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Friberg, Carsten

Published in:
Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Publication date:
2011

Document Version
Tidlig version også kaldet pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Friberg, C. (2011). Contemporary Culture and Aesthetic Education. I F. Dorsch, J. Stejskal, & C. Todd (red.), *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* (s. 104-114)
http://vbn.aau.dk/files/68710392/friberg_Contemporary_Culture.pdf

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Contemporary Culture and Aesthetic Education

Carsten Friberg*

Aarhus School of Architecture

ABSTRACT. In this paper I wish to focus on the importance of an education of our senses and body through sensorial elements for the improvement of our sensibility for situations and our faculty of judgement. This was the key focus of aesthetics in its classical form from antiquity until early 19th century when aesthetics was, to a large degree, a matter of aesthetic education and communication. Important were arts and letters, which still are important but now very much on the defensive also because aesthetics often is about criticism rather than about the sensorial and bodily aspect of cultural products. I suggest we can learn from the early generations within aesthetics not least from Kant when we keep in mind that his investigation of the aesthetic judgement was for the sake of judgement as such, thus for our ability to chose the right conduct of behaviour. The aesthetic judgement is a judgement about our relation to a specific cultural context and our acquisition of it comes from being acquainted with cultural products. Aesthetics is thus closely related to hermeneutics, to how we interpret specific situations we find ourselves in.

I.

I wish to emphasize the importance of aesthetic education for our ability to interpret and act within our contemporary culture. By aesthetic education I understand the education of our senses and the body making us capable of responding to our surroundings in an immediate way often expressed through taste, but in a broader sense we should speak simply of judgement.

* Email: carsten.friberg@gmail.com

Aesthetic education is an education through aesthetic means; these are, of course, literature, music, paintings, etc., but I would propose this should also include the aesthetic products of a modern culture like advertising, fashion, design, etc. They form an aesthetic communication we are constantly confronted with whether or not we recognize the products as genuine aesthetic products and their aesthetic qualities.

My suggestion is to put the debate about quality in brackets for a moment and focus on the aesthetic aspect. I would need then, to emphasize that by aesthetics I understand the sensorial and bodily aspects of cultural products and not art, criticism and beauty as the usually dominating subjects within aesthetics.

My reason for bringing up aesthetic education is motivated by the lack of acknowledgement hereof in contemporary culture where art and humanities are too often put on the defensive by desires to legitimate value on an economic and technical scale. What may sound like a conservative apology for classic values is meant as an attempt to revalue some important but sadly ignored elements — the sensorial and bodily — in our approach to and understanding of the world. I could go so far as to say that the importance of these elements is that they are constitutive of our judgement — which is explicitly stated by Kant but is also the motivation for the central role of, for instance, *artes liberales* throughout centuries.

2.

For the main line of my argument I will begin with my motivation for this perspective on aesthetics. It is to acknowledge the importance of cultural products, taken in the broadest possible sense, for our education as well as insisting on the importance of practicing our sensibility towards the cultural and social contexts we find ourselves in.

One often has the impression that the perspective on aesthetic products becomes too narrow: it is more a matter of excluding products in order to confirm one's exclusively aesthetic sense than about taking them seriously as aesthetic products, i.e. products leaving a sensorial impact on us. Though there are many good reasons for a desire to exclude poor products from good and to give a standard for taste, it is, however, difficult to free oneself from the impression that the key issue is not quality

but demarcation (cf. Shusterman 2000b, 35 ff.). I will not enter this debate but it is related to another motivating impression that perhaps is related to my position among architects and designers: that many debates about aesthetics are not productive for art, architecture and design because they put up standards of taste coming from a background that seeks intellectual demarcation that is hesitant or discouraging towards products meant for a broader public use. To quote an example of complaint about this: »It is urgent that designers stop pandering to the rarefied concerns of an aesthetic elite and pay careful attention to the problems of everyday life« (Pesce 2001, 192).

The ideal of exclusiveness and autonomy of certain aesthetic products have been challenged (cf. Perniola 1983, 131 ff.) and it is not my intention to add to this debate but rather to ask how we can talk about aesthetics in relation to, for instance, design when it is not arts and craft, artes minores, product design etc., i.e. not artefacts, but rather about services and strategies. This is an important direction taken within design today as well as by some art projects (Buchanan 2001, 201 ff.; Golsby-Smith 2010; Kester 2004). We must ask, then, what we understand by aesthetics and what should be considered as a relevant form of aesthetics for a kind of projects we could call social interventions. An important contribution is here made by Kester who shares Shusterman's concern about aesthetic theories as strategies for demarcation. He criticises some of the influential aesthetic theories of the 20th century (among them Clive Bell, Roger Fry, Clement Greenberg, Michale Fried; Kester 2004, 31 ff.) for being elitist because they exclude from aesthetics many cultural products.

My intention is not to go further into the issues raised by Kester but to take up the thread when he asks for a different approach to aesthetics. He proposes a dialogical aesthetics (Kester 2004, 82 ff.) and I can only agree. However, rather than following his cautious use of Habermas I will suggest a rehabilitation of a classical perspective on aesthetics and hermeneutics as productive for a contemporary debate. This is also because I wish aesthetics to include more than particular (artistic) products and to be a central part of educating us to be capable of acting in a contemporary culture. Competences have become a key-word in education, and I wish to argue for aesthetic competences — or rather for sensibility as an alternative to competences.

3•

My aim is, while talking about aesthetic education, to rehabilitate art and humanities for the sake of understanding our being in the world. We are sensorial and bodily beings depending on our ability to interpret the different cultural contexts we find ourselves in. Such an interpretation is not entirely explicit and conceptual; we must rely on our experiences and our faculty of judgement, which is a matter of displaying a sensibility towards different situations and finding the proper conduct. Such a sensibility can only be acquired through practice. We cannot learn rules for social behaviour and good taste by following explicit rules and expecting to have knowledge of when to use specific rules. Applying rules is a matter of judgement, and judgement cannot be taught, only practiced (Kant 1781/1787/1971, B 172). The outcome of this practice is a refined sensibility, and an area in which it becomes explicit is in the judgement of taste.

Kant is a key-figure when we talk about judgement and taste. In his characterisation of taste we find the link between our sensibility and judgement: »We could even define Taste as the faculty of judging of that which makes *universally communicable*, without the mediation of a concept, our feeling in a given representation« (Kant 1790/1799/1974, § 40).

What I wish to emphasize and is my reason for introducing Kant is how the judgement of taste must be seen as a judgement about cultural products. These products we immediately approve or disapprove of through taste rather than through a conceptual judgement. What Kant offers is a description of the »mechanism« of this approval or disapproval. We can, of course, have a long debate as to whether his description is plausible or not, but he offers a reflexion on some important features of the faculties we rely on in relation to aesthetics.

For Kant our approval is not a matter of an immediate pleasure we take in different objects but it is related to a pleasure (German: Lust) which has its ground (German: Grund (ibid., LVII)) in the harmonious play of understanding and imagination. The imagination that freely produces its products is crucial, but not any product is at stake here — if the imagination wanders off one gets lost in fantasies and loses the sense of reality (cf. Kant 1798/1800/1968, § 45). The place of interest is when imagination and intellect are in harmony; we imagine something freely as if we had a

concept but the imagination is not led by a concept (Kant 1790/1799/1974, § 9).

It is important to bear in mind that Kant operates with many forms of aesthetic judgements. We may find satisfaction in objects we desire to possess, however, this is not an example of *pure* aesthetic judgement, which is the subject of investigation in *Critique of Judgement* since his interest here is the condition of the subject that calls forth pleasure and pain as faculties of the mind. After Kant we have got used to exclusively talking about the pure aesthetic judgement, the judgement characterized by being free of interest — or disinterested — without a concept, and purposiveness without a purpose, however, the different debates on aesthetics after Kant are not identical with Kant's interest in investigating the legitimacy of the subject's exercise of its faculties. Kant forms the fundament for the aesthetics in the period after himself; but the same period may not share the same intentions as Kant though they may be justified in finding their inspiration in Kant.

4.

If there are differences between Kant and his successors I believe we should see Kant in accordance with his predecessors and contemporaries. The philosophy of Kant was a revolution in the way of thinking but this does not imply it was also a revolution in the frame of thinking. The overall model of world interpretation was for Kant still the metaphysics of the 18th century including its questions about cosmology. These are questions we simply cannot stop asking because we have a natural inclination to ask them (Kant 1783/1983, 136 (Auflösung)), though he reinterprets the legitimacy of the answers to these questions as well as the extent of our knowledge.

For Kant, propositions about beauty can no longer be related to cosmology, they cannot be said to concern ideal proportions of the world constructed after measure, number and weight («Thou hast arranged all things by measure and number and weight» *Book of Wisdom* II, 20). Beauty has no longer a cognitive validity as Leibniz could assert (Leibniz 1718/1969, §§ 13-15) but can only be an ideal (Kant 1790/1799/1974, § 17). What is important for Kant is to maintain that beauty is not only a subjective perception;

the judgement about beauty must be valid in a community. Decisive becomes then, our common norms and the beautiful soul — the aesthetic and ethical educated person becomes crucial (ibid., § 42).

Aesthetic judgement thus has an important social aspect. This brings Kant in accordance with the debate about aesthetic education going back to antiquity. When Baumgarten established aesthetics as an independent discipline in the middle of the 18th century he opened his *Aesthetica* with saying that aesthetics is concerned with the art of beautiful thinking, *ars pulchre cogitandi* (Baumgarten 1750/1758/2007, § 1). Beautiful thinking gives us a hint of how aesthetics is not a matter of only aesthetic objects, but rather has a cognitive element. We may read it as a preference for poetry, but we may also see it as a matter of how the organisation of our thoughts, in accordance to rules of eloquence, not only makes our communication appear in a way that pleases but also has a truth value. Since the antique world we have repeatedly been told how beauty comes from being in accordance with true proportions. We still have reminiscences of this in different modes of expression, such as when we call something a beautiful act because it lives up to certain ideals of norms.

Kant differs from his contemporaries when he rejects the cosmological, or metaphysical, foundation of beauty. Again, we have to emphasize that his rejection is not simultaneously a dismissal of beauty being related to something ideal, to humanity and morality (Kant 1790/1799/1974, §§ 42 and 59). For the sake of my argument I will leave this discussion and return to how Kant deals with aesthetic judgement as an aspect of the investigation of the faculty of judgement.

The judgement is concerned with combining the particular with the general. This is of crucial importance for knowledge; theoretical knowledge is concerned with subsuming the particular under a general rule: ›this phenomenon is of this kind‹; practical knowledge is about seeing the general in the particular: ›this particular situation is one in which we ought to act in a certain way because we can relate it to a set of norms‹. We cannot simply subsume situations under norms; if that was the case we would have no problem with education and ethics, we would be able to determine situations with the same certainty as we can determine this particular object to be, for instance, a cup. When it comes to situations we do not agree in

the same way. We need to judge, and for that we have to rely on experiences.

For Kant, to find the general in the particular is a reflective judgement. To reflect means we are not simply following a rule but searching through our experiences to find something we can relate to the situation in which we now find ourselves. Here we find a social aspect because if we share background and education with other people we also have similar experiences to draw from when we seek the proper description of a situation. While the imagination finds its material in our experiences and memories it becomes clear how important a set of mutual experiences become for bringing up the mutual ideas we share within a community. Though the feeling of pleasure comes from a harmonious play of imagination and understanding, which cannot be arbitrary because it includes understanding, I believe we learn from Kant how the judgement of taste based on a subjective feeling is a judgement we can expect others to agree to because it will work along similar lines when we have a similar background.

5.

Bearing this in mind we can relate Kant to the beautiful thinking — *ars pulchre cogitandi* — of Baumgarten as well as the *ars bene dicendi* of the rhetoric — the art of speaking well. Speaking well is what characterises the moral character, the person who knows to say the right things. This person is the well educated; the person who has acquired the skills of acting as a true human being, someone with a beautiful soul, a *bel âme*. For educating this person the training was traditionally related to the liberal arts, *artes liberales*, among them the knowledge of literature, language and the art of argumentation which enables us to speak well within the cultural context we belong to. *Artes liberales* also belongs to the original characteristics of aesthetics (Baumgarten 1750/1758/2007, § 1).

The beautiful soul exercises good taste, which is to display sensibility towards certain cultural contexts and to demonstrate an ability to choose rightly within these contexts. Good taste in this sense is a matter of displaying this sensibility and not a standard for evaluating the set of norms present in the cultural context. Any community has its norms and will differ on how the beautiful soul should be, but my point is that it is not

a matter of a standard originating from a classical background within a bourgeois, humanistic culture; it can equally well be the subcultural group finding itself in opposition to classical education, or teenagers who have very rigid norms of the right way of dress and speak as well as places to go and gadgets to show.

When we wish to participate in the different cultural and social groups we have to learn how to behave within them, and this is something we learn through imitating the different products — the slang, the dress code, the bodily movements etc. The judgement of taste is of importance because through it we demonstrate our interpretation of the social context we are in. This interpretation is the result of practicing our sensorial faculties including keenness of sensation, imaginative disposition, penetrating insight, good memory, foresight, and expressive talent (Baumgarten 1750/1758/2007, §§ 30 ff.; for English translation I rely on Shusterman 2000a, 265). These are important ingredients in what Baumgarten called sensorial knowledge which he established as the focus of aesthetics.

Perhaps this sounds like a program for an art education, but the education is not exclusively for the artist but for the citizen — the education for becoming a citizen. This is in line with the debate introduced by Plato about the influence exercised by aesthetic products, and whether we should accept any kind of product or instead introduce some standards of evaluation. While to modern readers Plato seems problematic in the apparently strict censorship he imposes on the ideal republic, a book which is not exclusively on politics and the ideal republic but rather a book about the soul and its education, we should be reminded about the ongoing discussions on products of mass culture and their possible bad influence. The equivalent to Plato would be violent film and videogames, sexist TV-shows and similar cultural products that we debate in addition to the products of consumerism, entertainment, media etc. These products of our everyday life are to a large degree responsible for the experiences we have when we act in contemporary culture and we have to acknowledge them as crucial for our cultural understanding. However, like Plato and others we also need to debate them and ask for further aesthetic products to supplement our education that open up alternative perspectives, challenging our existing perspectives, and offer a new set of standards.

My reason for going back to Baumgarten and Kant has not been to

advocate the necessity of reading them nor to provide a historical study of early aesthetics. It is to highlight how the judgement of taste has a social aspect because by utilising it we express our understanding of, and relation to, a community through a feeling we can communicate to others. In addition, it is because Baumgarten and Kant explain why the different cultural products are important for our education because through them we learn to exercise the faculties responsible for our sensibility towards other people, our faculty of judgement.

6.

To conclude I will briefly touch upon the relevance of (philosophical) hermeneutics in relation to aesthetic education, also to suggest a different approach to the dialogical aesthetics than Kester's use of Habermas.

A key model in hermeneutics — and again I should probably emphasize philosophical to avoid confusion with literary hermeneutics — is the hermeneutical circle: The mutual dependency of part and whole for understanding. Here, a question arises: how do we ever enter this circle to begin with?

A word in use here is what we find in Schleiermacher: *divination*. It is our ability to be in accordance with what others say and do by repeating it in the words and actions we know ourselves. It is not a mechanical reproduction, nor is it a mysterious ability to step into the others place, but instead is a fundamental ingredient in our behaviour: we imitate and through imitation we acquire experiences and knowledge that we apply to the knowledge we already have (Schleiermacher 1988, 326 f.; cf. Bowie 1995, 163 ff.).

This returns us again to Baumgarten and Kant: to aesthetics as being concerned with our faculty of imagination, memory, poetic disposition etc., something we have to learn and practice through the examples we get from the products of aesthetic education. This is an education which trains our sensibility; our ability to immediately understand a specific situation and draw from our experiences ideas of what behaviour and what judgements are proper. This is a training for which literature, music, art etc. is important because not only do we acquire knowledge about different cultural and human matters but we also develop our ability to co-

ordinate elements, use a language with nuances, and detect proportions, compositions and relations etc. This is additionally developed through the bombardment of other cultural products, which form an important element as they establish the fundament for the culture we live in. This then, raises the important discussion about quality: do we recognise all types of aesthetic products as equally important or do we wish sometimes to raise a voice and argue for the preference of some product above others. If so do we then exercise this preference through our behaviour, which in itself always implies an aesthetic component?

My proposition is not to introduce another demarcation between different aesthetic products but to ask for the acknowledgement of a common ground for fine arts, minor arts, and popular culture. The latter demonstrates its sensibility towards the cultural context; it is exactly for that reason that it has become popular. Any other form of communication however, needs to display the same sensibility and respect the present agenda in order to perform on it. Another thing is if this performance should be a mere repetition or it should contribute to influences the present norms. But before we are able to influence we need to learn from the present agenda. And this learning goes through the senses and body — it is an aesthetic education.

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