is a decision made by an individual regarding the aesthetic value, the quality, of an artwork. The outcome of an aesthetic judgement is expressed through observable expressions of aesthetic judgements, such as a person speaking positively about a work or purposely reexperiencing an artwork. Aesthetic judgements are created by the fulfillment or lack of fulfillment of the aesthetic criteria contained within a person's aesthetic perspective. When a person makes an aesthetic judgement, the fulfillment of a specific criterion does not always increase the aesthetic value of a work. Some people may use beauty as a negative aesthetic criterion within their

aesthetic perspective: the recognition of beauty within a work decreases a work's aesthetic value. For other persons, beauty could be a positive aesthetic criterion: the recognition of beauty within a work increases a work's aesthetic value. When a positive aesthetic criterion is fulfilled, the judgement of a work moves towards a positive aesthetic value. When a negative aesthetic criterion is fulfilled, the judgement moves towards a negative aesthetic value. The outcome of an aesthetic judgement can be viewed as a summation of fulfilled criteria, each criterion having a different direction and degree of influence on a work's aesthetic value.

2.2 Influences of Aesthetic Judgements

Imagine a person who has a large amount of knowledge about video technologies. This person will understand the technology of a video work in more depth than someone who does not. Consequently, aesthetic features related to video technologies are more likely to be apparent for this person. A person with technical knowledge of digital video formats, for example, may prefer certain formats to others. People who lack this knowledge cannot use an aesthetic criterion that responds to this feature because they lack the knowledge for distinguishing different digital video formats. Similarly, a person who has knowledge about ancient mythologies might prefer works depicting Greek deities to Roman, but a person having no knowledge of ancient mythologies is unable to distinguish any difference between Greek or Roman.

Although it is obvious that people's aesthetic criteria are related to their personal knowledge, people are unable to use certain criteria if they lack knowledge corresponding to those criteria. Because particular aesthetic features become important to a person according to personal knowledge, a person's liking for a particular artwork can be based on aesthetic features that are irrelevant to someone else. Video formats and mythology may not seem like comparable aesthetic features, but both can be used within people's aesthetic perspectives.

Aesthetic judgements can be influenced by any factor that affects the components of a person's aesthetic perspective: the limits of human perception, context, familiarity, personal values, personal motivation, persuasion, and personal knowledge. Personal knowledge exerts an important influence on aesthetic judgements by determining which aesthetic features have the potential to fulfill a person's aesthetic criteria.

Philosophical investigations into the nature of knowledge are typically based on a combination of logic and empiricism. Traditional approaches to epistemology usually define knowledge as a "justified true belief." [5] A belief refers to any idea that a person believes to be true, such as a person believing that "Vincent Van Gogh was a painter from the nineteenth century." A belief becomes justified when it is supported by reason or evidence, such as documentation justifying Van Gogh's existence and activities as a painter. Many theories of truth have been proposed and perhaps the most popular is the *correspondence theory of truth*, [6] which states that a belief is true only if it corresponds with reality. Using this theory, the belief stated in the above example would be true only if Van Gogh really was a painter from the nineteenth century.

The problematic aspect of the correspondence theory of truth is its assumption of an objective reality. Proving the existence of an objective reality is difficult—if not impossible—because the human sensory system is supposedly the only manner that we have for experiencing reality. Coincidentally, a similar problem pertains to theories regarding Van Gogh’s preference for using yellow paint. One theory proposes that his love of the liquor absinthe caused him to have yellow vision, thereby affecting his painting. [7] The questionable aspect of this theory is its assumption that Van Gogh had two pairs of eyes: one pair influenced by absinthe, while the other pair were unaffected and objective. If Van Gogh’s vision was affected in a manner that caused him to perceive certain colours of his world as yellow, his perception of paint would be affected in the same manner. If he perceived brown trees as being yellow, and he only had one pair of eyes, he would have also perceived brown paint as yellow.

Proving objectivity in human perception is problematic because any evidence supporting it must presumably be interpreted through the human sensory system. In acknowledgement of this dilemma, this text will use a phenomenological approach to knowledge by considering truth to be based on human perception rather than objective reality. Consequently, the term personal knowledge will refer to what a person believes to be true, regardless of those beliefs being justified logically or empirically.

Aesthetic perspectives are strongly influenced by personal knowledge because people’s beliefs are often the basis for their aesthetic criteria, even when those beliefs are inaccurate or false. A person who believes that complexity is always better than simplicity, for example, might use an aesthetic criterion corresponding with that belief. In order for a person to indisputably know that a belief is true, that person needs sufficient and accurate information supporting the belief and an ability to comprehend that information. Obtaining accurate and sufficient knowledge about any topic can be time consuming, difficult, or expensive.

Psychologist Elliot Aronson proposes that people hold false beliefs because they are overwhelmed with information, or because they lack the motivation and resources to determine what is empirically true. He states that we are “cognitive misers,” that we conserve our mental energy by “ignoring some information to reduce our cognitive load, or we overuse other information to keep from having to search for more.” [8]

3 Aesthetics and Ethics

Within the field of ethics, the terms moral values, moral principles, and human values refer to the specific human behaviors that people consider desirable and good. A person who holds honesty as a moral value, for instance, will speak honestly with all people. The complication regarding ethics is that people often disagree about which behaviors should be endorsed as moral values, such as abortion, capital punishment, or same-sex marriages. Philosopher Peter Singer states, “The problem is not so much to know ‘the difference between right and wrong’ as to decide what is right and what is wrong.” [9]

Even when people agree to adopt a specific moral value, they may disagree on when it should be used. Deontological theories of ethics propose that people should use moral values consistently, regardless of the consequences of their use. In contrast, teleological theories of ethics—also called consequentialism—consider the use of moral values to be dependent on the desired consequences. Consider the moral value that states a person should never be aggressive with other people. If a deranged person attacked a group of innocent people, a person who uses this value in a teleological manner may find it ethically acceptable to aggress and stop the attack of the deranged person. In contrast, people who use this value in a deontological manner may consider it unacceptable to harm the attacker because they are opposed to harming people under any circumstances.

Because of their disregard for consequences, deontological theories of ethics are similar to inherent aesthetic theories in that they both have little or no regard for the consequences of the experience being judged. Inherent aesthetic theories consider a particular aesthetic perspective to be appropriate in all situations, while consequential aesthetic theories permit the adoption of an aesthetic perspective according to the consequences that are desired. Teleological theories of ethics are similar to consequential aesthetic theories because they both consider consequences. The director of a private art gallery who prefers artworks that are potentially salable when they are intended for exhibition in the gallery, but prefers artworks that are beautiful when they are intended for personal enjoyment is using a consequential approach to aesthetics.

3.1 Aesthetics and Attitudes

In the field of social psychology, *functional attitude theories* examine the relationships between people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. [10] Within these theories, beliefs are defined as the concepts that people accept as being true. People can hold beliefs on any conceivable topic, including those pertaining to themselves, other people, tangible objects, or abstract concepts. A person, for instance, may hold the belief that "pizza is a food."

An attitude is defined as an evaluative judgement made by a person that expresses a degree of liking or disliking for an attitude object. An *attitude object* can be any concrete or abstract concept, such as a certain type of food, another person, a concept, or a particular artwork. If a person holds the attitude "pizza is a good food," the attitude object is the pizza.

The relationships between beliefs, attitudes, and attitude objects are similar to the relationships between aesthetic criteria, aesthetic judgements, and artworks. An aesthetic criterion is a person's belief, such as "good art is beautiful," an aesthetic judgement is a person's attitude, such as "this artwork is good," and the artwork being judged is the attitude object.

The core concept of functional attitude theories is that people hold specific attitudes because they are motivated to obtain certain goals through those attitudes. The theories propose that a person will hold a certain attitude not because it is objectively true, but because it serves a desired function for that person. A new media artist who writes software for his artworks, for example, might believe and tell other

people that “good new media art uses artist written code.” Functional attitude theories would propose that the artist is using this particular criterion, or attitude, because he wants other people to judge his work as being good. Similarly, a person who wants to be considered as an intellectual may prefer a style of artwork that is considered to be intellectual. Five general functions of attitudes have been proposed by these theories: to seek award or avoid punishment, to obtain a perspective for understanding the world, to defend the ego, to express personal values, or to obtain membership in a particular social group. [10]

Functional attitude theories propose that attitudes are instrumental at providing psychological benefits to the holders of the attitudes and that the “...primary benefit lies not in the attitude object being evaluated but in the expression of the attitude.” [11] This finding implies that the function of art is not determined by the specific aesthetic features within artworks—the attitude objects—but rather through the aesthetic judgements of artworks.

3.2 Aesthetic Judgements and Entities

The term entity refers to anything “...which is perceived or known or inferred to have its own distinct existence (living or nonliving).” [12] An entity can be a person, a physical object, or an intangible concept, such as integrity. A conceptual entity refers to the existence of a specific concept, such as “good art is meaningful” or “selfishness is good.” Conceptual entities are strengthened by becoming known and admired by more people, and similar to beliefs, the existence of a conceptual entity is determined by it being known by people rather than it being objectively true. Ethical values are conceptual entities because they are essentially ideas. They differ from other concepts, however, because they designate how people behave in relation to each other. The notion of a conceptual entity is similar to the idea of a meme. [13]

A personal entity refers to a particular person whose existence is determined by the presence of particular personal attributes. A social entity refers to a specific organization of people, such as a university, a business organization, an art museum, or a city. Aesthetic judgements are designated as mechanisms that have potential to promote or undermine specific conceptual, personal, or social entities. Aesthetic judgements can contribute to the strength of specific entities by enhancing their popularity, social status, authority, financial worth, or any other characteristic considered valuable. This perspective considers audiences to have a very important role in the function of media because their aesthetic judgements determine which entities will be promoted and, consequently, which values will be propagated through media.

A social entity is an organized group of people who share similar beliefs and values, such as particular families, cities, or business organizations. The strength of a social entity is determined by the presence and strength of attributes that it considers as valuable. If popularity, size, authority, and financial worth are considered important attributes for a social entity, the enhancement of any of these features become an increase in the entity’s strength. By using aesthetic criteria that correspond to the values of a social entity, a person can enhance that social entity through aesthetic judgements. A person who likes artworks exhibited at museum X promotes

the concept that “museum X exhibits good artworks.” This belief strengthens the museum financially because the person will likely pay to visit the museum. Attendance at this museum will be increased by the person’s visits and this person may also recommend the museum to other people, both enhancing the museum’s popularity and financial strength.

The particular social entities being reinforced through judgements of new media artworks are determined by the aesthetic criteria used for judging those works. If new media artworks are judged according to technological criteria—such as the newness of the technology—strength is provided to social entities that manufacture and sell the newest technologies. Similarly, if new media artworks are judged according to the presence of an established style, strength is provided to whoever acknowledges, promotes or originated that style, including specific artists, curators, museums, writers, and collectors. And if artworks are judged according to where they have been exhibited, strength is provided to the galleries, museums and festivals that are considered desirable. The positive beliefs that people hold regarding specific social entities function as mechanisms that promote those entities.

3.3 Promotion

The term promotion is used in reference to any action that contributes to the advancement, strength, or prosperity of a conceptual, personal, or social entity. Paying to see a commercial film can be a promotion for the studio that made the film. Liking minimalist art can be a promotion for the conceptual entity “minimalist art is good.” Telling a friend that you like a specific artist’s work can be a promotion for that artist, a personal entity. And attending an exhibition at a specific museum can be a promotion for that museum, a social entity. Even if a person dislikes an exhibition at an art museum, the person’s visit has contributed to the museum’s attendance records and ticket sales. A complicated aspect of promotion is that some people may be unaware how their actions are enhancing entities or which entities are being promoted.

Individual persons can have different relationships with promotion: as instigators, profiteers, carriers, or targets. Instigators of promotion are the persons or institutions that initiate the strategy of a particular promotion. The most apparent examples of instigators are advertising firms that are hired by manufacturers to promote their products through advertising. Less obvious examples are news writers who promote certain biases within newspapers and television news programs. A common term for the instigator of a promotion is a spin doctor.

The profiteer of promotion refers to an entity that profits through a particular promotion. Promotion can enhance an entity by providing it with more popularity, status, revenue, or whatever is considered valuable by that entity. The profiteer and instigator of a promotion may be the same person or organization, though it is common for a profiteer to hire an instigator.

Carriers of promotion are persons or organizations that carry out promotions, such as salespersons, athletes who wear corporate identities on their uniforms and equipment, or consumers who buy t-shirts bearing the logos of commercial products. Carriers of a promotion may not always profit from the promotion, and they may not

always realize their function as such. Athletes who bear corporate logos are undoubtedly aware of their function and they are probably receiving compensation as well, but people who wear clothing emblazoned with the names of their favorite corporations, cities, or music groups may be unaware of their function as unpaid promoters.

When people are carriers of promotion, they can provide a promotional mechanism in the form of spoken words, written text, articles of clothing, or whatever—including tattoos of logos on their bodies. [14] A teenager who boasts to friends about owning a particular brand of sneakers is a carrier of promotion for that manufacturer. Similarly, an academic who consistently teaches and writes about a particular style of artwork is a carrier of promotion for the entities associated with that style. Although it is unavoidable to be a carrier of promotion, because certain entities are always promoted through words and actions, people can consciously decide which entities they decide to promote.

A target of promotion is the person or entity that provides a specific form of profit to the profiteer. Voters within an election are the target of a newspaper article that provides a favorable depiction of a political candidate, and computer consumers are the target for a t-shirt bearing the name of a computer manufacturer.

3.5 Media Subterfuges

Media subterfuges refer to media content that is created or distributed for reasons other than what an audience believes, or for reasons other than what is proclaimed by the producers and promoters of the content. A common example of a media subterfuge is a specific product appearing in a commercial film because the manufacture of the product has paid for its inclusion, an advertising strategy called product placement. This text proposes that the general function of all media is to strengthen particular entities, but which entities are being strengthened will be unclear to audiences when media subterfuges are used. Media subterfuges are often successful because they fulfill the desires of an intended entity, such as the manufacturers of a specific product, and also the desires of an audience.

A popular strategy for accomplishing a media subterfuge is to encourage audiences to use the aesthetic criteria that will ensure the goal of a subterfuge. Filmgoers may be encouraged through television talk shows to judge commercial films according to their use of celebrity actors, which only large film studios can afford. Another strategy for a media subterfuge is the creation of content that fulfills an audience's existing aesthetic criteria while concurrently fulfilling the goals of the producers or distributors of that content. A documentary video about the impoverishment of a particular country may appeal to audiences who hold humanistic values, but the film may have been created to enhance the reputation of the director, to promote a political party who funded the production, or as a mechanism for attracting large audiences and, subsequently, large advertising revenues for the broadcasters of the video.

Although many people are aware of media subterfuges being used within commercial media, such as product placement, its use with fine art media may be less obvious. When an art museum exhibits particular artworks, its audience may believe that the works are being exhibited because they are objectively good. My research

interviews with curators disclosed that various reasons might exist for exhibiting specific artworks, including nepotism, exchanging opportunities, enhancing the reputation of the gallery, or enhancing the reputation of an institution associated with the artist being exhibited.

As more people become aware of advertising strategies, covert forms of persuasion have become increasingly popular, such as product placement and viral advertising. The common feature of these and other forms of stealth advertising is that they do not appear to be persuasion. Examples of viral advertising are certain video files that are shared by friends through email or posted on personal websites. These videos are often macabre, humorous or sexual, and they usually have a reference to a commercial product, though the actual association with the manufacturer of the depicted product is uncertain.

So the item of the day on advertising blogs everywhere has been this disturbing viral Volkswagen ad. It shows, if you can believe it, a suicide bomber driving up to a café in a VW Polo and trying to detonate a car bomb. But he manages to blow only himself up—the sporty little roadster absorbs the blast, proving that it is “small but tough.” As if we needed it, we have gotten official word that neither VW nor any of its agencies (including DDB, its lead shop in Europe) had anything to do with this. It is indeed a hoax. Move on, please. Nothing to see here. *Adfreak.com blog*. [15]

4 Conclusion

The conclusion of this article is that aesthetic judgements of art function as mechanisms for promoting specific conceptual, personal, and social entities. An entity can be an abstract concept, an ethical value, a specific person, or an organized social institution with cultural, business, or political responsibilities. The aesthetic criteria used by people for judging artworks—rather than artworks’ aesthetic features—determine which entities are promoted through aesthetic judgements. Some people, however, may be unaware of which entities are being promoted through their judgements because of a lack of knowledge or awareness, or because media subterfuges are being used. This article has avoided stating which specific entities are being promoted through aesthetic judgements because the intention is to provide a perspective that enables readers to determine these relationships for themselves.

By understanding the ethical consequences of compositional decisions and aesthetic judgements, artists and audiences can have increased responsibility for the propagation of ethical values, the concepts that dictate which behaviors we deem appropriate and which we do not. Without this awareness, a person might promote any value whatsoever through aesthetic judgements. Having an awareness of the influences and consequences of aesthetic judgements is desirable because it enables a person to promote specific values with intention.

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