

# The Promiscuity of Aesthetics

Paul Duncum

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Recently, art educators have debated the value of aesthetics in art education (Duncum, 2007; Tavin, 2007; Tavin, Duncum, Lankford & Parsons; Barrett, Tavin & Duncum, 2007). Kevin Tavin initiated the debate by arguing that aesthetics, as it is used in art education, has so many meanings, which are often contradictory, it is often difficult to know what is meant by it. His solutions are to either drop the use of the word *aesthetics* in favor of the language of representation or always to make its use problematic.

I support Tavin's espousal of representation and his contention that the multiple and often contradictory meanings of aesthetics is confusing. The original aesthetic proposal that emerged from England and Germany during the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was highly ambiguous (Eagleton, 1990), and art educators, on the one hand who attack it for being elitist and reactionary (Tavin, 2007; jagodzinski, 1981) or on the other hand defend it for its socially progressive values (Barrett, 2008; Freedman, 2003; Stewart, 1997), echo its origins as a deeply conflicted concept.

Notwithstanding these complications, I contend that the concept of aesthetics lies at the very heart of the art educational enterprise, albeit significantly reconfigured. I begin by offering a highly potted, historical overview of aesthetics that while it supports Tavin's view of aesthetics as a confused and confusing concept, demonstrates how important it remains. My intention is not to support aesthetics as part of a progressive socio-political agenda, as many art educators do, but because the word *aesthetics* is today used extensively beyond our specialized area of art education to conceptualize the sensuousness of contemporary cultural forms. A brief investigation of books and articles on today's cultural forms indicates that, as Williams (1976) noted 30 years ago, apart from its specialized use in art and literature, "aesthetics is now in common use to refer to questions of visual appearance and effect" (p. 28). This usage is freed from Modernist associations of formalism and transcendence; rather, it echoes the original Greek origins of aesthetics as *aisthesis*, which meant sense data in general. For the Greeks, *aisthesis* was a very general concept meant to distinguish between what could be seen and what could only be imagined (Eagleton, 1990). This very broad meaning of aesthetics as sensation is implied in the opposite idea of anesthetic, the deprivation of sensation.

In what follows the tone is playful, but the intention is serious; I seek to embrace contemporary cultural life insofar as it is being conceptualized as aesthetic in disciplines beyond our own specialized area (Mitchell, 2005), and thereby situate art education as crucial to today's cultural life. Because aesthetics is central to a consumer society, art education can by such means engage with the world of our students.

## Promiscuity to the Max

No less an authority on aesthetics than Immanuel Kant (1764/1965) described the two main aesthetic categories of his time, the sublime and the beautiful, in clear-cut gendered

terms. For Kant, the sublime was masculine, the beautiful, feminine. Shortly after Kant wrote the sublime fell out of favor; it was almost completely sidelined by beauty (Gilbert & Khun, 1953), and today ordinary language dictionaries often define aesthetics simply as beauty and usually fail even to mention the sublime. In consideration of this I had thought of referring to aesthetics as feminine, but considering some of the things I am about to say about aesthetics this seemed open to serious misrepresentation. So, I will refer to aesthetics as androgynous. Aesthetics as androgynous is further to be preferred because today in both institutional art making and contemporary cultural critique notions of the sublime and the beautiful are equally fully back in favor (e.g., Brand, 2000; Mirzoeff, 1999). Yet I make this point about the original, dual gender of aesthetics because gender is only one example of where he/she deals with both hands at once. Aesthetics is virtuous, but also full of vice. He/she has played many parts: a virgin, but equally a whore. A prophet, priest/priestess, and a prostitute, aesthetics has been all of these, and all at the same time.

Politically, he/she has served equally both the left and the right (Eagleton, 1990). Aesthetics was a progressive liberal, a conservative, and a reactionary, and he/she was each simultaneously. Aesthetics was a liberal serving the middle class in their fight with the aristocracy. Aesthetics was a conservative in helping the middle class to find a sense of themselves as refined, possessing taste, and appearing liberal. And aesthetics was a reactionary in binding together the middle class in their opposition to the working class, helping the middle class to demonize the working class as rude and crude and unworthy of sharing power (Eagleton, 1990). For many years aesthetics was staunchly undemocratic, though more recently he/she has been reborn as a democrat (Barrett, 2008). But then he/she has been reborn many times. There is no social cause, political regime, or economic system to which aesthetics has not taken a shine. He/she is willingly co-opted by them all. As a philosopher aesthetics has focused upon him/herself: what is aesthetics, he/she has asked, what is his/her significance, and what does he/she think of him/herself, all of which he/she has done in ways far too numerous to enumerate here (Beardsley, 1958). The problem is that aesthetics thinks too much of him/herself; aesthetics is a classic narcissist uninterested in others.

Aesthetics has been exclusively concerned with form, totally preoccupied with emotional empathy, and completely committed to symbols and icons, and, again, all simultaneously, and for each he/she has claimed the imprimatur of Kant (Mundt, 1959). Aesthetics has been omnipotent, a universal taste setter, though managing this as did Kant (1764/1965) himself only by excluding the tastes of most of the people of the earth. Aesthetics has been appallingly racist, but now finds him/herself deeply committed to multiculturalism. While of both genders, aesthetics was once utterly sexless, sensual yet not sexual. This is now all in the past. Today, aesthetics is hetero, queer, and trans-gendered. Above all else, aesthetics is a survivor.

Aesthetics has been utterly disinterested, as uptight as a Puritan caricature, yet today he/she lets it all hang out. A servant of global, corporate capitalism and every government instrumentality, aesthetics is selling for all he/she is worth. Glossing social policies or consumer products - it is all the same to aesthetics. Aesthetics is busy everywhere, promoting every worthy cause, propping up every corrupt regime, available to everyone with an issue, service, or product to sell. Aesthetics is ever reliable, there for everyone and everything.

Appearing good, true and proper, aesthetics simultaneously serves everything that is ugly and evil. Once aesthetics championed feudalism and monarchism; today it is capitalism, socialism (still), totalitarianism (still), plutocracy, democracy, and every possible hybrid. It is not as if aesthetics was schizoid; it is more a matter of a very serious case of multiple personalities. Continuing a polymorphous life, aesthetics remains near hidden in obscure philosophical debates - and arguably even more marginal art education journals - while also out in the most public of domains, as seductive as Eve with the apple, *a femme fatal*, and as brutal as an axe wielding, laser destroying cyborg in a wide-screen, multiple-speaker Hollywood spectacular. Consider what aesthetics does for a living today. Aesthetics describes everything from *Buffy the Vampire Killer* to parking.

## **Aesthetics Today**

Let me list the ways, or rather, just some of the ways the word *aesthetics* is used in books and articles today beyond the specialized use it has in art, literature and art education – in each case a way of describing specific visual characteristics and their effects: <sup>i</sup>

The aesthetics of the everyday, which include the aesthetics of sport, the aesthetics of weather, the aesthetics of shopping malls and department stores, and the aesthetics of violence.

The aesthetics of everyday life  
Commodity aesthetics  
The aesthetics of consumerism  
An aesthetics of marketing  
The aesthetics of merchandise presentation  
An aesthetics of product design  
The aesthetics of carnival  
The aesthetic of the grotesque  
The aesthetics of loss  
Manga style aesthetics  
The informal aesthetics of cell phones  
Information aesthetics  
The aesthetics of self-taught art  
An aesthetics of cool  
A post-soul aesthetic  
Female bodily aesthetics  
African and European aesthetics  
Black and white aesthetics  
A Light-skinned, straight-hair aesthetic  
Aesthetics politics  
Incendiary aesthetics  
The aesthetics of organization  
New urban aesthetics  
The aesthetics of poverty  
An aesthetic of homelessness  
A domestic aesthetic  
The anorexic aesthetic  
The masochistic aesthetic  
An aesthetic of decadence  
The aesthetics of kitsch

Trash aesthetics  
The aesthetic of Japanese lunchboxes  
The aesthetics of stage lighting  
Queer aesthetics  
An aesthetics of power  
Nazi aesthetics  
An aesthetics of evil  
Media aesthetics  
Hyper-aesthetics  
Aesthetics of comics  
Animation aesthetics  
Video game aesthetics  
An aesthetics of the environment  
Aesthetics of natural environments  
Aesthetics of ecology  
Aesthetic medicine  
Aesthetic surgery  
Aesthetic laser surgery  
Aesthetic nasal reconstruction  
Reconstructive aesthetic implant surgery  
Aesthetic dentistry  
The aforementioned  
The aesthetics of *Buffy the Vampire Killer*  
The aesthetics of parking

And, not least, there is the aesthetics of beauty, not as a general category, but as a series of specific visual characteristics.

## **Conclusion**

Today aesthetics is one of the central means by which much of the world – local, national, and global - conducts its everyday business. This is quintessentially true of economically advanced societies. Aesthetics is an essential ingredient in how the economy is maintained, how politics is conducted, and how everywhere people struggle to negotiate, resist and offer their own points of view. There is a need to examine the ideologies offered through visual forms, as well as multimodal forms that include the visual, but the task of addressing seriously the sensuousness of the forms in which ideologies come wrapped is central to art education. There are other concepts as important as aesthetics - ideology and representation are immediately obvious - but no concepts more important.

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<sup>i</sup> Given the number of uses of aesthetics listed references to them are not given here, but they can be obtained from the author. The uses are given in no particular order.