

# Aesthetic terminology



**Aesthetic Terminology: Shaping Art With Language**

Art stimulates. Whatever form it happens to take, it has the ability to evoke emotions and perhaps, more importantly, provoke thought. Anything that is experienced with the five senses ultimately creates a conscious effort to understand. All critical discourse involving a work of art employs language; be it verbal, written or even in the form of thought.

Art and language are both symbolic and because of this unique sign-to-sign relationship, two different disciplines - anthropology and philosophy - unite to create an Aesthetic terminology of sorts; the use of signs to analyze signs. In this sense, Aesthetics becomes intrinsically linked to language; thought, verbal and written. As a result, a specific set of words are consistently used within the 'Artworld', and these words have become fundamentally linked with Aesthetic philosophy, criticism and culture.

Though art and, consequently, the words used to discuss it are constantly evolving, the terminology employed within the artworld alters that culture's perception of art because the relativistic nature of language suggests that it can effectively shape thought. There is a circular flow between each component of this equation: art influences culture, culture influences language, and language influences reality; reality of course, eventually influencing ... art.

The term 'Artworld' was coined by Philosopher Arthur C. Danto and with this he suggests that, "to see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry-an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (A. Danto 580). Danto is clearly defining his artworld as a

distinct sub-culture; one which shares “ behaviors, values, attitudes, and artifacts among their members” (Lenkeit 37), as well as “ an understanding of the symbolic meaning of their material culture” (Lenkeit 90). Danto, however, goes one step further to speculate that it’s the “ role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible” (A. Danto 581). In this sense, Danto implies that it’s not art forming the culture surrounding it, but the language used to discuss art. He applies the Saussurean model of signs when he states,

So it is essential to our study that we understand the nature of an art theory, which is so powerful a thing as to detach objects from the real world and make them part of a different world, an art world, a world of interpreted things. What these considerations show is that there is an internal connection between the status of an artwork and the language with which artworlds are identified as such, inasmuch as nothing is an artwork without an interpretation that constitutes it as such (A. C. Danto 43).

Danto’s emphasis on the “ world of interpreted things” (A. Danto 43), implies that not only is this culture unique, but it serves a certain purpose. This purpose seems to exist solely to provide a platform for the creation and analysis of art. Neither could exist without the other. Should no more artwork be produced, there would be no need for an artworld to introduce it to. If there were no artworld, it’s quite possible that nothing would be recognized as art.

Culture can be defined as the “ sum total of the knowledge, ideas, behaviors and material creations that are learned, shared, and transmitted primarily

through the symbolic system of language” (Lenkeit 26). There are three main components to a culture: cognitive processes, behaviors and material creations. The artworld most definitely possesses material creations – in the form of music, literature, sculpture, painting, etc. – as well as a unique set of behaviors. Cognitive processes include “ learning, knowing and perceiving” (Lenkeit 26) at the heart of which is language. What makes culture unique is that all these components “ create a pattern that changes over time and serve as guidelines of behavior for members of the society” (Lenkeit 26). This correlates well with what we know currently about art. Many artists are influenced by the works of other who preceded them. In some cases, an individuals are might evolve over time, and with both of these concepts, new insight is created and will be used for future generations.

The artworld possesses its own unique language, and as a result, people within this group perceive art differently than an outsider would. The differences between the terminology used from within and from without, are explored by philosopher Frank Sibley. He suggests that though anyone can use aesthetic terminology, those who employ it from within the sphere of the artworld are utilizing it to its fullest potential; there being a certain shared knowledge between participants that defies complete understanding by the layman. Sibley “ makes a case that judgments of this sort are distinctively ‘ loose,’ in that no conditions are either necessary or sufficient for these kinds of judgment to hold” (Goldblatt and Brown 469).

One unique aspect about cultures that is apparent within the artworld is that most members of subcultures are also members of other larger cultures. People might be part of the artworld, but also a larger ethnic group or even

nationality or gender population. Cultural diffusion is the process in which a culture can change due to a blending or exposure to other cultures. This is relative to what Sibley said, because in the artworld, some members are also members of other cultures. Art terms are therefore passed around to other cultures, and these terms are incorporated into the language of others. This would account for people not entrenched in the world of art to know and comprehend many of the specific terms used when describing art; though it's plausible that only true understanding will come when they gain admittance to the artworld itself by becoming a critic, a purveyor or even a producer of art.

People falling into this category will often use non-aesthetic terms to describe art, which then must be interpreted or guided by a member of the artworld in order to reach a comprehensive understanding. Initially, a person making a non-aesthetic judgment “ sometimes says the right thing,” (Sibley 475), however, this is not a matter of knowledge, but rather a guess. Not being part of the artworld has prevented him from being immersed in the correct terminology as well as the underlying meaning and consequences. Had his reality been shaped by his language, this might not be the case. Sibley contends that it is the job of the critic to guide this person down the path to enlightenment, by “ point[ing] out non-aesthetic features”, “ mentioning the very qualities [he] want[s] people to see,” (Sibley 475) and eventually brings the discussion to a point where there is a linking of both non-aesthetic and aesthetic terms. This process could be seen as an induction into the culture of the artworld, and a means to shape the reality of the newcomer.

Language is a means by which human beings “categorize observable variations in the natural world” (Lenkeit 81) and it’s certain that culture will have an effect on language. This is evidenced in vocabularies that “reflect adaptive features of a culture” (Lenkeit 77). Examples of this might be urban black youths adopting their own form of slang, or the Valley Girl craze that occurred in California. There is even a line of thought nowadays that ascribes art work such as photography, cinema, and theatre as its own unique language. “Media such as television and film are regarded by some semioticians as being in some respects like ‘languages’.” (Chandler). Semiotic study is concerned with the relation between concepts and the sign, in this sense these forms of art take on their own meaning as signs that can be analyzed.

On a universal level, the adaptive nature of language and culture can be seen when a new word or phrase is coined and then rapidly diffuses throughout large populations, often ending up being used widely and even added to existing dictionaries. Applied to art, it can be gleaned that discussions will exchange ideas, share perspectives, attempt to define or interpret. The words that are used will embody experiences into a “readily exchangeable form, one that is mutually intelligible for people who have learned that language” (Sociology 44).

Because language is the basis of culture, those words not only express what we perceive but also help determine what we perceive. Our contact with members of our own and other cultures, means that “when we learn a language, we learn not only words but also ways of thinking” (Henslin 45). The language of aesthetics will in turn mold the artworld around its own

means of communication while at the same time, mold language around its culture. The two concepts are bound to each other much like the opposite sides of the DNA code, each forming a half to a whole, and exerting their own force on the outcome.

Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure describes a special relationship between the form a word takes and the concept that it implies, however he makes a distinction between,

langue (language) and parole (speech). Langue refers to the system of rules and conventions which is independent of, and pre-exists, individual users; parole refers to its use in particular instances. Applying the notion to semiotic systems in general rather than simply to language, the distinction is one between code and message, structure and event or system and usage (in specific texts or contexts). (Chandler)

Saussure's theory contends that what we say often varies from the rules of grammar and syntax. Further deepening the concept of the art – language relationship.

Aesthetic philosophy has become synonymous with the terminology that people within the artworld employ. Modern linguist, David Chandler, states that, “ signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs on when we invest them with meaning” (Chandler). What gives these words meaning is our culture; a group of individuals who agree upon something almost universally and set up rules based on the needs of that particular group. The artworld follows this pattern closely, as evidenced by the strict

confines within which critical discussion takes place. Each word is chosen carefully and applies directly to some aspect of the world of art.

Though rooted in the anthropological field of linguistics, and describing, “not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern” (Chandler), it’s clearly applicable to Aesthetics in that during critical discourse, words (signs) are used to describe other signs (artwork). Terms such as, “‘tragedy, ‘ comedy’, ‘ epic’, ‘ symphony’, ‘ sonnet’ (Shusterman 93), and, “ unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, somber, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental” (Sibley, Aesthetic Concepts 472), all take on richer meaning when applied to art, from within the sphere of the artworld because “ aesthetic terms are characteristically, but not exclusively, used to talk about works of art” (Kivy 197).

The language used within the world of art, “ embodies an interpretation of reality and language can influence thought about that reality” (Lucy 294-295). Philosopher Arthur C. Danto states that, “ the word stands parallel to the work; the linguistic meaning in the mind of the speaker stands parallel to the artistic meaning in the mind of the artist; and the critic in art stands parallel to the translator or expositor in language” (A. C. Danto 57-58). By this, he isolates a specific type of wording and a specific sub-culture which uses it, both interacting to function as a single unit.

Benjamin L. Whorf formulated the theory that, “ a language forces the native speaker of that language to perceive the world differently” (Lenkeit 78).

Much of his work was completed alongside anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir. The heart of their research was devoted to the relationship



between language and culture. Together, they eventually developed a unified theory, called the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, stating, “ that language constructs our perception of reality” (Lenkeit 78).

English philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein phrased the notion in a slightly different manner when he suggested that the limits of one’s language define the limits of one’s world. The Philosophy of language is the branch of philosophy that studies language and it is from within this field of study that most of Wittgenstein’s conclusions arose. Its primary focus includes the nature of linguistic meaning, reference, language use, language learning, language understanding, truth, thought and experience, communication, interpretation and translation. While Wittgenstein might have initiated the study of philosophy and language, with the work of Whorf and Sapir, more insight into the subject matter has been filtered through the academic community. Many other notable philosophers have tackled this very same subject, including Arthur C. Danto, Richard Shusterman and Frank Sibley all presumably using Wittgenstein’s ideas as structure for their own further studies.

When viewing aesthetic terminology as a subset of a language that is used for special application within the artworld, the term ‘ grammar’ comes to mind. Cambridge scholar, David Crystal describes how rules affect the use of language, stating that “ prescriptivism is the view that one variety of a language has an inherently higher value than others and that this ought to be imposed on the whole of the speech community ... the descriptive approach ... recognizes the fact that language is always changing, and that there will accordingly be variation in usage” (Crystal 366).

Applying this to the artworld, it's becomes arguable that there is a sort of etiquette involved, much as Frank Sibley implies during his discussion regarding the relationship between aesthetic and non-aesthetic terms. He seems to support both an artworld and an aesthetic language when he states that “ our ability to notice and respond to aesthetic qualities is cultivated and developed by our contacts with parents and teachers from quite an early age” (Sibley, *Aesthetic Concepts* 477). After all, a culture does in fact have its own unique language, of which special meaning can be inferred.

Establishing the relationship between art and culture and culture and language isn't complete without determining whether language goes on to shape reality. The linguistic relativity hypothesis proposes that, “ the particular language we speak influences the way we think about reality” (Lucy 291). Hence, if there truly is an aesthetic language, this language should force an effect on the artworld. Art would in a sense, be shaped by what is said about it, rather than the words being molded by the art.

Danto explains that “ in the criticism of art and its attendant search for meaning ... we stand here at yet another point of intersection between the philosophies of art and language, where a conception of meaning in art is given shape by a prior, if implicitly held, conception of linguistic meaning” (A. C. Danto 57). In this sense, he seems to imply that the collective language of the culture of the artworld, accumulated over a period of time, will provide insight into new art, thus determining new, perceived reality.

Because of the evolutionary nature of art, language will be adapted, and thus, new reality created. In the past, the “majority of the changes in philosophical nomenclature are due to the need of substituting, for expressions that have become unfit to express a given idea clearly and with sufficient definiteness, other expression in which the same idea or the same distinction is characterized in a form less apt to give rise to confusions or misunderstandings” (Vailati 473). The process involves art, culture, language and reality is perpetual and dynamic; but because they are all linked, they will evolve parallel to each other.

It could be argued that aesthetics, or more narrowly, the artworld, doesn't in fact have its own 'language' because after all, language isn't something that can be confined to one particular culture or group of individuals.

Anthropologist and author Roberta Lenkeit supports this claim by saying, “data and testing have shown the richness of vocabulary seems merely to give a more detailed map to one's world, not, as Sapir-Whorf suggest, a different reality” (Lenkeit 79).

Language is something that is both shared and related. Because language is simultaneously both comprehensive and confined, in the sense that in “itself [it] is universal ... all human groups have language, but there is nothing universal about the meanings given to particular sounds” (Sociology 42), seems to support this claim.

Another counter might be the evolving nature of both art and language. Each year dozens of new words are added to our dictionaries, compensating for a lack of richness that modern life is promoting. Art itself is always changing as

well. Each era brings a fresh influx of artists to the culture and as a result, a new and unique way to perceive art. Some of these concepts can't be understood from past cultural experience and have no terms associated with them from which to build from. As Danto indicates, artists that approach subject matter never before encountered create the need for new terminology. The art of Andy Warhol, for example, couldn't have been effectively discussed in a previous century, because it hadn't been created yet. Renaissance artists wouldn't have depicted the slavery movement because it hadn't happened yet. As a result the aesthetic language in use at any given time is reflective of current art plus all that which came before it. It's an accumulation of knowledge and this is evidenced in the honing of aesthetic terminology.

Just as art that springs from the minds of future generations will be totally foreign, so will the language used to describe it at that time. However, ever-changing doesn't mean that the reality created by the language of aesthetics can't adapt and evolve as well. Language has proven to be both dynamic and everlasting. New art will simply mean new language and new culture – as well as new reality.

The search for meaning in art corresponds to the desire to tease meaning out of life itself. Art, culture, language and reality will forever be intertwined because both artistic expression and communication are at the very heart of human civilization. An artistic expression will always be subject to criticism and the language used to develop that will always be subject to the culture from it stems from. In a world with so many cultures and so many languages, and the boundaries between both and all breaking down in the global era,

it's clear that one will always have an effect on the other. Because of the nature of language, it will be the conduit through which art is defined and ultimately, become the reality of those within the subculture of the artworld.

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(A. Danto)

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