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The Subversion of Beauty

Epigraph

In due time, the theory of aesthetics will have to account not only for the delight in Kantian beauty and the sublime, but for the phenomena like aesthetic violence and the aestheticization of violence, of aesthetic abuse and intrusion, the blunting of sensibility, its perversion, and its poisoning.


I. Introduction:

Aesthetics has traditionally been concerned with understanding the experience of beauty in the arts and in nature. In the contemporary world, however, aesthetic values are no longer confined to the museum and the scenic drive where they are honored but kept isolated and innocuous. Aesthetic experiences and values have now become increasingly prominent in all areas of modern life, raising conflicts with values in morality, religion, economics, environment, and social life.

Such experiences are largely, though not entirely, perceptual and occur in various ways, both directly through sensory engagement, and indirectly through sensory imagination. The broad scope of perceptual experience in the contemporary arts and artistic practices has led to the proliferation of sensory engagement in distinctive and sometimes unique ways. This developed capacity has been refined in the arts but it is also diffused in an endless variety of ways and places throughout people’s activities and practices.

The concern with perceptual experience pervades the history of philosophical aesthetics. We only need think of Plato’s suspicion of the moral influence of music and poetry because of their seductive qualities and enervating influence, and their enticing and compelling though irrational appeal. Together with Aristotle’s recognition of the cathartic effect of tragic drama, both of these seminal figures recognized the powerful and emotionally compelling force of perceptual experience. This is a theme that continued with greater or lesser force in the development of Western aesthetics, leading in the mid-eighteenth century to Baumgarten’s
designation of *aisthēsis*, literally, perception by the senses, as the science of sensory knowledge directed toward beauty, and to considering art as the perfection of sensory awareness. We do not sufficiently credit the fact that the origins of aesthetic value lie in sense experience. This is shown not only in the etymology of the term ‘aesthetics’ but also in the dependence of aesthetic appreciation on the sensory content of our encounter with a work of art or a natural landscape. This encounter centers on perceptual experience: acuteness in viewing, listening, touching—the full somatic engagement with the rich world of sensible experience in which we are inextricably embedded.3

It is not necessary to review here the subsequent history of aesthetics in order to follow the expanding presence of sense experience through the twentieth century and into the present one. A sensory presence has never been more influential than now, when the expanded scope of sense experience and of subject-matter entertains no limit and admits no restraint. We now have aesthetic inquiry that includes the involvement of all the senses, not only the traditional distant ones of sight and hearing, but the bodily, contact senses of touch, smell, taste, kinesthesia, and the like.

At the same time, the range of activities and experiences has broadened so that nothing is excluded from aesthetic uses and participation. Aestheticians now probe the folk and the popular arts, as well as the traditional fine arts, and aesthetic inquiry extends to food, sport, environment, and culture. Along with an unrestricted scope of attention, aesthetic inquiry now explores the entire range of perceptual experience of the body and its social matrix. This enlargement of the scope of aesthetics has flowered in such areas as environmental aesthetics, the aesthetics of everyday life, social aesthetics, and the aesthetics of politics. The enlargement of aesthetic inquiry has increased our awareness of its active, participatory character, a condition I call *aesthetic engagement*. All this has led me to think of aesthetics as the theory of sensibility.

As the theory of sensibility, aesthetics focuses on the range, qualities, and nuances of sensory experience, and on its discrimination, acuteness, and subtlety, its perceptual, experienced significance and its emotional component. Thus from this standpoint, aesthetics embraces the full range of perceptual experience, and cognitive factors (history, information, theory, interpretation, and such) are relevant only insofar as they enhance direct perceptual experience.
This enlargement of aesthetic awareness has had a profound effect on the field of aesthetics. Not only does aesthetic inquiry now embrace the objects, activities, and experiences of human life without constraint; it necessarily implicates other areas of philosophy. When aesthetic inquiry embraces social domains, ethical and even metaphysical concerns cannot be ignored. When eyes sensitive to beauty in art and nature encounter the objects and activities of ordinary life, they see not only their hidden charms but also their failings. Thus aesthetics has come to include a negative domain and become a moral instrument and even a political factor in developing new thought in cultural analysis.

The aesthetics of everyday life offers a fresh perspective on the world of ordinary experience, revealing facets that have long gone unremarked. These experiences may not be spectacular and may even be routine. Aesthetic value is discovered in common objects, conditions, and situations, ranging from the houses, landscaping, and trees encountered during a walk in one’s own neighborhood, to basking in the spring sunshine; from tossing a ball back and forth and even, one scholar has suggested, to finding a certain aesthetic satisfaction in hanging laundry. As Yuriko Saito has noted, "We are yet to develop an aesthetic discourse regarding artifacts such as utensils, furniture, and other objects with which we interact in everyday environment and activities that we undertake with them, such as cleaning, cooking, and socializing with others." All these offer occasions of delight in the sensible experience of an ordinary situation and the sheer sensory pleasure of being alive.

We can see, then, that aesthetic experience pervades every society and every aspect of sensibility. Some things that affect that experience are obvious, such as our physical endowments, educational and recreational opportunities, life activities, and previous aesthetic experiences. Many hidden factors also affect sensible experience, such as unknown physical or perceptual endowments and limitations and, most striking, ethnic and cultural influences.

II. The co-optation of sensibility

Aesthetic sensibility is profoundly influenced by the experiences and practices that characterize mass consumer culture. While pervasive, many of these are hidden and their influence undetected. An aesthetic critique is uniquely capable of revealing their subtle force. Because of its ubiquity, sensible experience has many manifestations, both overt and hidden. Let us consider some largely covert practices by which aesthetic sensibility has been subtly appropriated and exploited. These practices have resulted in what may be called “the co-
optation of sensibility.” Their damaging consequences to health, society, and environment are incalculable. Let me explain.

As one cannot help being aware, the developed world has fostered an industrial-commercial culture obsessed with profitability. From schools to public agencies, no institution is immune to the business imperative of reducing costs and increasing profitability. This is dramatically different from the *raison d’être* of service institutions, which is to meet people’s needs, assist them in fulfilling their goals, and promote the transmission and enhancement of the culture. These institutions are particularly vulnerable under a business model, since the high labor costs of providing services is a major expense and directly impedes the maximization of profit. This model has taken an increasingly firmer hold on schools and universities, on health care, and on public services of every kind. All have been subsumed under the standard of profit-making enterprises. Although my observations make special reference to practices in the U.S., they have global relevance wherever these practices are found the capability for the experience and appreciation of aesthetic value, which I call here inclusively ‘beauty,’ has been subverted. Indeed, those capacities of human sensibility have been deliberately appropriated and distorted in mass consumer culture in at least three distinct ways: by gastronomic co-optation, technological co-optation, and emotional and psychological co-optation. By controlling, appropriating, altering, and impairing the capacities of human perception, these forms of co-optation undermine the free sensibility that is the heart of aesthetic appreciation, thus subverting the very possibilities of aesthetic value.

Commercial and political practices have developed slowly and irresistibly to control and shape the very capacities for perceptual experience, a process that is *the co-optation of sensibility*. It consists in the appropriation of the capacity for sensible experience in the interests of mass marketing and corporate profits. Moreover, the political process has itself come increasingly under the influence of this economic model and to the degree that it is often dominated directly and indirectly by its interests. How does mass consumer culture subvert the experience of beauty? Let me offer some examples of three domains in which the co-optation of sensibility in mass consumer culture takes place. These practices have become a global menace to human health, cultural pluralism, and well-being overall.

A. *gustatory co-optation*
The first mode of sensible co-optation to consider is gustatory co-optation. One might ask what relevance this has for aesthetics. I have several reasons for beginning with this mode of co-optation. One is that the aesthetics of food has emerged as an interest in aesthetic theory as well as in practice, generating serious discussion in the recent literature. The flagrant abuse of gustatory sensibility is so widespread and deleterious to health that it provides a vivid illustration of the phenomenon of co-optation that I am identifying.

Having a sweet tooth is more than an innocent indulgence; it carries consequences for health. Sugar is associated with what is called the metabolic syndrome: obesity, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Moreover, sugar is addictive and plays a part in encouraging the consumption of other addictive substances, including the caffeine in soft drinks such as Coca-Cola and coffee, and alcohol in a range of drinks. Salt is another food substance where a tasteful and necessary substance is often used to excess in prepared foods and a “taste” for salt is encouraged. At the same time, its influence in raising blood pressure is well-documented. Other gastronomic examples are plentiful, such as the high use of fats and oils in deep-fried fast food, a habitual practice that leads to high cholesterol levels and obesity. Junk foods in general use excessive amounts of sugar, salt, and fat, together with chemical preservatives for the producers’ convenience. Our very sensibility is being distorted as well as our health affected in order to promote addictive consumption and profitability.

B. technological co-optation

Perceptual experiences are fabricated through chemical as well as electronic and digital technology. The conveniences are obvious and the products are widely adopted, but there are some hidden sensory costs that are not generally recognized. Smell, for example, is a sense modality that has been co-opted. False fragrances are infused into a multitude of products, from hand cream and bar soap to laundry and dish detergents, so that it is difficult to determine how something actually smells. Fragrant overlays suffuse hotel rooms and emanate from pets and people. A principal source of perceptual information has been lost.

Still another impingement on sensibility lies in the colors used in clothing, home decoration and, of course, in print advertising and on the Internet. Strident and garish colors are widely used to attract attention to signs and clothing on commercial strips as well as TV and internet ads, so that subtle and muted colors are not noticed or have simply disappeared from the marketplace altogether.
Music has a place in nearly every culture and is omnipresent in modern developed societies. Sound is an elusive phenomenon. While we can usually identify its source, sound spreads broadly and, like perfume, tends to envelop the listener. This is one of the appealing qualities of musical experience, but in some cases this attractive feature is exaggerated and intrusive so as to become oppressive and inescapable. Extremely high volume is used in some rock concerts to increase the appeal of the music and create a manic audience response. Such high volume is intended to impress the audience by its sheer force, and indeed one can often literally feel the physical pressure of the sound waves. This presumably attracts a large attendance and makes such entertainment highly profitable. Other consequences to auditory sensibility may take a little longer to recognize, such as the hearing loss from damage to the tiny hair-like cells in the cochlea of the inner ear that are the auditory nerve receptors.

Moreover, the auditory environment is not free from pollution. Because sound is intangible and invisible, it is easily imposed on others with impunity, like smoke and smell. Public space has long been taken over by businesses that sell sound in the form of canned music to fill empty space. Commercial sound saturates transitional public places, such as waiting rooms, bars, restaurants, malls, and even streets and parks. And when canned sound is not present, people cooperate by supplying it through their own headsets. Silence, even relative silence, has become a rarity.

Auditory co-optation can be recognized when poor sound reproduction in speakers and microphones makes its presence apparent, although this is less common as the technology improves, while at the same time electronic sounds have widely displaced those produced naturally. Indeed, the ubiquity of hand-held electronic devices has tended to alter auditory sensibility. It not only usurps perceptual attention but entices people into centering their attention on I-phones, cell phones, tablets, and lap-top computers, seducing them into alternative perceptual worlds at the cost of being unaware of their actual perceptual environment. Obviously I am speaking of the perceptual consequences of the abusive over-use of such devices and not of their practical convenience.

Another domain of technological co-optation occurs from the false, impaired perception of architectural space and mass through deceptive design. Mirror walls that distort space, disguised entrances that confuse the approaching pedestrian, towering masses that intimidate and oppress the body are some ways in which architectural design can be used to overpower
and subjugate human sensibility. Instances of these and other forms of technological co-optation can be vastly expanded.

C. psychological co-optation

Then there are the means by which sensibility is distorted or drugged. One of the most widespread and insidious practices of cultivating sensory pleasure for profit is, of course, cigarette smoking. Few smokers enjoyed their first cigarette: the taste is unpleasant, the smoke choking, the physical effects nauseating. But the appeal of emulating celebrities, the desire to display sophistication, the attraction of transgression, and peer pressure are powerful incentives. Even more are its narcotic effects. The tobacco industry uses these successfully to create a desire in many people so strong that it overcomes their initial distaste, gradually leading to an acquired taste and to nicotine addiction with its deleterious consequences in the high incidence of lung and other forms of cancer. As its ill effects have become well-known and legislative restrictions have impeded its spread, cigarette smoking is being replaced by a range of e-cigarettes that provide nicotine often camouflaged by unrelated flavors designed to entice children into addictive behavior.

The use of alcohol has been a regular pastime for many people, reinforced in popular culture, on TV, and in film by romanticizing drinking and appealing to self-indulgence. This is much like the way cigarette smoking was associated with sophistication until its damaging effects on health were shown to be so widespread and costly that legal measures were enacted in some developed countries to restrict smoking in public places and by the young. Alcohol abuse may be somewhat less visible than smoking, but it is a public health problem of epidemic proportions. At the same time, the production and dissemination of alcohol is a major industry for stimulating sensibilities. Its manifold forms, from beer, wine, and iced tea to mixed and straight drinks, is widely encouraged on many social and economic levels. The excessive use of alcohol is a public health menace that carries high personal and social costs. All these forms of altered and distorted sensibility, while ubiquitous, are overshadowed by the epidemic of mind-altering drugs and chemicals that have swept the industrial and developing worlds. I can only cite these as forms of emotional (and physical) co-optation here; they are, more broadly and directly, major public health issues that undermine personal and social life.

The present-day obsession with psychedelic and narcotic drugs to induce altered states of consciousness supports a huge illicit industry that encourages a desire for exaggerated and extreme perceptual experience for relief, escape, or adventure, all at the cost of health and
normal functioning. The enormous quantity of prescription and non-prescription drugs consumed in the U.S. has reached the proportions of an epidemic.

Another form of psychological co-optation has long been used by religious and political social institutions. This consists in cultivating and playing on people’s emotions or religious and patriotic feelings to influence behavior for political, social, or commercial purposes. Developed and enhanced by modern techniques of marketing, advertising, propaganda, and other forms of thought control, emotional responses are cultivated to create false consciousness and manipulate behavior whose authentic base lies in the normal complex of natural feeling.¹⁴

A related area in which sensibility has been appropriated is pornography. Erotic sensibility is easily co-opted, and the pornography industry profits enormously by extrapolating people’s normal erotic desires from their personal context. It does this by removing feelings of caring and the richness of complex human relationships, narrowing erotic sensibility into pure titillation, and exaggerating it by excess at the cost of healthy eroticism.

III. Co-optation

These three forms of co-optation provide only a brief description of some of the most obvious forms of sensory intrusion, manipulation, alteration, and numbing, and often they overlap or merge. The word 'co-optation' has a powerful meaning for a social and political critique. It means something like "appropriation," "taking something over."¹⁵ Marcuse spoke of "the social and psychological mechanisms at work in society that make the proletariat complicit in their own domination."¹⁶ The co-optation is hidden so that the "victim" is entirely unaware of the process. Moreover, the appropriation is not just hidden; it is embedded in the person.

How is this an issue for aesthetics? It follows from understanding aesthetics as the theory of sensibility that aesthetics should be concerned not only with how sensory experience is enhanced but also with how it is abused. This is in support of a critical aesthetics, an aesthetics that supports a social and political critique.

I am claiming that a principal characteristic of our contemporary mass, corporate culture includes practices that appropriate people’s sensibilities, first by dwelling on certain sensory satisfactions, second by over-emphasizing and exaggerating them in order to entice people to purchase products and services, products that are often unhealthy, harmful, addictive, or simply unnecessary, and third by taking "normal" sensory experiences and turning them into false needs, needs that are exaggerated and excessive. Mass corporate culture turns humans into
consumers, not only by propaganda in the form of sophisticated advertising designed to create and intensify desires, but by re-structuring people’s very capacity for sensible experience, which is the very substance of human life. This constitutes a commodification of the human sensorium.

We can see how an aesthetic analysis of the mechanisms of mass culture can reveal many of the hidden ways in which sensibility is appropriated and controlled. It may not be too far-fetched to recall Aristotle’s definition of a slave as a living tool. How else should we think of a person whose sensibility has been so taken over that one’s very perception of the world is controlled by others. This is more than physical domination, more than thought control; it is control over the very substance of experience. Would it be too strong to call this total enslavement? Through such an analysis as this essay suggests, aesthetics is empowered to become an instrument of emancipation.\(^\text{17}\) \(^\text{18}\)

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Recently discovered internal sugar industry documents, provide compelling evidence that the sugar industry had initiated research expressly intended to exonerate sugar as a major risk factor for coronary heart disease. The documents show that a trade group called the Sugar Research Foundation, known today as the Sugar Association, paid three Harvard scientists the equivalent of about $50,000 in today's dollars to publish a 1967 review of research on sugar, fat and heart disease. The studies used in the review were handpicked by the sugar group. Anahad O'Connor, “Sugar Backers Paid to Shift Blame to Fat,” The New York Times, New York edition, September 13, 2016, p. A1.

Selected critique of “soft” drinks: Coca-Cola Company, PepsiCo Inc, Nestlé SA. Except for bottled water, these drinks tend to be overloaded with sugar, which is addictive and harmful. The high consumption of sugar is linked to cardio-vascular disease, metabolic syndrome (increases risk for heart disease, stroke, diabetes), and type 2 diabetes. Coca-Cola (addictive: narcotic, sugar), . A typical 12 oz (355 ml) can contains 38g of sugar (usually in the form of HFCS). In 2013, Coke products could be found in over 200 countries worldwide, with consumers downing more than 1.8 billion company beverage servings each day. Coca-Cola contains 34 mg of caffeine per 12 fluid ounces (9.8 mg per 100 ml). Kola nuts act as a flavoring and the source of caffeine in Coca-Cola. Now cocaine free. Remains high in sugar and caffeine.

The “Big Mac,” for example, is a hamburger consisting of two high-fat patties topped by a slice of American cheese, with dressing, lettuce, pickles, and onions on a sesame bun, all of which contains as much or more fat than protein. In the U.S., A Big Mac contains 29 grams of fat to 25 grams of protein, with similar proportions in the many other countries where Macdonald's restaurants are found. Japan has the highest proportion of fat: 30.5 grams to 25.5 grams of protein. See the article and references on "Big Mac" in Wikipedia (accessed 11 Nov 2014).

French fries are a striking example, where the fat-saturated outer crust often penetrates and displaces any soft potato core. In addition, cream or cheese sauces are ladled over many dishes, preceded by cream soup and accompanied by a lavish supply of rolls and butter, not to mention the rich dessert offerings. (I speak here obviously of Western, especially American cuisine.) Please note that I am not condemning the appeal of such foods but rather the encouragement of patterns of exaggerated taste and over-consumption that underlie their use. Taste is heavily influenced by learning, and the omnipresence of advertising encourages the acquisition of such inflated desires.

Techniques of persuasion span the range of rationality

1. direct techniques to which people consciously respond and deliberately accept:
   a. logical proof
   b. debate
   c. empirical research

2. indirect forms of persuasion by which people are enticed or inadvertently slip into accepting:
   a. ritual
   b. rhetoric
   c. propaganda
   d. advertising
   e. sales techniques

Cf. the work of Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse.
See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Marcuse.

Spinoza may have been prescient: "...[A]ll those things which bring us pleasure are good. But seeing that things do not work with the object of giving us pleasure, and that their power of action is not tempered to suit our advantage, and, lastly, that pleasure is generally referred to one part of the body more than to the other parts; therefore most emotions of pleasure (unless reason and watchfulness be at hand), and consequently the desires arising therefrom, may become excessive. Moreover we may add that emotion leads us to pay most regard to what is agreeable in the present, nor can we estimate what is future with emotions equally vivid." *The Ethics*, Part IV, Prop. XXX, p. 242.

"We may thus readily conceive the power which clear and distinct knowledge, and especially that ... founded on the actual knowledge of God [nature], possesses over the emotions: if it does not absolutely destroy them, in so far as they are passions...; at any rate, it causes them to occupy a very small part of the mind." *The Ethics*, Part V, Prop. XX, Note, V, p. 256.

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