

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

The theme for this essay is Multi-Sensory Aesthetics. I have chosen Benjamin Highmore's 'Bitter After Taste' (2010) from the recommended reading list that is related to this theme. My focused question is: *Has human aesthetics changed in conjunction with multi-sensory aesthetics in the 20th and 21st Centuries?*

My rationale is that multi-sensory aesthetics has affected our notion of contemporary human aesthetics; aspiring to an increasingly global set of values that define our homogenised notion of beauty. I intend to examine how society views and values individual beauty and aesthetics. I will look at how the definition of beauty has changed historically and question our contemporized analysis of these definitions and values. Through the development of the essay I hope to construct different perspectives and ideas from both historical and contemporary philosophy to examine the idea of what is beauty.

The essay will be divided into two main sections: I will first explore the theme of Multi-Sensory Aesthetics considering some key theoretical issues and debates, including a summary of Benjamin Highmore's essay; 'Bitter After Taste', discussing its relevance and contribution to historical, theoretical and critical debates relating to Multi-sensory Aesthetics; especially considering human aesthetics and notions of beauty and sublime. In the second section I will explore the human aspect of Multi-sensory Aesthetics through two works of art; Marina Abramovic's; *Art must be Beautiful, Artist must be Beautiful*, and Sissel Tolaas's "Fear of Smell / Smell of Fear".

PART 2: THEORIES

MULTI SENSORY AESTHETICS

Multi-sensory can be defined as an experience that involves several physiological senses concurrently. Multi-sensory aesthetics relates to how individuals experience aesthetic stimuli; not only through visual stimuli, but also through sound, touch, smell and taste.

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that deals with art. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to it as, "the perception of the beautiful". In the modern sense aesthetics can be said to be; the creation, interpretation, and appreciation of artworks, involving how the experience affects the individual in terms of their own sensitivity and cultural contexts (Oxford Dictionary online, n.d.).

In the 18th Century Alexander Baumgarten was the first philosopher to apply aesthetics in a different way to its Ancient Greek origins. The word aesthetics originally meant sensation but Baumgarten applied it to mean taste, or a sense of beauty, to describe the affects of art and nature. Baumgarten derived the term from the Greek word *aisthanomai* (to perceive), and the Latin *sentio* (senses), proposing it

to designate the outer, external or bodily sense, as opposed to the inner sense of consciousness, placing aesthetics in the realm of the sensible, of sense perception and sensible objects. Baumgarten's usage was consistent with classical sources, but it extended logic and science into a new understanding (Townsend, 2015).

Baumgarten defined the discipline of aesthetics as the "science of sensible knowledge", taking the object of beauty beyond the limitations of art, into a more multi-sensory realm. In *Aesthetica* (1750) he argues that aesthetics is as relevant to the practical activities of daily life as the arts, adapting the rationalism of Leibniz for both the study of art and what came to be known after Immanuel Kant as the "aesthetic" (Guyer, 2014).

Kant's book *Critique of Judgement* (1790) discusses four possible "reflective judgements" of aesthetics; the agreeable, the good, the beautiful and the sublime. The agreeable is a sensory judgement (the coffee is bitter), the good an ethical judgement conforming to moral norms. Beautiful and sublime, he argues, are "subjective universals" where judgements are subjective and not bound by any absolute, made in the belief that they are universally true, even though we accept that others may not agree. *Sensus communis* (common sensibility or values) prevails in aesthetics and taste; the beautiful ideal recognizes beauty (even without a practical function), and the sublime is a characteristic that is beyond comprehension. Judgement allows us to determine the beautiful and the sublime; genius allows us to produce it (Ginsborg, 2005).

In *Speaking of Art as Embodied Imagination: A Multisensory Approach to Understanding Aesthetic Experience*, (2003) Annamma Joy and John F. Sherry Jr consider the contemporary consumer marketplace, illustrating how aesthetics has changed; marketing has developed from selling products as a collection of features, to a multi-sensory experience highlighting benefits and the memorability of aesthetic experience. They argue that Kant's question; "How is experience possible?" should be revisited, that multi-sensory experience applies to how modern society consumes information and stimuli, most readily be seen in our multi-channel, multi-sensory consumption which now includes physical and digital (social media and online).

HUMAN AESTHETICS

The human form in art involves a study and appreciation of its depiction or presentation involving; body shape, postures, and movements. Kant refers to the human figure as the ideal of beauty. (Figure, n.d.).

Wladyslaw Taterkiewicz explains in *The Aesthetic Experience: History of The Concept* (1980, p.p. 310-311). "For the last hundred years the majority of publications concerning the idea of beauty and art have been of a psychological character, their subject being the human response to beauty and art". In the mid-eighteenth century, aesthetic inquiry was quite different since there was no definite concept of art. In Plato's time the perception of beauty placed value on proper ethics and the improvement of life, promoting the idea that there are certain universal truths about fixed characteristics of beauty. History views art in the past from differing perspectives and organizes it into a hierarchical system of values. As such art with

elements of beauty enjoyed a higher status than others; this also applies to human aesthetics. Such an idea is not compatible with the expanded contemporary definitions of art.

Contemporary aesthetics is often considered through four main questions, central to what art is, and its definition; proposing that aesthetics can be determined; by the effect on its audience, its place in society, how it was created, and whether or not it creates emotion.

Contemporary human aesthetics is no longer the sole realm of the artist; it promotes a democratic homogenous ideal of beauty accessible in way hitherto unimaginable; from “photo-shopped” imagery to cosmetic surgery.

Brett Lunceford's *The Ethics of Seeking Body Perfection, with Continual Reference to Heidi Montag* considers the ethics of cosmetic surgery: medicine, individual, media, and those who tacitly approve? “Cosmetic surgery, with its reliance on prostheses and promise of re-shaping the body, is, at its heart, a post human enterprise. Although many have engaged in cosmetic surgery, actress Heidi Montag became an exemplar of reshaping the body by undergoing ten different plastic surgery procedures in one day”.

In *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*, (1999) Sander L. Gilman explains, “In a world which we are judged by how we appear, the belief that we can change our appearance is liberating. We are what we seem and seem what we are”. This can be seen echoed in Facebook profiles featuring photo-shopped images, fake statuses and seemingly endless friend lists. Gilman argues that as we judge the world, it judges right back, to become a better version of ourselves in the eyes of the world is something we all want”.

BEN HIGHMORE – BITTER AFTER TASTE:

My chosen text is Ben Highmore's “Bitter After Taste”. Highmore considers affect in particular reference to the wider subject of what he calls social aesthetics, emphasising the connections between affect, sensual and sensorial culture, and perception.

Affect is a type of culturally embedded intelligence giving us an understanding about the world; the whistling kettle informs us of boiling water. (Highmore, p118) “Cultural experience is in fact an imbrication of emotions and affects, of perception and the senses, the sensorial and the human sensorium of the body”(Highmore p119). Affect is part of aesthetics but Highmore argues that beauty has been overvalued in context to the history of art; such as the Ancient Greeks preoccupation with perfect mathematical proportion or Renaissance art depicting the divine and beautiful.

Highmore suggests that there is more to aesthetics than beauty and sublime, observing that affective experience is outside the scope of beauty and sublime; it is part of sensation, perception and the physical nature of the body. (Highmore, p119)

Highmore considers that human aesthetics is bound-up with culture, “Yet a body free of the trappings (and traps) of discourse, of culture, might not be much of a human body at all” (Highmore, p119). He believes there is a dualism between the physicality of the body and our perceived aesthetic reflected back through metaphor and culture. Our cultural experience is a complex combination of multi-sensory aesthetics; an overlap of senses making up our physical and aesthetic perceptions - the crunch of potato chips being part of the flavour illustrates how combined senses contribute to aesthetic experience. Multi-sensory Aesthetics goes beyond the five senses; cross-modal networks link perception, affect, senses, and emotions. Highmore uses the term “social aesthetics” to describe this cross-modal multi-sensory experience (Highmore, p121).

Highmore argues that “taste” is central in the evaluation of aesthetics, defining a refined and discerning choice, and by extension social status; it orders and demeans, giving value and taking it away (Highmore, p124).

Highmore references Baumgarten’s concern that multi-sensory aesthetic “impressions from the senses, fantasies, emotional disturbances, etc. are unworthy of philosophers and beneath the scope of their consideration” (Highmore, p122). Highmore concludes that there has been misdirection of aesthetics towards art theory, where aesthetics becomes a kind of moral improvement aimed at sensation, sentiment and perception, “the artwork is a moral lesson, an aesthetic example to be mimicked and developed in pursuit of the good and the true” (Highmore, p122). Other kinds of emotions and feelings are not recognised in this particular view of aesthetics where beauty and sublime promotes a positive experience rather than the ugly or mundane. Works of art that describe the mundane everyday life are seen as aesthetically dissatisfying and unaccomplished, with beauty favoured as it completes the viewer’s sensual experience. Highmore references Kant to illustrate this, arguing that Kant believed that the artwork embodies the experience into something for aesthetic appreciation. Highmore suggests that the idea of aesthetics in modern art and social aesthetics, “will have to work hard to disconnect itself from the tradition of aesthetic thinking that has remained bound to the moral mission of the artwork and it’s evaluation” (Highmore, p123).

PART 3: VISUAL ANALYSIS

I will explore Highmore’s contention that aesthetics needs to rid itself of traditional values by considering two contemporary artworks by Marina Abramovic and Sissel Tolaas. Indeed, Highmore comments that Baumgarten recognised that traditional thinking excluded whole areas of experience. He further highlights Terry Eagleton’s comment regarding these areas that our experience, our human interaction, is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together; our multi-sensory life. Throughout the history of art the depiction of the human body – and particularly women and the female form - is bound up with traditional notions of aesthetics; of beauty and sublime.

The performance art of the early seventies is characterised by experiments and the sounding out of



Figure 1: Marina Abramovic, Art must be beautiful, Artist must be beautiful (1975)

physical limits. It is a form of self-discovery with feminist challenges from female art activists such as Gina Pane, Valie Export and Marina Abramovic with artworks that stood against the image of women as “objects of lust” in a continuing chauvinistic orientated society. (IMAI, n,d).

Marina Abramovic is one of the artists who made a decisive impact on history of performance art and on the criticism of the representation of the female body in Western culture. Her work always tests and pushes the boundaries of physical and mental limits through the intensity and endurance of her performances and the creation of extreme situations that also involve the audience in an intimate and personal involvement in her practice (Re Act Feminism, (n,d).

In *Art must be beautiful, Artist must be beautiful* Abramovic appears in close-up, showing only her face and hands, in front of the camera, confronting the viewer personally and directly (Re Act Feminism, n,d).

Abramovic says of this piece, “I brush my hair with a metal brush held in my right hand and simultaneously comb my hair with a metal comb held in my left hand. While doing so, I continuously repeat 'Art must be beautiful', 'Artist must be beautiful', until I have destroyed my hair and face” (Media Art Net, n.d.).

The artwork uses the motif of brushing ones hair which is something that is traditionally identified as feminine, almost a ritualistic process that is bound up with traditional ideas of beauty and human aesthetics. This can be seen in historical examples of art such as Velazquez’s *Rokeby Venus* with its classic sense of beauty and Rossetti’s *Lady Lilith* with its pre-Raphaelite ideal of aesthetics. As Highmore points out, this is the traditional idea of beauty and being beautiful where beauty is seen as edifying and morally uplifting.

Velazquez’s *Venus* can be seen reflected in the mirror echoing Abramovic’s composition, and Rossetti’s *Lady Lilith* shows the process as gentle and refined. In the video, Abramovic continually repeats the forceful action of brushing without pause for 50 minutes, reinterpreting the process in the context of art history through her performance. Throughout the piece she constantly repeats, “*Art must be beautiful, Artist must be beautiful*” like a chant or mantra, giving the work an intensity that focusses the viewer to the actions of the artist.

Highmore argues that aesthetics are part of sensation, perception and the physical nature of the body – a multi-sensory aesthetic experience. Throughout Marina Abramovic’s performance, the viewer is confronted with this ritualistic process of everyday life. Abramovic presents an aesthetic that is not merely beauty and sublime; it involves all of the senses. As the artist repeats over and over again, “art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful”, the aesthetic is a condition for



Figure 3: Diego Valazquez, *Rokeby Venus*, c. 1647–51. 122cm x 177cm (48in x 49.7in). National Gallery, London.



Figure 4: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1866-68 1872-73 oil on canvas, 96.5cm x 85.1 cm Delaware Art Museum, Wilming Delaware.

being beautiful, a perfect idea of what beauty is through an imperfect presentation of enforcement of human aesthetics (Re Act Feminism, n,d).

Sandler L. Gilman in his book *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* states, "To become someone else or to become a better version of ourselves in the eyes of the world is something we all want". (Gilman S. L *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*)

Abamovic's work questions the traditional conditions of aesthetics. Performance art as a form of multi-sensory cultural transmission now demands to be considered as part of art history and art criticism. *Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful* addresses the multi-sensory aspect of human aesthetics but also contextualizes and challenges the ideas and politics surrounding human aesthetics. She says of this artwork that the subject challenges the traditional notion of art as beautiful and what that means in a modern context, "beautiful or not beautiful is not important, it has to be true" (Re Act Feminism, n,d).

The second piece of work I have chosen is Sissel Tolaas's *FEAR 01/21 Smell of Fear /Fear of Smell* (2006). Tollaas is an olfactory artist whose work literally revolves around the sense of smell and scents. Her work makes us aware that the sense of smell can equally evoke one's memory and imagination of cultural experiences. Through the fact that the work relies almost entirely on one sense, it highlights how senses other than sight are appropriate for art (Alyssa,H. 2011).

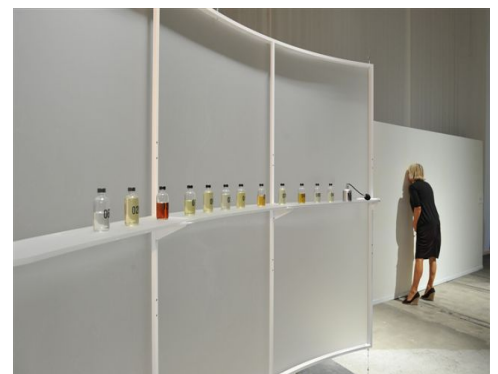


Figure 2: *FEAR 01/21 Smell of Fear/Fear of Smell* (2006)

FEAR 01/21 Fear of Smell/Smell of Fear comprises individual bottles of twenty-one men's body odor captured when these men experienced moments of fear. Tolaas devised a device that collected the sweat when these men, who suffered from phobias or panic attacks, this was then packed in bottles. Tolaas had the samples analysed in a headspace gas chromatography sampler machine. Here, the reproduced smell of her subjects was synthesized and then mixed into wall paint through a process of micro-encapsulation. This sophisticated technology is a descendent of the 1965 technology marketed as Scratch-n-Sniff (current uses include decorating houses in scent, for instance, every time you walk over a certain carpet the smell of grass will be released). This variable release mechanism combats the oppressiveness and diminishing perceived effect of constant scents in a given environment. The exhibition features a blank white wall labelled Guy #1, Guy #2 etc. To release the individual scents visitors had to rub the wall. Reactions were sometimes extreme, a woman became obsessed with one guy/smell visiting every day and leaving lipstick marks on the wall, a war veteran wept at the evoked memory of wartime sleeping quarters (Alyssa,H. 2011).

Although this installation piece can only be encountered through first-person experience limiting the audience engagement in her work, it provides such an authentic olfactory experience that is true to the beauty of everyday life. The work gives the audience a truly modern multi-sensory aesthetic experience; the absence

of visual stimuli (creating a powerful visual impression in the context of a gallery), the olfactory stimulus in smell and taste, and the tactile interaction in releasing the smell.

Many visitors were definitely reluctant to participate in sniffing her work; smells such as disgust, aversion, and, of course, fear. It is not uncommon for visitors to huffily refuse Tolaas' open invitation to participate in the conceptually dense olfactory experiences. (Jones, C. A. 2006, p 98).

This points to what Highmore discusses about cultural experience as a strong influence on our affective and sensory perceptions. The decisions that visitors make to sniff the scents after reading the notes accompanying the bottles of odour, also demonstrate visitors' taste for scent; what Highmore might refer to as a social aesthetic. Would every member of the audience from any social status be willing to experience the odour of men risking their lives at a construction site? Not necessarily. Just like any other senses, a person immersed into an olfactory experience will have a cultural "taste" for what a good or bad smell is, or possibly such scents would evoke a recollection of the past. Smell provides a potent symbolic means for creating and enforcing class and ethnic boundaries. When people speak about smell, often they are an indication to their negative feelings like annoyance or disgust. Physical feelings can inform us about differences; in race, religion or education. Through this artwork, the audience participates in a true contemporary multi-sensory aesthetic experience. The audience rubs the walls as if rubbing human flesh, releasing the smell of Tolaas' subjects' bodies and crossing the olfactory with the tactile. Here, everyday-life sensual stimuli takes place when visitors feel empathetic or are able to relate to the fear of the men as they rub the wall and experience the smell. Previous visitors' marks on the wall metaphorically map on top of the absent models' heady smells creating a virtual schematic of the subjects; the audience do not go home empty-handed, taking home the smell of the scent on their hands as a sensory souvenir of the installation work.

Like Abramovic, Tolaas is inverting our traditional notions of the accepted human aesthetic, challenging the classic ideas of beauty; Abramovic brushes her hair to highlight our outdated ideas of beauty and sublime, and Tolaas presents us with the antithesis of the culturally powerful cosmetic industry pedaling an aesthetically idealised sensation of hope and aspiration.

CONCLUSION

In considering whether human aesthetics has changed in conjunction with contemporary multi-sensory aesthetics, we can see that, in the context of what Highmore would call “social aesthetics”, human aesthetics is still preoccupied with an ideal; cosmetic surgery, media obsession with celebrity, peer pressure through social media etc.

Through the work of Kant and Baumgarten, we can see that human aesthetics was preoccupied with beauty and sublime; a presentation of an ideal to a passive audience.

The art of the 20th and 21st Centuries has challenged and sometimes rejected this notion of beauty and sublime. It now employs multi-sensory techniques to break down the barriers and distinctions between artist and audience which we can see illustrated in the two artworks featured by Abramovic and Tolaas. Art practice has challenged art’s somewhat narrow traditional aesthetic definition, opening up a more interactive, democratic, and multi-sensory aesthetic. Highmore argues that this social aesthetic now includes, “the connections between affect, sensual and sensorial culture”

As in art, there is a broader cultural use of multi-sensory aesthetic through mediums such as social media, photoshop, and cosmetic surgery. And whilst the multi-sensory, multi-channel, digital 21st Century looks very different, the aspiration of the ideal remains the same.

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