

“Collaborate”

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At a glance, the future of academic studies of aesthetics looks grim. New challenges will surely give rise to new opportunities, but not all of the imminent changes seem welcome or desirable.

Adopting the perspective of someone who works in philosophical aesthetics and its history – though I recognize that not all members of the American Society of Aesthetics find their homes in departments of philosophy or see themselves as doing philosophical aesthetics – I would like to make a few observations, some of them surely more controversial than others.

In the near future, there will continue to be a more pronounced emphasis on professional education. The future of academic studies of aesthetics will be influenced by an increase in professional and pre-professional programs in the academy in North America. This movement will likely in time have a global effect. (Japan recently declared its renewed dedication to education in science and technology, just as it cut humanities departments.) The US pedagogical tradition and philosophy of education make the professionalization of the academy easier than in countries with a classical high school, a *Gymnasium* or *liceo classico*, though if current trends continue, these countries are likely to adopt changes in American education as well. The shift toward professionalization is evident, for instance, in the growing presence and power of grant-wielding foundations seeking to “integrate” (as one foundation puts it) the humanities and liberal arts into pre-professional and professional programs in business, education, nursing, and health sciences.

In a 2015 Republican Primary debate, US senator Marco Rubio pronounced that we need more welders and fewer philosophers. In a sense, this is nothing new, and not very surprising. It is hard to think of a time when philosophy was considered important or crucial in the minds of Americans. Indeed, the debate about the “usefulness” of philosophy is traceable back to ancient Athens. But the sentiment, with roots in American history and philosophy of education, appears to be growing. In this vein, the disturbing decrease in tenure-track jobs in academia and in the humanities in particular will make matters worse.

Like other disciplines in the humanities, philosophical aesthetics is endangered. As revealed by recent polls (e.g., the 2014 survey by Anna Christian Ribeiro in the blog *Aesthetics for Birds*),¹ aesthetics is currently at the margins of academic *philosophy*. Even if related disciplines or allied fields (art history, film studies, literary theory, gender and queer studies, etc.) show an interest in

¹ 2014 survey: <http://www.aestheticsforbirds.com/2014/03/the-philosophical-importance-of-22.html>

See also the 2013 polls on the US and UK, respectively (all accessed 6.6.2016).

US: <http://www.aestheticsforbirds.com/2013/07/the-status-of-aesthetics-in-leiter-top.html>

UK: <http://www.aestheticsforbirds.com/2013/07/aesthetics-in-uk.html>

the work of aestheticians, this picture is still ultimately disheartening. If philosophy, and the humanities in general, are at the margins of academia, the marginalization of aesthetics is exacerbated.

The aesthetic community, including organizations such as the American Society of Aesthetics, should consider how best to adapt to these developments. Already an association whose members come from various disciplines, the ASA has an opportunity to show the relevance of what it studies to the wider academic and professional communities. This can take a number of possible forms. A few examples will suffice. (These are of course only tentative suggestions, to be subject to careful debate and deliberation.)

Practitioners of aesthetics could collaborate with “applied” and “allied” fields as well as the sciences. Aestheticians could work with professional fields such as architecture, engineering, design, environmental studies, urban studies, and computer science. Call these the *applied* fields. Moreover, aestheticians can continue to collaborate with scholars of communication, literature, queer studies, disability theory, gender studies, art history, museum studies, and cultural history as well as colleagues working in creative programs (music, dance, writing, etc.). Call these the *allied* fields. Finally, some aestheticians interested in the philosophy of emotion, aesthetic experience, or perception are already working with colleagues in departments of psychology, neuroscience, or biology, and are likely to continue to do so. Moreover, as I mention below, aestheticians could also engage with mathematicians or physicists in discussions of the beauty of mathematics and science.

If, as seems likely, programs such as global studies and Latino studies grow, aestheticians should consider how we might contribute to these fields, too. Provided that there is such growth, there will be an opportunity to meet (if not create) a *relatively* increased demand – that is, “relative” to demand for traditional (European) philosophical aesthetics – in the aesthetics of native peoples around the globe, and in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. If there is a growing interest in global studies (which is also rich in the social sciences, not just humanities), there will be an opportunity to offer non-European aesthetics and cross-cultural aesthetics, whatever threats aesthetics or the humanities in general might be experiencing overall.

As my title reflects, the ASA has an opportunity to collaborate with the allied and applied fields as well as with the biological and social sciences. Let me mention some practical matters. To improve membership, the ASA could co-sponsor meetings with disciplines in these fields. Likewise, members of the ASA might urge academic institutions (or chairs, deans) to hire joint appointments in philosophy and an allied field, or to have aestheticians co-teach or serve on dissertation committees with colleagues in them. The ASA could co-edit a journal or particular journal issues, perhaps on analogy with *Architecture Philosophy* or *Film-Philosophy*. It seems likely that there will be similar academic endeavors. This is encouraging, since it shows that there are partners out there and that this is not a unilateral effort.

Another general US (and probably global) trend that should be mentioned here is a demand for online education. Whatever one thinks of online pedagogy, a market-driven interest in online courses seems to be here to stay, if not increase. To be sure, there are several pedagogical drawbacks to online instruction. Discussion and personal relationships are harder to create and

maintain (even if, on the positive side, reticent students are forced to speak up using discussion boards). What happens is arguably less “teaching” than moderating a student’s self-directed learning. Moreover, there are great costs to ensuring that the *registered* student is doing the work, rather than cheating or misrepresenting his or her identity. Despite such problems (and there are more), the drive to ease and convenience, as Locke might have noted, will probably outweigh the drawbacks, keeping demand steady if not increasing it. Convenience and comfort, in other words, will continue to sustain demand for online education.

The ASA needs to consider how it wishes to respond to this demand. Assuming that the ASA desires to take advantage of this opportunity, it might encourage the development of more online aesthetic courses, perhaps working with an allied field. If so, it might consider granting award grants for the development of courses, on analogy with the ASA’s Curriculum Diversification Grants. However, given the serious problems with online education and pedagogy, it is hard to know what to recommend here, without deeper discussion and consideration from ASA members.

In any case, the ASA should continue to keep pace with technological changes. It has done an admirable job of this in the past (e.g., with dues and conference registration). It can continue to maintain an attractive and functional website. The Digital Humanities will continue to be prominent, and the ASA might consider how to promote and engage in such endeavors when feasible. (Interestingly, from a dialectical perspective, the appeal of and support for the Digital Humanities can be viewed as a response to a serious *threat* to the humanities and liberal arts.)

According to this picture, there will be a growth of applied aesthetics, and a decrease in philosophical aesthetics as we know it. Some form of philosophical aesthetics will likely survive, but only in very limited numbers. It will not completely die out, for the depicted scenario requires or presupposes academic training in aesthetics. The elimination of aesthetics is not sustainable if the applied disciplines desire aesthetics in their courses or modules. However, those pursuing a PhD in aesthetics, and professors teaching them, will be relatively fewer. (Recent polls reveal a lack of aesthetics faculty at PhD-granting institutions in the US.) The majority of aesthetics in the university will likely be carried out in classrooms of students specializing in some other field. The aesthetics taught in liberal arts colleges may be a small portion relative to how aesthetics will be typically taught, namely, in pre-professional or professional colleges. Accordingly, this will likely diminish the number of PhDs written and supervised in philosophical aesthetics, if PhDs are seen as preparation to teach courses in aesthetics to philosophy students, rather than to students in professional disciplines and areas. Granted PhDs will likely decrease, insofar as PhDs are seen as preparation for academic careers rather than for working in the private sector, in art history or cultural preservation or urban and environmental planning, in archives or museums or publishing houses, or alongside architects, designers, and engineers. Lack of tenure-track jobs deserves a great deal of the blame for the decrease in academic careers in philosophical aesthetics and the (likely) corresponding decrease in students applying to doctoral programs in this area.

Academic studies of aesthetics may continue to find a limited place on its own, or in conjunction with allied fields, but there will likely be less demand for the history of aesthetics. For not only is it aesthetics, it’s worse: it’s the history of aesthetics!

Finding a way to be connected to the STEM fields (which would fall under what I have been calling the applied fields and sciences) is one way for aesthetics to grow, or at least not be left out. (The Obama administration has explicitly aimed to stimulate the growth of STEM fields through grants and other means.) This preference is also reflected in state and federal governments' emphases on math, science, and reading – reading not as a so-called literary art, but as a condition for learning as such – in order, as a skeptic might put it, to manufacture or develop GDP-increasing goods and services.

There is an opportunity to work with applied fields and the sciences. Practitioners of aesthetics could discuss, for instance, the aesthetics of symmetry to engineering students, or beauty to architecture or mathematics students. Aestheticians seem to be missing out here. Such work appears to be largely carried out by mathematicians (e.g., Ian Stewart, author of *Why Beauty is Truth*) or scientists (e.g., Frank Wilczek, who wrote *A Beautiful Question*) who happen to take a genuine interest in beauty, rather than by aestheticians. Ideally, such topics would be addressed by *both* kinds of specialists, working in collaboration. Nanyang Technological University of Singapore offers a public Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) called “Beauty, Form, and Function.” The online course is designed and run by two engineers, but would surely be improved by the assistance of experts in aesthetics.

I'd like to indulge for a moment in the philosophy of education. The purpose of university education, I submit, is fourfold – the creation of local and global *citizens*, discovery and transmission of *knowledge*, personal growth and *character development*, and preparation for a job or *career*. In a phrase, it is, above all, to create an intellectual culture. If that is right, where will the academic study of aesthetics fit in?

The public generally identifies career and job preparation as the main aim of university education, so I'll begin there. Since professional education will increase, aestheticians should find a role in the pre-professional and professional areas such as architecture, design, engineering, or urban studies. Students and professors of these disciplines will become more numerous, providing the ASA new opportunities for revenue generation and membership growth. Moreover, new ideas are likely to be created from cross-fertilization and working with new and diverse peers and colleagues.

Thankfully, the other three goals (citizenship, knowledge, character) need not be totally neglected. But state and federal governments must make the creation of active, involved citizens a priority. Otherwise, university administrators, students, and parents, and perhaps even faculty members, are not likely to notice or care about this goal. Aestheticians can show how aesthetic values and experiences add to the formation of political identities and how aesthetic communication can bring citizens together, create a sense of unity, or raise social concerns, or create a more just society. The recording of information digitally can discover and transmit knowledge, and the Digital Humanities could play a key role in fulfilling this aim of education. Finally, the academic study of aesthetics could contribute to personal growth and character development, even if this will likely be seen as falling mostly under the purview of the liberal arts institutions or of the Arts & Sciences colleges at larger universities. In short, the academic

aesthetic community and ASA should identify and explain to the public and private sectors how it contributes to all of the aims of university education.

Some of the above changes I am predicting may not seem all that surprising. Aesthetics has long been a small minority in departments of philosophy. Imagine a department called “Philosophical Aesthetics” or even “Aesthetics.” There is a reason why you have to imagine it. It has never existed. Wearing many hats, we aestheticians frequently teach courses in the history of philosophy, ethics, political philosophy, or logic.

Fortunately, there may be benefits to having a different home or being supported by new departments (that is, new to us). There may be more funding available to us, as these departments have more financial resources than philosophy or the humanities, and a larger membership pool. Socrates was not rich, and he was often alone. It would be desirable, needless to say, to have access to additional funding and grants, and to work with new or diverse peers and colleagues. On another positive note, students who take numerous STEM courses might actually be thirsty for courses in the humanities and aesthetics, on beauty and wonder, the aesthetics of nature, or creativity and genius. Teaching them could be a genuine pleasure.

Of course, there are also significant drawbacks. One is the loss of autonomy. Teaching industrial design students “Aesthetics” in a 3-week module – to take an extreme scenario – risks limiting academic freedom and self-determination. We may feel that we are being told what we have to teach or write. Even an entire *course* of our design may feel limiting, simply on the grounds that it would be housed in or sponsored by another department.

I don’t wish to sound like Churchill warning of the descent of an Iron Curtain, but many of these changes seem imminent, however undesirable some of them may be (and not all are undesirable). If we desire to be innovative, we should consider these prospects. The ASA and its members should be prepared to collaborate with the noted allied and applied disciplines. To summarize the practical points, the ASA should consider how best to respond to the growing demand for online education, maintain an attractive and effective web presence, develop curricula and joint appointments with other fields, consider co-sponsoring journals and conferences, and recognize and publicize all of the goals of university education. It should educate the public about how aesthetics can contribute to these goals, and respond to national and global demographic shifts.

Thankfully, the ASA is already an innovative and forward-thinking interdisciplinary body; the foregoing recommendations may not require too painful a stretch. As an association composed of members from various disciplines, it is already involved in collaborations. My suggestion, then, is to do more of the same, perhaps introducing innovative and different ways and working with diverse groups. Although the foregoing analysis may sound a bit pessimistic, I would like to conclude on a positive note, invoking this piece’s title.