

Research article

Reclaiming aesthetics: Exploring the function of philosophy in art as an element of culture

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Abstract: *Aesthetics has historically been relegated to a secondary position within philosophy, despite its profound significance in understanding human experience, culture, and the arts. The 20th-century analytic movement challenged the legitimacy of aesthetics, citing its neglect of scientific principles and methods. Logical positivists, such as Rudolf Carnap, Hans Hahn, and Moritz Schlick, argued that aesthetic experiences and judgments are subjective and lack cognitive significance. They contended that aesthetic assertions and assessments are meaningless since they do not meet the criteria of the verification principle—a core tenet of logical positivism. Aesthetics is thus a pseudo-enterprise. However, despite this critique, aesthetics remains a vibrant field, offering unique insights into human culture and experience. Through analytical methods and*

critical analysis, this study debunks the logical positivists' assumptions and highlights the role of aesthetics in understanding art and culture. This research reveals that there is more to reality than the logical positivists would have us believe. The verifiability itself is neither analytically deduced nor empirically verifiable. The study also reveals that aesthetics occupies a middle ground between subjectivity and objectivity, where personal taste, cultural context, and objective principles intersect, making it a significant and relevant topic in contemporary philosophical debates. The study thus advocates for its reclaiming.

Keywords: Aesthetics, art and culture, philosophy of art, analytic philosophy, logical positivism

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1. Introduction

Aesthetics has been marginalised within philosophy despite its enormous importance in comprehending human experience, culture, and the arts. The 20th-century analytic movement in particular challenged the legitimacy of aesthetics, citing its neglect of scientific principles and methods as a fatal flaw. The logical positivists, an offshoot of the analytic movement – notably Moritz Schlick (1882-1936), Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970), and Hans Hahn (1879-1934), among

others – argued that aesthetic experiences and judgments are inherently subjective and therefore cannot be evaluated objectively (Carnap 2003; Hahn 1987; Schlick 1931). They argued that aesthetic experiences and judgments are subjective, rendering aesthetic statements meaningless and devoid of objective truth. This critique, grounded in the verification principle, has had a lasting impact on aesthetics, contributing to the fact-value distinction and relegating aesthetics to a secondary status.

This is a conceptual study that employs an analytical method and critical analysis. Both methods play distinct yet complementary roles in this study. The analytical method is utilised to clarify key concepts central to the research, including aesthetics, art, culture, and logical positivism. By logically clarifying these concepts, the study ensures precision and avoids conceptual ambiguities that might otherwise obscure the discussion. This methodological approach provides clear definitions and a thorough understanding of these concepts, laying a solid foundation for the research. Critical analysis is employed to evaluate the arguments presented by logical positivists regarding aesthetics, assessing their validity, reliability, and relevance. Through this process, the study highlights the significant role aesthetics plays in understanding art and culture, shedding light on its importance and implications.

Ultimately, this research asserts that aesthetics is characteristically linked to art, which is a cornerstone of culture. Artistic creations, whether natural or artificial, are subject to aesthetic judgment, which involves evaluating their beauty, significance, and cultural relevance. It is thus imperative to recognise aesthetics as a fundamental aspect of philosophy, to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the complexities of artistic experience and the cultural significance of art. The discussion is organised into five sections to provide a comprehensive examination of the topic: introduction defining of culture, art and aesthetics; a critique of logical positivism on aesthetics; functions of philosophy in art as an element of culture; and a conclusion.

1.1. Definitions of culture, art and aesthetics

Philosophers have long been fascinated by the concept of culture, recognising its profound impact on shaping human society. Culture encompasses the values, beliefs, and practices that define human communities, influencing everything from individual identity to collective norms and values. Given its complexity and multifaceted nature, philosophers have defined and

interpreted culture in various ways. Some have viewed culture as a reflection of human nature, emphasising its role in shaping moral values and aesthetic tastes (Williams, 1998; Geertz 2017). Others have viewed culture as a product of historical and social forces, emphasising its connection to power dynamics, economic systems, and technological advancements (Marx & Engels, 2023; Boas, 1901; Hall, 1997). Notable scholars have offered the following definitions.

Tylor defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Ratnapalan 2008). Nietzsche (1973) views culture as "a unity of artistic style, of philosophical thought, of moral values, and of religious beliefs". Heidegger (2017) understands culture as "the cultivation of the truth of Being, and this cultivation is the highest and most essential form of human existence". Arnold (1869) sees culture as "the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world". Geertz (2017) defines culture as "the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action". Bourdieu (2018) views culture as "the set of symbolic goods and practices which are transmitted from one generation to the next and which constitute the habitus, the system of dispositions and preferences that define an individual's or a group's position in the social space". These definitions illustrate the diverse perspectives on culture, highlighting its complex and multifaceted nature.

The term "art" encompasses the creation of diverse items, images, performances, and artefacts that convey human emotions, thoughts, and experiences. This broad category encompasses various mediums, including oral and written history and literature, music, dance, and theatre, as well as the visual arts, such as painting and sculpture, crafts and designs, architectural practices, historic sites, traditional technologies, and celebrations and cultural events. These diverse forms of artistic expression not only depict the culture that exhibits them but also contribute to their development and evolution. The profound connection between culture and art is undeniable; art is inextricably linked with culture, serving as a reflection of the society in which it is produced.

As Nietzsche (1973) astutely observed, art is the "distinctive expression of a culture, the highest manifestation of its will to power". Heidegger (2017) elaborated on this idea, describing art as "the clearing of being, the disclosure of the truth of existence within a culture". Geertz (2017) similarly emphasised the intrinsic connection between culture and art, affirming that "art is a

system of symbols and meanings that expresses the cultural values and norms of a society”. Bourdieu's (2018) perspective on art as a form of cultural capital also highlights its significance in distinguishing oneself within a social hierarchy. Meanwhile, Danto's (1981) notion of art as a "transfiguration of the commonplace" underscores its role in recontextualising everyday experiences within a cultural framework.

The relationship between art and culture was well-elaborated by Nishiyama (2023) as follows:

Expression of culture: Artists convey their cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and customs through the medium of art. A culture's history, religion, and social structure are frequently reflected in art forms such as painting, sculpture, dance, music, architecture, and literature.

Transmission and safeguarding of cultural legacy: The legacy of a culture (which can, among other things, be used to teach morals) is passed down through the generations with the aid of art. The tales, information, and wisdom of a civilisation can be captured in traditional art forms, while contemporary art reinterprets and adapts these cultural aspects to contemporary circumstances. By reflecting and challenging a culture's norms, beliefs, and practices, art can operate as a platform for social commentary and critique. By addressing social, political, or environmental issues in their work, artists can spark dialogue and subvert prevailing cultural narratives.

Formation of identity: Both personal and societal identities are shaped by art. People frequently feel a sense of pride and belonging in their cultural heritage when they connect with the artistic expressions of their culture.

Art changes and adapts with societies over time: As a reflection of the changing character of culture itself, artistic movements and trends can both impact and be influenced by cultural transformations. A culture's economy can also be influenced by art. The economic impact of the art market, tourism, and creative industries can be substantial in a nation or area, and government or private patronage of the arts might indicate cultural objectives and investments. Innovation and creativity are also fostered by art. It inspires people to think creatively and unconventionally, resulting in novel concepts and solutions. This is especially crucial in the modern world, as innovation is necessary for both economic success and progress.

The study of sensory perceptions was how A. G. Baumgarten described aesthetics in his 1763 book "Aesthetica," where the term first appeared in philosophy. *αἴσθησις* (aísthēsis) means “sensation” or “perception” and it designates the faculty of knowledge, through which the human

being naturally acquires representations of the things of the individual world, in fact, interior and exterior, that is, our ability to feel, to perceive through the senses (sensation, perception, sensation, action and functional results of the five senses) (Buda, 2017); *αἰσθητόν* (aistheton) is the neuter form meaning "a sensible thing" or "that which is perceived"; and *αἰσθητικός* (aisthētikós) is the adjective meaning "sensible" or "perceptible," from which the word "aesthetic" is derived (Harper, 2001).

Aesthetics is a philosophical reflection on art, natural surroundings, and culture. It is an inquiry into the nature and appreciation or criticism of art (natural art or man-made art) and culture, judging them to be either beautiful or ugly, good taste or bad taste, disgusting or appealing, awesome or horrifying. It also studies the principles for such evaluation. Put differently, it examines how individuals make judgments about both natural and artificial sources of artistic experience, such as mountains, rivers, hills, architecture, painting, poetry, sculpture, music, dance, and other artistic works. As a meticulous examination of the characteristics of an artwork, aesthetics is known as the philosophy of art.

1.2. A critique of logical positivism on aesthetics

Logical positivism, also known as logical empiricism, neo-positivism or the Vienna Circle, is a philosophical movement that emerged as an offshoot of the analytic movement. The movement that arose in Vienna in the 1920s was inspired by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century revolutions in logic, mathematics, and mathematical physics. Its most important representatives were members of the Vienna Circle who gathered around Moritz Schlick at the University of Vienna including Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, Kurt Gödel, Hans Hahn, Karl Menger, Otto Neurath and Friedrich Waismann and those of the Society for Empirical Philosophy who gathered around Hans Reichenbach at the University of Berlin including Walter Dubislav, Kurt Grelling and Carl Hempel (Friedman,1998). A succinct yet meaningful overview of the development of the movement was given when Stumpf (1994), quoted by Onebunne (2019), wrote thus:

The men who formed the Vienna Circle were by temperament attracted to the methods of science and mathematics. They were disposed to reject metaphysics, as had the earlier positivists who considered metaphysics, as Comte did, as outdated by science. Now they had the additional argument, because of Russell's work in logic and Wittgenstein's

powerful formulation of the relation of logic and language in the *Tractatus*, that metaphysics is impossible as shown by the logical and essential character of language. To differentiate themselves from the earlier Comtean positivists and to emphasise that they would combine the rigorous techniques of the new logic with the empirical temper of Hume, they called themselves “logical positivists” or sometimes logical empiricists. (Stumpf, 1994: 417-418)

The Circle emphasises the use of logical and scientific methods to understand the world, with verificationism as its core principle. Verificationism is a philosophical principle stating that a statement is only meaningful if it can be empirically verified through sensory experience or is true by its very nature. This criterion of meaning, central to the philosophy of logical positivism, argues that statements from fields like metaphysics, theology and axiology (ethics and aesthetics) are meaningless because it is impossible to gather sensory evidence to prove or disprove them. Under their verification principle, only statements that are either analytically true (like mathematical truths) or empirically verifiable (like scientific facts) are cognitively meaningful. Since statements about beauty or art are neither, logical positivists categorised them as expressions of emotion, not truth-bearing propositions.

Their arguments against aesthetics are based on three main theses: (1) Aesthetic experiences are subjective: Aesthetic experiences depend on an individual's personal sensations, experiences, and perspectives shaped by their unique background, taste, and personal preferences, leading to vastly different experiences of beauty or appeal, rather than being universally fixed qualities (Damböck et al., 2024; Bentley 2023). Thus, buttressing the assertion of Hume (2017) and the popular saying that “Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty” and “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” respectively; (2) Aesthetic judgments are non-cognitive: According to the logical positivists, aesthetic statements are mere expressions of personal feelings rather than objective truths (Ayer, 1952). Describing this thesis of the logical positivists, Sjöstedt-H (n.d.) wrote that “aesthetic terms have an emotional function, expressing feelings and influencing others' emotions and attitudes”. According to this perspective, aesthetic statements, such as "This artwork is beautiful," fails to describe the objective properties of the artwork but rather express the speaker's subjective emotional response to it; and (3) Consequently, aesthetic theories are

adjudged meaningless as they failed to provide factual information about the world (Damböck et al., 2024; Bentley, 2023).

The theses of logical positivism questioned the existence of universal, objective standards in aesthetics and challenged the validity, significance, and purpose of aesthetics as a field of study. Since aesthetics failed to meet the Verification Principle of logical positivism, it is considered a pseudo-enterprise by these critics (Ayer, 1952). The criticism contributes to the fact-value distinction, with aesthetics being relegated to a secondary status.

However, verificationism is not without its challenges; its validity and applicability are questionable (Kuhn, 1997; Quine, 2000; Putnam, 1979; Lakatos, 2014). The principle is based on a set of assumptions about language, meaning, and truth (Carnap, 2003). These assumptions are not empirically verifiable, making verificationism a self-referentially inconsistent theory (Hempel, 1996). Again, the principle relies on the notion of empirical verifiability, which is itself a subjective concept (Kuhn, 1997). What constitutes empirical evidence is not universally agreed upon and can vary depending on cultural, historical, and personal contexts (Quine, 2000). With the principle's emphasis on empirical evidence, it excludes other forms of knowledge, such as mathematical truths, logical principles, moral principles and aesthetic values. These forms of knowledge cannot be empirically verified, yet they are essential to our understanding of the world.

While personal preferences and cultural relativism play a significant role in shaping aesthetic judgments, such factors do not render aesthetics meaningless or illegitimate (Heidegger, 2017). Moreover, aesthetics is not purely subjective, as the beauty of an object is not only defined by the perception of an individual observer and their cultural preferences; certain principles are universal and independent of individual and cultural preferences. There are indeed objective aesthetic qualities, such as colour, shape, texture, proportion, etc. These always refer to measurable or directly perceptible elements of a work of art or design.

The parameters that these objective aesthetic traits can elicit or stimulate in us correspond to personal sensations and determine the subjective reaction. In the words of Dorweile (2023), aesthetics involves both subjective and objective aspects; the objective side encompasses measurable elements, such as colour and shape, while the subjective side refers to individual feelings and interpretations influenced by personal experiences and culture. "There is no

'objective reality' apart from a "subjective experience" of it any more than there is no "subjective experience" apart from an "objective reality": both exist as concepts in non-dual mutually dependent relation with one another." Thus, aesthetics is not purely one or the other but a combination of objective properties and individual, emotional, and cultural responses. Such interplay depicts the complex of reality. Thus, aesthetics, like verificationism, deals with complex and subjective issues (Leddy and Puolakka, 2006).

1.3. Functions of Philosophy in art as an element of culture

Philosophy's rich contribution to culture is multifaceted and far-reaching, with aesthetics serving as a primary lens through which this contribution is examined. Aesthetics, which explores the complex and multifaceted nature of art, beauty, and taste, is inherently tied to art—a cornerstone of human culture. Moreover, aesthetics encompasses a broad range of philosophical inquiries, including metaphysical, epistemological, axiological, and cultural judgements pertaining to both natural and artificial artefacts (Ade-Ali, 2004). In essence, aesthetics is a comprehensive study of the complex issues surrounding the perception, judgment, and creation of art.

Aesthetics provides a comprehensive framework for understanding art, encompassing various theories such as formalism, instrumentalism, and emotionalism (Nishiyama, 2023). These theoretical frameworks facilitate informed judgements in the creative process and enable the evaluation and interpretation of complex artworks, which are inherently open to multiple interpretations. Recent studies have emphasised the importance of aesthetics in understanding the cultural and historical context of artworks (Dieudonne, 2024).

Through the analysis and interpretation of art, aesthetics offers numerous benefits, including a deeper understanding of the artwork's meaning, themes, and messages, as well as insight into the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which it was created (Leddy & Puolakka, 2006). This, in turn, fosters a more informed appreciation and evaluation of the artwork, while also cultivating critical thinking skills (Monti, 2021). Moreover, aesthetics, through its critical nature, challenges existing assumptions and beliefs about art, subverting obsolete dominant cultural values and inspiring artists to explore new ideas and concepts in their work (Danto, 1981). Aestheticians may also collaborate with artists, providing them with fresh and broader perspectives and ideas to incorporate into their work, thereby promoting innovation and creativity.

The value of a creative work of art lies in its representation of an ideal of beauty conceived by its creator, which, in turn, provides insight into the universal, albeit imprecise, ideal of beauty shared among humanity. As Ade-Ali (2004) aptly puts it, art constitutes "the making of what is impressive and beautiful or things that are considered to be expressive or beautiful." At its core, the fundamental purpose of art is to reveal the essence of beauty. Aesthetics, in this regard, plays a crucial role in examining the intrinsic beauty inherent in artistic creations. Often referred to as the philosophy of beauty and the science of beautiful art (Buda, 2017), aesthetics plays a crucial role in evaluating the qualities that render an artwork sublime or pleasurable to behold.

Aesthetics, as a philosophical inquiry into the essence of beauty, provides fundamental principles and theories for evaluating, creating, and appreciating beauty. This field has given rise to diverse theories, including hedonist, realistic, and intellectualist theories, among others (Budd 1997). Although these theories conceptualise beauty differently, beauty, as a central concept in aesthetics, extends beyond an artistic object's tangible qualities, such as structure, colour, and sound (Kant, 2020). Through aesthetics, we recognise that sensory experiences encompass valuable aspects beyond mere sensory information and that beauty transcends the physical attributes of an artwork (Danto, 1981). Hence, Ade-Ali (2004) defines beauty as "qualities that are inherent in artwork and transcend the realm of perception." Additional aesthetic attributes, including gracefulness, affection, endearment, humour, pleasure, and moral worth, are integral to the assessment of beauty (Scruton, 2009). It examines how we form judgments about beauty and how these judgments are linked to our experiences of pleasure, emotion, and meaning (Hume, 2017). Whether in the context of art, nature, or everyday life, aesthetics examines the values we ascribe to beauty and conveys them through opinions and judgements (Scruton, 2009).

In other words, the concept of beauty transcends physical attributes and perceptual experiences, encompassing moral, cultural, political, and economic elements in defining an artwork. It is inherently metaphysical and ethical. Recognising the significance of beauty in human life, aesthetics necessitates a comprehensive consideration of all components that constitute an artwork's beauty. For instance, the interactionist view, as discussed by Carroll (1996), underscores the impact of an artwork's moral character on its artistic value. Aestheticians adhering to this perspective emphasise the importance of upholding ethical values in artworks and acknowledge the moral responsibility of artists. By integrating ethical considerations into the

creative process, artists can produce works that not only possess aesthetic value but also promote moral and cultural significance.

The function of aesthetics as a critical study of beauty is well-ingrained in the holistic understanding of beauty from the Yoruba perspective. From the Yoruba perspective, beauty, the central theme of aesthetics, transcends physical appearance. It is deeply connected to the essence of life, encompassing not just physical appearance but also character, morality and spirituality. The concept of beauty is intertwined with the pursuit of balance, harmony, and virtue in life. When the concept is applied to a person, beauty is not just a superficial quality but a profound aspect of human existence that reflects one's inner being, character, actions, and relationship with others. As the Yoruba proverb says, "*Ewà ara kò gbòdò, ewà ọkàn nìgbòdò*" - "Physical beauty is fleeting, but inner beauty is enduring" (Abiodun, 2022). The Yoruba proverb "*Ìwàl'ewà*" (character constitutes beauty) is a powerful statement that highlights the interconnectedness of ethics and aesthetics in Yoruba culture. These proverbs emphasise that true beauty is rooted in virtues such as kindness, compassion, honesty, and integrity. It encourages individuals to cultivate inner beauty through good character, rather than just focusing on external appearances. Similarly, within the context of artefacts, aesthetics encompasses not only physical appearance but also the meaning, significance, and cultural context of an artefact.

Some of the fundamental questions that aesthetics attempts to answer are: what constitutes beauty, and how is it perceived? Is beauty culturally or historically bound (Budd, 1997)? Which art should be appraised and why? Aesthetics also investigates what makes art beautiful, the relationship between beauty, truth, and morality, and the importance of art in human life. Additionally, it explores whether there are objective standards for beauty, the concept of an aesthetic object, the admirability of nature, the purpose of art, and its interplay with culture (Danto 2003), as well as the relationship between pleasure and beauty. By attempting to answer these questions, aesthetics sheds light on the purposes and functions of artworks, while also illuminating how art influences our identity, values, and worldview.

Aesthetics plays a crucial role in understanding the concept of value, particularly in relation to art and culture (Dieudonne, 2024). Recognising that every culture possesses its unique set of values, aesthetics explores how different cultures perceive beauty in the arts (Lomas, 2023). It seeks to comprehend what a particular group or culture considers beautiful, thereby gaining

insight into their underlying beliefs, values, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making processes. Aesthetics contributes significantly to the formation and expression of cultural identity, enabling individuals to define and express their cultural values and beliefs through art (Ade-Ali, 2024). By promoting cultural diversity through celebrating unique traditions and practices of various cultures, aesthetics fosters cultural exchange and understanding in a way that transcends linguistic limitations.

2. Conclusion

This research reaffirms that art is a profound reflection, expression, and shaping force of culture. Aesthetics is inextricably linked to artistic experience, offering a nuanced understanding of how artworks engage, inspire, and challenge individuals. The intricate relationships between art, culture, and aesthetics provide a rich window into human experience, revealing the values, beliefs, and practices of individuals and societies.

This research has demonstrated that the criticisms levelled by logical positivists against aesthetics are unfounded. Aesthetics plays a vital role in understanding art and culture, providing essential functions such as interpretation, evaluation, and contextualisation. It is not purely subjective, nor is it entirely objective. Instead, it occupies a middle ground, where personal taste, cultural context, and objective principles intersect. Aesthetics provides a unique and valuable perspective on human experience, culture, and the arts, one that cannot be reduced to purely objective or scientific analysis. Rather than marginalising aesthetics, philosophers should recognise its importance and seek to integrate it into a broader understanding of human knowledge and experience.

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Ethical considerations

This research requires no ethical considerations, as no human subjects, animals, or private data were involved.

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