

Interdisciplinary Aesthetics

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Is aesthetics a branch of philosophy, or is it inevitably an interdisciplinary field of enquiry? Here I shall argue that it is properly both, depending on which aspect one concentrates at any given time. I shall also contend that when aesthetics is practiced as philosophy it can only succeed insofar as its exponents also acknowledge the existence of aesthetics as an interdisciplinary field.

Let us begin by looking briefly at aesthetics as a purely philosophical practice in relation to other branches of the discipline. The philosopher Alex Neill has examined some of the factors that have led to the relative marginalization and isolation of aesthetics within contemporary philosophy.¹ Philosophers of art and aesthetics have all experienced the disdain of philosophers in other fields for their chosen area of enquiry. I recall a philosopher of mind telling me that he expected the paper a colleague was about to deliver at a session jointly organized by the American Society for Aesthetics (ASA) and another organization at a recent ASA annual meeting to be “far too technically difficult” to be understood by the mere aestheticians who predominated. Although educated as a historian and art historian rather than as a philosopher, I have moved in philosophy

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¹ Alex Neill, “The Isolation of the American Society for Aesthetics,” *American Society for Aesthetics Newsletter* 24, 1 (2004): 1-2.

circles long enough to be discomforted by such sentiments. After all, not only is aesthetics as intellectually challenging as any human being can dare to make it, but most of us concerned with it have to be, and indeed wish to be, at least competent, and ideally excellent, in other, more reputedly muscular branches of philosophy. Furthermore, the partitions dividing areas of intellectual endeavor are far from impermeable, so philosophers cannot practice aesthetics in mental isolation from their other concerns. We all know, then, that the disdain of specialists in other philosophical fields is misplaced. Nonetheless, Neill's point that aestheticians need to take the initiative in cultivating contacts with them is well taken.

Surely Neill is also correct when he expresses fear that the development of aesthetics as an independent discipline, which he ascribes to several of the founding fathers of the ASA as their ideal, would lead to its estrangement from philosophy more generally. Yet just as dangerous for our capacity to think creatively as any fissure of aesthetics from the rest of philosophy, is our acquiescence in, or even encouragement of, fissiparous tendencies within aesthetics itself. When proponents of analytical ideals and advocates of continental theories no longer converse constructively with one another, all are losers. The philosopher Casey Haskins has eloquently argued that aesthetics "exhibits an identifying integrity not in spite of, but on account of, the divergent ways in which its participants talk or write."² Its very disunity, rather than any pretended coherence, is its strength, for this allows aesthetics to function as a network in which filaments can occasionally reticulate in unlikely yet productive ways: Kristeva, Lacan, and Kant appealed to in the same breath, for instance. Haskins points to the Oxford *Encyclopedia*

² Casey Haskins, "The Disunity of Aesthetics: A Response to J.G.A. Pocock," *Common Knowledge* 11, 2, 2005.

of *Aesthetics*, edited by Michael Kelly, as the cynosure of a practice of aesthetics that values, as he puts it, “not simply knowledge that comes from collaborations among researchers who share vocabularies, methodologies, and even ideologies, but also knowledge that comes from interactions and confrontations among colleagues who do not recognize the legitimacy of one another’s work.”

Aesthetics thrives not only when it is internally connected (however various and mutually antipathetic its constituents), and when it is connected with other fields of philosophy, but also with other areas of enquiry and professional practice, notably but not exclusively the critical disciplines of the human sciences. The fact that the ASA is “an association for aesthetics, criticism, and theory of the arts,” and that its journal is not only of aesthetics but also of art criticism, should remind us of the advantages of permeability among fields not only within philosophy, but between philosophy and the critical disciplines. Further, the editorial statement of the online journal, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, launched in 2003 under the editorship of Arnold Berleant, states, “In recent years aesthetics has grown into a rich and varied discipline. Its scope has widened to embrace ethical, social, religious, environmental, and cultural concerns. As international communication increases through more frequent congresses and electronic communication, varied traditions have joined with its historically interdisciplinary character, making aesthetics a focal center of diverse and multiple interests.”³ I propose that we read these rubrics not as calls for aesthetics to be an independent discipline at a distance from philosophy more generally, but rather as calls for aesthetics to be a collaborative project that benefits not only from substantive exchanges within

³ <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/>.

philosophy, but also with practitioners from other disciplines ranging across the alphabet from anthropology to zoology.

In proposing that aesthetics not only benefits from interdisciplinary exchange, but that it must necessarily be pursued in the light of interdisciplinary concerns, I should like to apply the principle of aspect viewing to aesthetics. Clearly, not only does aesthetics admit numerous interpretations of its objects of study, but the field itself is amenable to more than one interpretation. For instance, sometimes we might legitimately see it as a branch of philosophy, while at others we might see it, rather, as defined by the intersection of various disciplines, philosophy among them. In this respect, aesthetics is like Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous ambiguous image that can be seen alternately as a duck and as a rabbit (Fig. 1).⁴ Let us suppose the disciplinary equivalent of the image as a duck to be aesthetics as a specialist field within a particular discipline: aesthetics, that is, as a sub-discipline of philosophy. Much is to be gained from the focus afforded by the progressive concentration upon philosophical questions peculiar to the field as aestheticians refine them from others specific to philosophy more generally. We can take the equivalent of the image as a rabbit, on the other hand, to be aesthetics as an interdisciplinary endeavor. As such, it is a mode of enquiry no less dependent upon the critical disciplines than on distinctively philosophical procedures. We cannot do both simultaneously—pursue aesthetics as pure philosophy, and as interdisciplinary combination—just as we cannot

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, the German text, with a revised English translation, 3rd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), II, xi, 165-67 (1st edn. 1953), attributes the prototype of his simplified line drawing to Joseph Jastrow, *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1900) although Jastrow had published it the previous year in his article, "The Mind's Eye," *Popular Science Monthly* 54, 1899, 299-312; whereas E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 5th edn. (London: Phaidon, 1977), 4-5 (1st edn. 1960), who in his discussion of the image cites the first edition of Wittgenstein, ascribes it to "the humorous weekly *Die Fliegenden Blätter*" (published in Munich between 1845 and 1944) as reproduced by Norma V. Scheidemann, *Experiments in General Psychology*, enlarged edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 67, fig. 21 (1st edn. 1929).

see the duck and rabbit other than as alternatives to one another. Whereas in his discussion of the image, Ernst Gombrich adheres to a purely binary conception of the perceptual process concerned—“the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly will we discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time”—Wittgenstein conceives of our perception of both aspects as itself being affected by alternating between them: “The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception’s being unchanged.”

Wittgenstein’s claim would seem to promise a great deal for aesthetics, for while it might be productive in various respects either to pursue aesthetics as philosophy alone, or to pursue aesthetics as an interdisciplinary endeavor, to see both of these courses of action necessarily affecting one another as a condition of pursuing either satisfactorily would surely be an advance on simply making a choice to follow one or the other exclusively. In other words, however purely and exclusively philosophical one wishes to be in making aesthetic enquiries, one cannot wholly ignore the claims of other disciplines, just as one cannot *not* be aware of the existence of the rabbit aspect of the duck-rabbit image when one concentrates on the duck aspect once one knows the latter to be a possible interpretation. To see only the duck aspect would be either a failure of perception or a culpably willful suppression. By any reckoning, then, aesthetics must be an interdisciplinary endeavor, whether one chooses to pursue it as such, or to eschew other disciplinary concerns as far as possible in favor of purely philosophical matters. This is not to claim that some people’s practice of aesthetics cannot quite properly be preponderantly philosophical—duck-like—only that that very ducklikeness is necessarily affected by the philosopher’s knowledge of the existence of rabbitlikeness—the concerns

of other disciplines—and, if that philosophy is to be cogent and to sustain critical scrutiny, it cannot ignore every consequence of the existence of those rabbitlike concerns.

What, then, is the broader consequence of this claim? Sadly, it is that philosophers who broach aesthetic issues in ignorance of the proper concerns—procedures and information—of those in other disciplines that discuss the same material must fail. Perhaps it is a consolation to philosophers that the same holds true in the other direction: that those in the critical disciplines who discuss aesthetics in ignorance of philosophy germane to their concerns will also fail. Philosophy and the critical disciplines are not alternative epistemological modes, the one as good as the other in some relative manner. The claims each one makes either satisfy scrutiny from the other disciplinary point of view, however secondary it may be in any given instance, or they do not. (We must, of course, resist the temptation of claiming that philosophy is a metadiscipline whose preoccupations and procedures trump those of all other disciplines. It simply cannot be conducted successfully in ignorance of the lessons of other disciplines. Neither does philosophy comprehend all useful thought.)

We are left with the conclusion that, however apparently philosophically exclusive any given pursuit of aesthetics may be—and it is clearly quite proper to pursue aesthetics as a branch of philosophy—the very fact that it is amenable to pursuit in an explicitly interdisciplinary manner entails modification of the first alternative such as to render it implicitly interdisciplinary, just as the second alternative must be rendered implicitly philosophical. Neither aspect of aesthetics—the purely philosophical and the interdisciplinary—can properly exist wholly independent of the other wherever one chooses to expend one's effort.

I hope to have demonstrated, first, that aesthetics is always at the very least implicitly interdisciplinary, and, second, that in spite of being so one can pursue it from within philosophy, although in that case it would be greatly to the advantage of everyone interested in aesthetics to do so on a broad intellectual front. This is not to claim that everyone in aesthetics must master every pertinent contributory discipline: that would be unrealistic and absurd. Yet if the claims that philosophers make in the realm of aesthetics are to find a wider audience, and thus to inform thought more generally, those claims must be plausible to practitioners of other disciplines who also make claims about the same or similar topics.

For example, the later paintings of Piet Mondrian are amenable to discussion in terms of two-dimensional, rectilinear patterns, and anyone is free to discuss them as such. This may be one of their most interesting characteristics amenable to aesthetic consideration by philosophers. However, any such consideration that fails to take into account other characteristics of these paintings, such as their three-dimensionality, as manifested by their supports, layering of paints, revisions, surface facture, development of craquelure, may seem to be no more than a discussion of abstractions from the paintings—derivative artifacts, no less—rather than of the paintings themselves.⁵ Such discussion is open to the suspicion that the selection of Mondrian’s patterns for consideration in isolation from their actual material embodiment, was made in ignorance of the possible roles—or even existence—of the neglected features, rather than as the result of informed choice. This is not to claim that the salient feature of these works for a particular aesthetic discussion

⁵ For instance, compare John Brown, “Mondrian’s Balance” posted at <http://www.philosophy.umd.edu/Faculty/jhbrown/mondriansbalance/index.html>, with Ron Spronk, “Revealing Revisions: The Transatlantic Paintings in the Laboratory,” in Harry Cooper and Ron Spronk, *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 67-106.

may not legitimately be their patterns, but in an important sense any such discussion in isolation is likely to fail a test of interdisciplinary adequacy.

It is worth reiterating that interdisciplinarity is a matter of exchange, not correction. Practitioners of human science disciplines have much to learn from the precision of argument and marshalling of abstractions that aestheticians and other philosophers bring to their topics. The ASA is the ideal forum for such exchanges, not only within aesthetics and within philosophy more generally, but also among philosophers and exponents of other disciplines. To foster such exchanges would not only accord expediently with many of the demands being made on us within our institutions to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries in research and teaching, but would bring innumerable intellectual and even affective benefits, as well as constituting an active and practical acknowledgement of the necessarily interdisciplinary character of aesthetics.

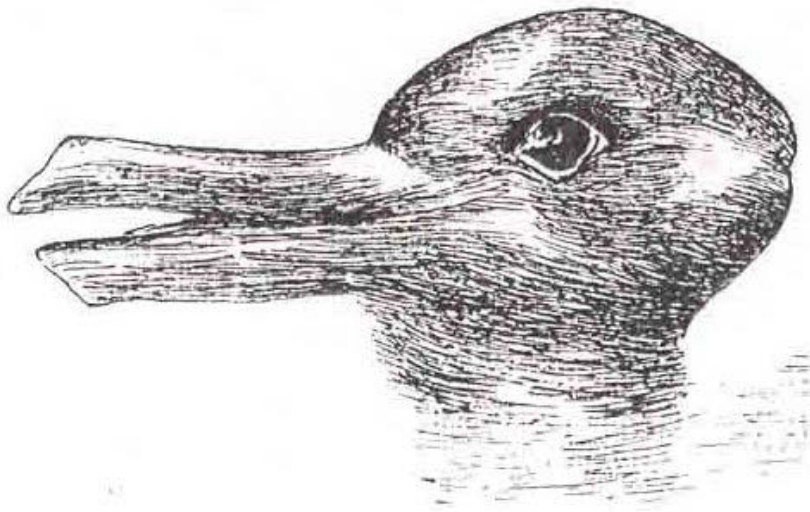


Fig. 1 *Duck-Rabbit Illusion*, from: Joseph Jastrow, “The Mind’s Eye,” *Popular Science Monthly* 54, 1899, 299-312. Media file in the public domain.
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