AESTHETICS WEEK 2

Ancient Greek Philosophy & Objective Beauty

Objective vs. Subjective

**Objective**: something that can be known, which exists as part of reality, independent of thought or an observer.

**Subjective**: existing in the mind; belonging to the thinking subject rather than to the object of thought
Is beauty objective or subjective?

In other words

• Is beauty a property of some objects (like mass, shape, etc.)
• Or is beauty a judgment of the mind observing the object (an emotion, feeling or evaluation)

Why does it matter?

• Judgments based on objective matters can be true or false.
  — Meaning we might be able to discover criteria on which to base our aesthetic judgments
• Judgments based on subjective considerations are only true relative to the person making them.
  — Something might be beautiful to you, but not to others...but nobody is wrong in their conclusions
The Ancient Greek Concept of Art

• The Greeks did not have our modern concept of Art.
• *Techne* – (often translated “the arts”) area of human expertise or craft (ex. medicine, carpentry, mathematics, etc).
• Plato & Aristotle do refer to the “the imitative arts” (ex. painting, poetry, sculpture) or “pleasure giving arts” (amusements).
• Plato ranked the “imitative arts” as the least important of the arts.

The Ancient Greek Concept of Art

• Both Plato and Aristotle assumed all art should represent the world in some way.
• **Mimesis:** art as imitation or copying. Using art to replicate something as it would be seen in nature.
Pythagoras

• Pythagoras (580 –500 BCE) was a philosopher and mathematician from the Greek Island of Samos. He lead a group of devoted followers in a secretive philosophical/religious cult which viewed numbers as divine.

\[ a^2 + b^2 = c^2 \]

To Pythagoras mathematics was a form of knowledge that was certain, objective and universally true.
Enter Plato

- Plato (428-347 BCE) was strongly influenced by Pythagoras. Plato replaced Pythagoras’ divine numbers with his doctrine of perfect “Ideal Forms”.
- The physical world is just a shadow of a higher realm of abstract archetypes or “Forms”.

![Diagram of geometric shapes representing elements: Octahedron (Air), Cube (Earth), Tetrahedron (Fire), Dodecahedron (Universe), Icosahedron (Water).]
How do we understand such different objects belong to the same class?

Plato’s Forms

Plato’s Forms are both the essences and ideals of the physical objects or qualities that correspond to them...

Essence: a things ultimate nature; what all members of a class of objects share in common

Ideal: the standard of perfection (for Plato, Forms are eternal and unchanging)
The Forms and Their Shadows

- All entities in the physical world depend on the Forms...which exist outside of space and time. But unlike their archetypal counterparts, physical entities are subject to imperfection and decay.
- Our senses can only see the shadows, but the forms can be perceived through reason.

Of Horses and “Horseness”

- There is a Form for each species of entity that exist. (ex. All tables are expressions of perfect “tableness”)
- Qualities also have Forms. One of the most supreme of forms is the “Form of Perfect Beauty”.

To the skeptical comment “I see horses but I don’t see Horseness” Plato replied “because you have eyes but no intellect.”
Plato’s Theory of Beauty

• Beauty is an objective quality (it is real) with its basis in the world of Ideal Forms.
• Physical objects, etc. may “manifest” or “participate” in beauties true Form but they are only imperfect shadowy reflections of it.
• Our physical senses only perceive beauties shadow, but through rational contemplation one can perceive beauties true Form

“Beauty is Loves Highest Object”

Plato thought the young should be instructed to contemplate the body of a lover. Then by a processes of abstraction work step by step toward understanding the True form behind his/her beauty.
Plato’s criteria for evaluating Art:
Unity and Proportion

In Plato’s view visual art is “thrice removed” from the Form it imitates... Art is an imitation of imitations.
The Dangers Inherent in Art

• Art can (and often does) distort reality...it provides untrustworthy or false understanding of the world.

• Art arouses emotions and can deter us from reasoning clearly.

• Drama often promotes superstitious thinking and immoral behavior

“[Euripides’] Medea was about a “barbarian” woman who betrayed her father and brothers to help the heroic Jason obtain the Golden Fleece. But after she had borne him two children Jason took a new, native-born bride, since his people feared Medea as a foreigner and a witch. Medea, enraged seeks revenge by killing their two children.”
-Cynthia Freeman’s summery in But Is It Art (pg 32)
Plato vs. the Arts

- Art, in Plato's view, encourages talented people to play in the shadows when they should be focused on becoming philosophers. Truest reality (the Forms) can only be perceived by abstract thought.
- Plato continually attacks art and artists in his written works. His favorite target—poets.
- Plato said of poetry... “with a few rare exceptions it is able to corrupt even decent people”

Censorship of the Arts in *the Republic*

- In *The Republic* Plato describes his ideal city. In it all poetry is banned “on the grounds that it falsely masquerades as knowledge and is detrimental to the human mind” (Janaway 7)
Some Platonic anxieties about the power of images are echoed today by the influential French social critic Jean Baudrillard. He argues that images and simulated realities are all that exist now: Television images, advertising and fashion photography, for example, create a replacement reality that obscures what is really real. Baudrillard’s term for this condition is “the simulacrum” a kind of world in which representations of things, and not the things themselves, are taken to be real” –Terry Barrett

From Why is That Art?