

AESTHETICS AND SOCIOLOGY

FOREWORD

Human beings—as the ancient Athenians well knew—have three areas of capability: the aesthetic, the intellectual, and the physical. Indeed, their socialization of youth took care to develop everyone’s fullest potential in all three areas in order to produce the desired goal of well-rounded individuals. Although those ancient Greeks may have recognized the need to include aesthetics in one’s upbringing, they were hardly alone in appreciating its value and in expressing themselves creatively. Beginning some 40,000 years ago with Paleolithic cave paintings and sculptures, and later with Neolithic decorated vases, then onward through the advance of civilizations worldwide, much of what we know about early civilizations comes from their surviving aesthetic artifacts.

It has long been conventional wisdom that art is a reflection of the life and times of a people. Many forms of aesthetic expression exist, such as architecture, crafts, dance, drawings, engravings, humor, literature, music, painting, sculpture, theatre, urban design, and, more recently, cinema, computer art, photography, television, and even video games. All serve as platforms to illustrate cultural values, emotions and viewpoints within the economic, political, and social environment from which they spring. The pursuit of what is beautiful and appealing also finds individual or group expression in attire, body art (piercings, tattoos, and cosmetic surgery), hair color, hairstyles, makeup, and perfumes. However manifested, aesthetic expression comes forth from a cultural womb that we must understand if we are to appreciate fully what its creator has rendered. Although each art form may be an individualistic depiction that may even influence public taste, no person conceives it in a vacuum. Society influences the artist/artisan, providing the filter through which aesthetic expression finds its voice.

One might assume that, because aesthetics captures so much of the human experience, sociologists would expend considerable effort in examining its place in understanding societies. That has not been the case, however. Except for a hardy few, for many decades sociologists by default left this scholarly pursuit primarily to anthropologists and historians. Georg Simmel, as discussed later in this book, virtually stood alone among the early sociologists in recognizing the need to go beyond explaining the rationality of behavior, as he spoke to the need to incorporate also abstract individualities in what he called “sociological aesthetics.” Although other recent sociologists (e.g., Howard Becker, my former professor Peter Berger, and Richard Sennett) showed interest in aesthetics as an object of study, the reality is that other aspects of social behavior and analysis have consistently drawn far more attention from most other social scientists.

From his articles, “Arts and Crafts” (1978) and “Aesthetics and Truth” (1980), and through his several books about art and music, Becker has enlightened us, as he says, about “science in art” and “art in science.” Berger has consistently viewed sociology in the humanist tradition, and in *Redeeming Laughter* (1998), for instance, he effectively explored the comic dimension of human existence; humor, of course, is one of the more widely shared and enjoyed means of aesthetic expression. Sennett’s studies of the social ties in cities and the effect of urban living on individuals in the modern world provide a

nice framework for discussions about aesthetics. Indeed, the second part of this book has this focus.

In *The Transformation of the Avant Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985* (1990:148), Diana Crane lamented, “Systematic analysis of visual materials by social scientists has rarely been done and few guidelines exist for a sociological examination of aesthetic and expressive content in art objects.” Raimondo Strassoldo (1998) pinpointed part of the reason in *Form and Function: Introduction to the Sociology of Art (Forma e Funzione: Introduzione alla Sociologia dell’Arte)*, when he asserted that only 0.5 percent of sociological output could be classified as the sociology of art. This subject is only part of the larger field of aesthetics, but such information helps us understand the dearth of sociological study in that greater sphere. Two decades later, aesthetics still has limited attraction for sociologists. For example, the common-interest sections within the American Sociological Association do not include aesthetics, or even the sub-discipline sociology of art. Only to be found is a section for Body and Embodiment and another for Culture, but the first is much too narrowly defined and the second is much too broad to focus on what the study of aesthetics is fully about.

Cities provide a wonderful tapestry in which bonds between aesthetics and sociological analysis can be interwoven. Moving past the simpler aesthetics of prehistoric times, the first cities enabled advanced social development in the arts, science, philosophy, writing, and division of labor that generated greater complexity in many forms of expressivity. With ever-increasing concentrations of people, cities evolved and came to represent the best and worst of society. We see this in the grand manifestations of urban design and architecture and in the depictions of human suffering. We find innumerable examples of the genius of creative expression of the human spirit, yet also the howls of protest against repression of the individual through exploitation or by brutal political oligarchies. Aesthetics has thus been a history presented by our imaginative and inspired predecessors who left behind insights into what they valued and disliked. Similarly, aesthetics is also a contemporary lens with which to view our own values and lifestyles.

Let us, for a moment, pick just one dimension of life to illustrate the larger point about the value of aesthetics in sociological research for examining society. We learn much about poverty in nineteenth-century London, for example, by reading the novels of Charles Dickens (1812-1870). In a similar vein, in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Jacob Riis (1849-1914)—first in a newspaper series and then in a book—brought to public attention the misery of everyday life among the immigrants living in New York’s Lower East Side. French engraver and illustrator Gustave Doré (1832-1883) gave us heart-rending examples of the suffering of the poor, as did many other artists. From the long list of excellent photographers whose works effectively depicted cities and culture, some of the best have been Eugene Atget (1857-1927), Henri Cartier Bresson (1908-2004), Karl Hugo Schmotz (1927-1986), Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), and Robert Frank (1924-). Many filmmakers, like Federico Fellini (1920-1993) and Martin Scorsese (1942-), have also given us penetrating portraits of urban life and behavior.

Cities themselves offer their own testimony. That the main streets of many ancient cities, such as Teotihuacan of the Aztecs or the Forbidden City of the Ming Dynasty, lie along a north-south axis is by no means coincidental; it tells us of their awareness of the North Star and provides a clue into their belief systems. The easily visible steeples of

churches over all other buildings in medieval European cities reveal the dominance of religion in people's everyday lives. In contrast, in modern cities the towering skyscrapers that dwarf even cathedrals' highest points give evidence to the economic priorities found in capitalist societies. Repetitive paintings of pharaohs in ancient Egypt and numerous large-scale portraits in public places of leaders of recent and current totalitarian regimes are indicators of the exercise of raw power and control.

A sharp contrast in aesthetic styles that revealed differing political systems was experienced by this writer when entering East Berlin soon after the wall came down. One left brightly-lit West Berlin—with its many colors and stylistic varieties of building facades—and found in dimly-lit East Berlin buildings of uninspiring functional design, often with sections of crumbling concrete, and all with a dreary, gray countenance. Even white would have been a welcome relief! What greater visual testimony could there be against a repressive political system that denied individual expression! And yet, within East Berlin one could also find in the old town some of the most impressive architecture in the entire city dating from its pre-fascist/pre-communist years. A lesson in the interplay of aesthetics and sociological analysis easily emanated from these three styles in one city.

Urban design incorporates far more than buildings and can offer revealing insights into prevailing values, particularly in the use of outdoor public space. Plazas or squares, parks, walkways and pedestrian malls, as well as landscape design (fountains, monuments, murals, sculptures, and other installations), create an ambiance in those locales while also signaling cultural priorities. They can also enhance social bonding (as murals often do in ethnic communities) and social interaction (through crafted pedestrian patterns and gathering places). Whether it be the openly accessible public space of the Greek *agora*, or the similar Spanish physical layouts of the centuries-old centers of most Latin American cities, or the planned communities of today, the imprint of value orientations manifests itself and thus offers the opportunity for cultural analysis if we choose to do so.

To stimulate their local economies, many U.S. cities turned to private developers to revitalize certain areas. Although the results were often commercially successful, they usually came at the sacrifice of creativity and beauty. Many critics, in fact, have complained over the years that privatized public spaces are too bland and homogeneous. Often constrained by strict design guidelines, these areas in many ways have an in-built redundancy as they resemble one another in their form and inclusion of recognizable chain outlets to attract customers. Furthermore, the architecture is inauthentic, thereby promoting an aesthetic of artificiality. Profitability has trumped the encouragement of true aesthetic expression. City officials, investors, merchants, and the public are all delighted about these false realities with their fake, unimaginative features and environment. Thus, even in this setting, we learn truths about cultural attitudes, values, and priorities.

Recent concerns and actions regarding gendered public space are illustrations of how changing values find an outlet in some forms of aesthetic expression and design. As feminist insistence on gender equality in all realms of life took firmer root in society, the re-ordering of urban public space was inevitable. In a male-dominated society, planners typically allocated most open space to male-oriented activities such as sports, giving little consideration to the needs of women. Among proposed and/or enacted changes are: giving greater attention to creating safe environments to protect children at play, providing less-constrained places for women to walk or jog, and creating housing that promotes more

contact with neighbors, especially for children. Importantly, the demand is that spatial arrangements not segregate the sexes, which would reinforce traditional ideas about gender, but instead allocate space to help all individuals' lives.

Returning to the theme of the city as a tapestry, the urban environment is far more likely to stimulate and promote mental activity and experimentation. People living in the city—by definition a heterogeneous place—typically have a greater tolerance for individuality and nonconformity than those living in a small town. Also, a cosmopolitan populace supporting the arts in turn attracts others in the arts to come and find their niche. It is small wonder that creativity thrives in a large metropolis. Here you find a myriad of high culture (art galleries, ballet, museums, opera, symphony halls, and theatre) and of low culture (graffiti, murals, pornography, and street performers). Here is where you also find the greatest concentrations of advertising agencies; daily newspapers; radio and television stations; and cinema corporate headquarters. The world of beauty, as presented by cosmetic firms and fashion design houses, finds its nexus in the city. As company executives readily admit, the “feel of the street” sets the tone of their business

Ideas and aesthetic expression generally spread from the city to the hinterland and less so the other way. Just as those once living outside the walled cities benefited from the crafts produced within, so too do those living outside cities today reap benefits from the concentrations of innovative activities within. It is to the city that people come to enjoy the arts and it is from the city that fashion styles in clothing and hair, musical styles (like hip hop and rap), and television programming radiate.

Aesthetic expression has enabled many cities to project a unique image to the world. One finds it difficult, for example, to think of London without Big Ben, Paris without the Eiffel Tower, Rome without its coliseum, San Francisco without the Golden Gate Bridge, St. Louis without its arch, New York without Times Square. Yet it is not just one landmark that gives a city its own unique identity and “personality.” Each city has innumerable objects (building heights, colors, street widths and facades, styles of architecture, activities, public spaces, urban design, etc.) that combine to connote a certain “feeling.” In most large urban centers, one seldom mistakes one city for another. A city’s cultural heritage and its residents’ original visions generated its unique features.

When we are mindful of the importance of aesthetics in understanding cultures and civilizations, that sensitivity enables our analysis to go beyond mere dissection of style and technique, past commentary on meaning and purpose, and into a rational exploration. This is not as counterintuitive as it sounds, for we are not attempting direct objective scrutiny of the essence of these subjective manifestations. Instead, we seek to learn what clues or insights the object can contribute to our grasp of the realities of everyday life in the time and place of that creative expression. That is the challenge and task before all sociologists who focus their research on aesthetics and/or teach the subject within the conceptual framework of social science. The contributors to this book followed that path and we are indebted to them for giving us much needed insights into an important but oft-neglected area of inquiry.

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