

Overview of Aesthetic Formalism Debates

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§ 1. Multiple Formalism Debates

There are many issues and debates around and about something called “aesthetic formalism” across many kinds of art media—for example, literature, painting, architecture, music and so on. While much seems to be in common between those issues and debates, there are also differences. Presumably this is either because of differences between the media in question, or because of differences between the traditions that surround those art media. There is a question about how much we should strive for unity in various employments of the word “form” about the arts. There are also debates about formalism in the aesthetics of nature—of the non-human world, that is. Those debates are also similar in some respects to some of the other debates over aesthetic formalism about various art media, but there are also differences from those debates. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile attempting to sketch some very general issues about formalism about our aesthetic lives.

§ 2. Questions

One range of questions concerns aesthetic experiences. What are they?; what are they like?; and what do they depend on? But there are also normative questions about what they *should* be, and what is *appropriate* aesthetic experience of those things: which experiences are genuine, and which are bogus or defective, in some way? Which are inferior, which superior? Normative views on these questions will affect practical issues concerning the value of our aesthetic experiences, and about the value of beauty in the arts and nature. That, in turn, will have ramifications for practical policy questions about the obligations that human beings have with respect to the arts and nature, whether they are obligations of individuals, or norms guiding policies of groups, institutions and governments. So, questions about our experiences of the arts and nature are both questions of intellectual curiosity, and also questions with practical importance.

We can think about our aesthetic *experience* of things, or we can think about aesthetic *properties* of things. This raises a metaphysical issue about whether aesthetic properties are in the world or rather in our experience, or at least internally related to our experiences. I do not propose to explore those questions here, interesting though they are (see further Zangwill 2001).

§ 3. Formalism and Historical Properties

Let us begin by asking quite generally what formalism is. It is notable that the simplest thing to say is what it is opposed to. Those who oppose formalism about the arts typically claim that the *history* of things matters to their aesthetic properties and to our aesthetic experience of them. In our thinking about visual arts and sculpture, for example, anti-formalists say that we cannot have genuine experi-

ences of the aesthetic properties of things or have a proper aesthetic experiences of things if we do not know about their history of production. The aesthetic properties of works of art depend on their histories. Formalists typically deny that the aesthetic properties of works of art depend on history, and they should deny that the proper aesthetic experience of them, depends on knowledge of their historical properties. Whether history is or is not relevant to the aesthetic properties of works of art and to our experience of them, is a much-discussed issue. British formalists at the beginning of the 20th century would be classic examples of such formalists. Clive Bell and Roger Fry denied the role of history in constituting the aesthetic characteristics of works of visual arts (Bell 1914, Fry 1920). However, they also had positive views about what *is* relevant. Formalism, in any domain, is a *combination* of negative and positive theses. The negative thesis says what is not relevant; and what is not relevant in the case of the visual arts is history. But there is also a claim about what *is* relevant and what is positively important to our aesthetic appreciation of the aesthetic properties of paintings, sculptures and so on. Visual formalists typically claimed it was lines, colors and represented spatial masses in paintings. The viewer was supposed to abstract from the *content* of paintings—what they are of—which is tied to their history. What a painting is of depends partly on the painters intentions and other facts concerning how the painting came into existence with its properties. That, they claimed, was not relevant to the beauty of paintings.

The positive formalist thesis is, very roughly, that we can appreciate things without having to know their history of production because we experience their lines, colours and shapes. So, you can look and see, and appreciate the aesthetic value of things, and that looking and seeing does not have to be done in the light of sophisticated knowledge of their history. Aesthetic appreciation is something quite naive and immediate. This is something emphasized by Clement Greenberg in his writing on the arts (for example, Greenberg 1999).

One thing we see here—and this is something which is transcends the differences among different debates about formalism—is a combination of positive and negative theses. Such a combination is always at issue when issues of formalism are debated—such as those concerning literature, architecture, music and nature. There is a positive thesis and a negative thesis. The issue is over what is and is not relevant to the aesthetic qualities of things and what we do and do not need to know in order to make aesthetic judgments about those things. What varies from area to area is what goes into the negative and positive buckets, as it were, but in every area where there is a debate over formalism, there is a distinction between negative and positive claims. In the case of visual arts, and in case of many other arts, it is the relevance or irrelevance of history that is debated. Interestingly, when we come to the aesthetics of nature, that is not the main issue. However, for many artforms, that is indeed the substance of the debates.

§ 4. Appearances

We need a more systematic conception of the *positive* claims of formalism, where that is a claim about that on which formal aesthetic properties depend. Recall the lines, colors and shapes of Bell and Fry. Such a basis is unlikely to be right quite generally for many other formalism debates about the arts, which is important for the debate over the aesthetics of nature. It seems that in many areas

of aesthetic discussion it is the role of *appearances* that is central—or rather, what I am going to call “mere appearances”. And the formalist in the aesthetics of painting is someone who claims that aesthetic properties are generated by, or grounded in, the mere appearances of things.

This notion of appearance applies both to sensory properties of things plus their shapes. Things can look red and look square. It is how lines, colours and three-dimensional masses appear to us that is aesthetically important. Formal aesthetic properties are those generated by mere appearances.

What is an appearance property? Appearances are typically experienced or potentially experienced. Crucially, things that have appearances need not appear as they are. We may know how they are, but when they do not look or sound like that, they are *mere* appearances. In the famous example of the Müller-Lyer illusion, the lines look of different lengths even though we know that they are the same length. The appearances of the thing are not ‘penetrated’, as psychologists say, by our knowledge of the fact that they are the same lengths. They still carry on looking different. These kinds of appearances are common in our sensory experiences.

There is a relativity of appearances to a kind of observers. For example, for Europeans, the moon looks like the face of a man—the man in the moon. But if you are from East Asia, you are more likely to see a rabbit pounding rice. That is how it looks to many people. The example shows how appearances can vary between observers. This allows, in principle, that people who know more about things can experience different appearances from those who know less. For visual formalism, it is lines, colors and shapes that are determinants of formal beauty, since appearances of lines, colors and shapes are not normally penetrated by knowledge. But in principle there can be two similarly colored patches in different color contexts that look different colors even though we know that they are similar; and this difference could be aesthetically significant.

§ 5. What about Representational Beauty?

Let us now consider the plausibility of formalism, which implies a certain restrictiveness about what determines aesthetic properties, in particularly beauty. Consider paintings. Of course, to understand paintings and appreciate them if they are representational paintings, we need to know what is represented. In particular, we have to know some history to know what the painting is of. Many paintings are representational paintings, and so you cannot just view these things as abstract works of art because that is not what they are. They are representational works, and so to appreciate them we have to understand what is being represented.

My view is that we should endorse some version of Richard Wollheim’s theory of representation (Wollheim 1980). On that kind of view, representation is partly historical; the thing represents what it does partly because of the representational intentions of the person who made it. This means that there are likely to be aesthetic properties or beauties of representational paintings that depend on what they represent and how they are represented. A painting’s representational properties depend on its history; so, the beauties or aesthetic qualities of the painting also depend on its history. There is no way around that. Here I would like to import Kant’s idea of dependent beauty (Kant 2000, section 16): something can be beautiful as a thing with a certain function. This is the best way to think of representational paintings, as things with representational functions. Some things have beauty as

representations. So, when a representation of a tree is beautiful, it is beautiful *qua* representation of a tree; and that is a non-formal value because its beauty depends on its history, and in order to appreciate it we have to know its history.

§ 6. Moderate Formalism

Clearly, people find much beauty in the *way* things are represented. Nevertheless, such works typically *also* have formal aesthetic values; they can have both kinds of values. The view that they can have both I call “moderate formalism”, which is intended to sound very reasonable. The thought is common-sensical because it does not deny the existence of non-formal aesthetic values, which obviously exist in many works of visual arts and in other arts forms. Nevertheless, many works also have formal aesthetic properties that do not depend on history. One and the same work can have both kinds of aesthetic qualities—formal and non-formal. Furthermore, there can also be some works (non-representational abstract works) that *only* have formal aesthetic values and, equally, some works that *only* have non-formal aesthetic values, even though there are many works that have both formal and non-formal aesthetic values. That is moderate formalism. (See further Zangwill 2001.)

One would have thought that moderate formalism is a sensible compromise view, but in fact it is not accepted generally because many people reject formalism even for non-representational abstract works of art. An instance is Kendall Walton (Walton 1970); also, in architectural theory, there are those who want to prioritize the meanings of buildings, who say that all buildings have a meanings and that those meanings are the important thing about them (Norbert-Schulz 1974). Theorists of this sort do not allow that there are some buildings or works of art that only have formal aesthetic features, and they do not allow that in complex works of art, among all the other values, are some important formal aesthetic values that do not depend on history. This also contradicts moderate aesthetic formalism.

An extreme formalist might resist this commonsensical moderate formalism, which grants the existence of representational beauties, urging that paintings are complicated things. Paintings do have what they called ‘literary’ qualities (such as a certain religious theme), and these are indeed determined by its history, but the extreme formalist thought is these are not relevant to our aesthetic experience of the thing and to the beauty of the thing. This is not to deny that there are literary properties of some paintings and other works of art. They do have these literary properties, and they are also can be very interesting in their own right. Formalism is not, or should never have been, intended to be, a thesis about what’s ‘important’ in a work of art, in some generic sense. That would be an uninteresting kind of debate to have because works of arts are complicated. What is more profitable to think about is the *aesthetic* nature of these things, which might be just *part* of how they are. There is an interesting issue about what is relevant or irrelevant to the aesthetic qualities of things, and then, running in parallel or alongside that, there is an issue about what is or is not relevant to our aesthetic experience of things. In the case of visual art, the extreme formalist view is that (appearances of) lines, colors and shapes *are* aesthetically relevant and the history of production, and representational contents that depend on the history of production are *not* aesthetically relevant.

However, the dismissal by extreme formalists of representational beauties is surely too radical.

There are representational arts, like paintings. And representational paintings have non-formal values that depend on their representational properties, where something is represented as a tree or a man. There is no getting away from this beauty, although Bell and Fry deny it. That is too much of a departure from actual aesthetic experience, and from what we might call “folk aesthetics”. Conservatism about folk aesthetics, then, favors moderate formalism, at least about the visual arts. In many other areas where formalism is debated, such as music, architecture and nature, there is a similar dialectic, with conservatism about our actual aesthetic lives favouring a moderate formalist view.*

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