

Richard Woodfield

AESTHETICS AT THE END OF THE CENTURY: DESSOIR'S PROJECT

Historians seem to agree that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* launched a tidal wave of books on the subject, mostly written in German. By the end of the nineteenth century the subject was in a state of crisis: philosophers had got lost in the giddy heights of abstraction, pursuing system building for the sake of it. Herbert Read, the first President of the British Society of Aesthetics, wrote in his book *Art Now*:

After Kant the world, as Jean Paul Richter said, swarmed with aestheticians. I have never been able to believe the idealistic conception of art, developed on the basis of Kant's aesthetic by writers like Fichte and Schelling, and given a more popular romantic expression by poets like Richter and Novalis, is worth the time that would be involved in mastering its mysteries. It consists mainly of a discussion of abstract categories like imagination and fancy, form and idea, and these are rarely, if ever, related to objective works of art.¹

And he went on to observe that "science is prior to philosophy, and a science of art must establish its facts before a philosophy of art can make use of them." In response to this situation, psychologists, who had recently broken away from philosophy, launched an alternative approach to the subject 'from below'. In their *History of Aesthetics*, Gilbert and Kuhn observed:

The old philosophical method, claimed Gustave Fechner, the pioneer of experimental aesthetics, moves "from above," from the universals down to the particulars. This was Schelling's, Hegel's, and even Kant's approach. Since however we do not believe any longer that we possess a reliable system, it is wise for us to choose the opposite way and build esthetics "from below." We have to start with facts and then rise, cautiously and gradually, to generalizations.²

The philosopher was dislodged from his chair as a teacher of aesthetics. But who was to replace him? The psychologist, the sociologist, or the historian of art? There are a great number of equally competent applicants. The new scientific tendency created many sciences of beauty instead of one, psychological, ethnological esthetics, and the like. The disintegration of the study was in rapid progress. It was arrested only at the end of the period under consideration, when the growing wealth of findings and tendencies was newly hedged in by the elastic and liberal conception of "Esthetics and the general Science of Art" proposed by Max Dessoir.³

Dessoir wrote a book *Aesthetics and the General Theory of Art*, published a journal of the same name from 1906 to 1943 and convened the first international congress on aesthetics in Berlin in 1913. Reading through the journal, one encounters a number of Germany's most important scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Although he drew a distinction between aesthetics and, what he called, the general science of the arts he emphasized the importance of maintaining a link between the two areas. This is a link that can still be found in the aims of the American and British Societies of Aesthetics and the practices of the national societies around the world. According to the American constitution:

The purpose of the Society is to promote study, research, discussion and publication in aesthetics. The term "aesthetics," in this connection, is understood to include all studies of the arts and related types of experience from a philosophical, scientific, or other theoretical standpoint, including those of psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural history, art criticism, and education. "The arts" include the visual arts, literature, music and theatre arts.

There has, however, been a drift away from Dessoir's conception of his project. That drift has a lot to do with increased specialization in the academic world and changes in the nature of art practice.

When Dessoir launched his project, the social sciences were just separating themselves out from philosophy, art history was only just emerging as an academic discipline and Kandinsky hadn't yet invented the art of pure abstraction. Aestheticians concerned themselves with perception and Dessoir's

project concerned itself with the double project of perception and art. Art historians were encouraged to philosophise, Dessoir's journal published two of Panofsky's important theoretical essays for example. Philosophers were encouraged to reflect on culture: Ernst Cassirer organized an aesthetics conference in Hamburg in 1930, to which Panofsky made a contribution. And sociologists could reflect on sensory experience: Georg Simmel wrote widely on the subject and regarded himself as a major influence on Berlin philosophical culture. His essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' is precisely on the sensory experience of the city. In this climate it made sense to ask whether there was such a thing as the history of sight, and one could expect scholars from a wide variety of different disciplines to get involved in the debate. I mention this particular topic because it was discussed both then, in the early years of the twentieth century, and now, in the current issue of the American *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. The difference is that in the contemporary debate, in the American journal, there isn't a single psychologist, sociologist, ethnologist or art historian in sight. The subject is dominated by philosophers clucking around the subject, like medieval theologians debating the number of angels that can sit on the head of a pin.

In the spirit of Dessoir's project, I would like to argue that there is a solution to the problem of whether there is such a thing as the history of vision and that to solve the problem one needs a combined interdisciplinary team of scholars intensely self-conscious about the way they reflect on art. At the beginning of the century, thought about art was unconsciously dominated by the mimetic principle. By the end of the century, thought is self-consciously antimimetic and conventionalist. I will unpack this as I proceed.

By the end of the 19th century and under the combined influence of academic art practice, the development of varieties of realism and naturalism in painting and the invention of photography, conventional wisdom declared that the artist was naturally inclined to paint what he saw. Departure from natural appearance was a matter of choice: two representative examples were Egyptian art and Japanese art. Tribal and "primitive" art were regarded as curiosities rather than as things on intrinsic visual merit. In the first two decades of the 20th century attitudes began to change. As a consequence of bumping into Georg Simmel in the Trocadéro Museum, Wilhelm Worringer was led to write *Abstraction and Empathy*, which was an application of *Volkpsychologie* to so-called abstract and naturalistic styles of art. Shortly before then, in 1901, Alois Riegl had published his *Late Roman Art Industry*, which analysed the development of antique art through from haptic to optic modes of perception. For Riegl, style was a product of an 'art drive', which was itself a product of a world view.

Ethnologists began to take a new interest in "primitive" and tribal art, and two attitudes emerged. The first was that phylogeny repeated ontogeny: there was a positive correlation between the development of "primitive" art and the art of the child. The second was that different art forms reflected different world-views and that tribal art was the artist's self-representation of his experience. Complicating evidence came from anthropologists experimenting with photography. On the one hand, subjects could not recognize themselves in their photographs, and on the other, film audiences were scared out of their wits and hid from the looming realities of the screen.⁴

The overall effect was to identify the style of an artwork as the product of a particular mentality reflecting a specific vision of the world. In his book *The Principles of Art*, published in 1915, Heinrich Wölfflin had declared that "Every artist finds certain visual possibilities before him, to which he is bound. Not everything is possible at all times. Vision itself has a history, and the revelation of these visual strata must be regarded as the primary task of art history." Later, in 1936, Walter Benjamin wrote "During long periods of history, the perception by the historical collective changes with the changes in their historical mode of being. The way in which human perception organizes itself – the medium in which it takes place – is conditioned not only naturally, but also historically." Following Riegl, he went on to say "The period of migration in which the late Roman art industry and the *Vienna Genesis* came into being, had not only a different art, but also a different perception from classical times."

The trouble with the idea of the history of vision is that Wölfflin himself knew that it was suspect. He was aware that both Alberti and Leonardo had observed that cast shadows take on their local colour although the practice of representing shadows in that way was not taken on until the nineteenth century. He got out

of the problem by suggesting that “it is always decorative principles, convictions of taste, to which the last decision is assigned.”

The main breakthrough came, however, with an observation made by the German Egyptologist Heinrich Schäfer. He assembled literary descriptions of perspectival effects in pre-Greek literature ranging from the Akkadian myth describing Etana’s flight to heaven, to the Bible and across to Confucius.⁵ He argued that there was an essential difference between perception and representation and that Egyptian art was notational rather than depictional. I have yet to discover whether there was any reaction to Schafer’s book amongst Dessoir’s community of scholars. Across in Vienna, Julius von Schlosser didn’t think much of Dessoir’s project. A person who might have picked up on the significance of the idea was Karl Bühler, who worked on the boundaries between linguistics, semiotics and the psychology of perception but I have no evidence of that. The person who did realize the full impact of Schafer’s discovery was, of course, Ernst Gombrich, who unraveled its implications in *Art and Illusion*, which is not about aesthetics but about the psychology of pictorial representation.

Gombrich argued that the history of art is based upon the development of skills to enable the artist to satisfy the demands placed on imagery in his epoch. The functions of visual imagery are different through and across cultures. The renaissance construction of naturalistic imagery emerged out of a symbolic base and while the discovery of linear perspective was important to the construction of naturalistic imagery, that was just one ingredient. Renaissance painting was Christian at the same time as being naturalistic. Masaccio’s *Holy Trinity*, for example, straddles both naturalistic and symbolic conventions in its representations of Christ, the Holy Ghost and God. Although the depiction of the architecture was realistic, the representation of the Trinity was symbolic. Although the depiction of Christ invited empathetic response, the Dove didn’t and nor did God. This painting, by a follower of Botticelli is a sign for the Archangel Raphael it is not a picture of Tobias on a stroll with an Angel. Take a close look at the way in which the angel is joined to Tobias: it’s an artifact of painting not a naturalistic depiction of a possible reality. This painting of the Virgin, St. Anne, Child and Lamb, by Leonardo, again straddles the domains of both symbolism and naturalism. It’s another sign but its composition is more complex, much more complex than the joined up hands of Raphael sign. The Virgin is the attribute of St. Anne, the child is the attribute of the Virgin and the lamb is the attribute of Christ. The Virgin’s uncomfortable presence on the lap of St. Anne is a compositional device to underwrite their sdymbolic relation: why else would one grown woman sit on the lap of another?

From the renaissance artists constructed increasingly sophisticated relational models to purvey naturalistic effects but it is in the nature of such models that a gain in one direction is at the expense of a loss in another. An illusory depicted field creates problems for a balanced pictorial surface. The highly legible quality of a purely symbolic image will be undermined by the qualitatively different demands of a naturalistic one. Add to that the demands of artistic virtuosity and priorities will shift and change. Against Panofsky’s view that perspective was a symbolic form, an idea drawn from Ernst Cassirer, Gombrich argued that it was a technical optical device used by artists who wanted to match the natural phenomenon of occlusion. It was a major discovery because it depended upon the recognition that the proportions between objects in a simulation would have to be different from the way in which they are judged in natural vision.

But as Gombrich recognized, this was not the end of the story. There is a difference between images with an existential import and images without, a difference between images that have been created to be taken for real things and images of purely imagined realities. To make this clearer we could turn to contemporary visual imagery. In discussing “the sign and the portrait” Jean-Paul Sartre remarked:

I can very well posit a centaur as existing (but absent). But when I look at the photographs in a magazine they ‘mean nothing to me’, that is, I may look at them without any thought that their subjects exist. In that case the persons whose photographs I see are reached through these photographs, but without existential position, exactly like Death and the Knight, who are reached through Dürer’s engraving, but without my placing them.⁶

There is a kind of blindness to existence that occurs through the use of what Baudrillard has called 'simulacra': images that are used simply for the sake of their existence as images. Contrary to Baudrillard, images can occasionally break through their surface boundaries. If the Gulf War took on the appearance of a phantasy construct, the publication in the *Guardian* newspaper of a dead and very burnt Iraqi soldier did have a very substantial impact on public opinion. Our experience of visual imagery is frequently mediated by the phenomenon of theatricality: the dominant imagery of the Gulf War was theatrical. But there are moments when our sense of the real intervenes and we search for the contingencies of that reality.

Roland Barthes has suggested that in fiction 'the reality effect' is generated by the descriptive element that has no contribution to make to the novel's plot. Norman Bryson has suggested that pictorial naturalism is generated by the accumulation of visual detail: the more the detail the greater the realism. But I believe the reality is much more complex than that. In the literary case, the reader searches through the story for the unexpected contingency that underwrites the plot.⁷⁷ There is a kind of inevitability to something going wrong for the boy Charles in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* who wears the stupid hat. Isn't a man who wears a hat like that doomed?! And although nineteenth century academic painters could produce exemplary nudes, their unreality is born out by contrast with Rembrandt and Manet's. With Bouguereau one is in a kind of Disney fantasy land; with Rembrandt one feels oneself in the presence of a real woman. And the spectators to Manet's *Olympia* most certainly felt in the presence of a real woman: a recognisable prostitute who not only walked the streets but visited the Salon itself.⁸⁸ Contingency features in the structure of the work to the degree that even when we've seen Hitchcock's *Psycho* a hundred times, we still grip the edges of our seats in the infamous shower scene: we *notice* the shadow against the shower curtain and we *re-notice* it every time we watch the film. The *re-noticing* involves an act of *re-cognition* and as one repeats the *re-viewing* of the film one's sense of the inherent structure of narrative details increases.

Walter Benjamin argued that it was only the photographs of the past that had an auratic presence and that contemporary photographs just reproduced experience. That auratic presence depended on a notion of "what would have become":

One comes upon the picture of Dauthendey – the photographer and father of the poet – from around the time of his wedding, seen with the wife whom one day shortly after the birth of their sixth child he found in the bedroom of his Moscow house with arteries slashed. She is seen beside him here, he holds her; her glance, however, goes past him, directed into an unhealthy distance. If one concentrated long enough on this picture one would recognize how sharply the opposites touch here. The most exact technique can give the presentation a magical value that a painted picture can never again possess for us. All the artistic preparations of the photographer and all the design of the positioning of his model to the contrary, the viewer feels an irresistible compulsion to seek the tiny spark of accident, the here and now.⁹⁹

Paradoxically, it is that sense of the implicit logic of 'hereness and nowness' that Manet and the artists of Impressionism, in the mimetic tradition, wanted to capture: the *aesthesis* of the moment. Photographers using impressionist conventions were determined to elevate their images to the status of art: the very falsity of their imagery undermined their project. By contrast, the unmanipulated image, retains an authenticity in relation to the situation in which it was made.

This example takes me back to Kant and Dessoir's project. It is essential to Kant's aesthetics, and later aesthetics for that matter, that the work of art enables the spectator to distance herself from the object of perception, that belief in the existence of the depicted object plays no role in its perception. But I think that the matter is far more complicated than that. The art historian, ethnographer, anthropologist and, indeed, Egyptologist need to work together to fathom out the mysteries of how images have worked. Contemporary artists and critics need to work together to understand the ways in which artworks function today. It is only after they have done their work that the aesthetician is in a position to comment on what they have done. My main criticism of contemporary aesthetics is the same as Herbert Read's: it dwells in the giddy heights of abstraction without addressing itself to the issues that have confronted artists in the past and today. Let us hope that SANART will continue to maintain the connection between practising artists and other scholars in the field besides philosophically trained aestheticians.

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- ¹1. H. Read, *Art Now*, London 1968 , pp. 26-7.
 - ²2. K. E. Gilbert & H. Kuhn, *A History of Aesthetics*, New York 1939, p. 525.
 - ³3. Gilbert & Kuhn, p. 527.
 - ⁴4. I have addressed this issue in 'Form, Expression and the Photograph', *Interface: Bradford Studies in Language, Culture and Society*, 2 (1996), pp. 263-284.
 - ⁵5. Heinrich Schäfer, *Von ägyptischer Kunst*, Leipzig 1919.
 - ⁶6. *The Psychology of Imagination*, London 1972, p. 26.
 - ⁷7. I have presented this argument at length in my article "L'effèt du réel: an alternative account" in a special issue of the Polish philosophy journal *Dialectics and Humanism* edited by Harold Osborne 1989.
 - ⁸8. On this subject see the discussion in T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, London 1985, pp. 79-146. I can't understand why Clark failed to make reference to Zola's *L'Oeuvre*, which described such an encounter.
 - ⁹9. W. Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography' in *One-Way Street*, London 1979, p. 243.