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INTRODUCTION: AESTHETIC KNOWLEDGE

PETER MURPHY
peter.murphy@jcu.edu.au
Arts and Creative Media
College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University, Townsville

ABSTRACT. The special issue of the journal *Knowledge Cultures* on the theme of Aesthetic Knowledge explores different ways in which human beings understand the world through aesthetic media. Some of these media are openly artistic in nature, such as music. Other aesthetic media are closer to design, or in a more general sense, to shape, pattern and form. Whether aesthetics is contained in an art gallery or a concert hall, or whether it forms part of the everyday world, it is a way of knowing the world through figure, outline, and structure rather than through the more conventional means of knowing that are language-focused, declarative, indexical, or discursive. The special journal issue explores what happens when we think about the world and its institutions aesthetically rather than textually or declaratively. It addresses the kinds of cities, organizations, education, and arts that we end up with when we approach things in an aesthetic manner.

Keywords: aesthetics; knowledge; art; design; culture; beauty; music; sound art; tragedy; authenticity

Aesthetic Knowledge

Knowledge comes in many forms. We think of knowledge foremost today as something written down. It appears in reports, documents and books. Let us call that linguistically-mediated knowledge. It starts and ends in words. We report information that way; we move up the scale from information to explanatory knowledge communicating in words (Murphy 2011a; 2001b). But we also know the world in other ways than just through the medium of language. One of the most important of these other ways is aesthetics. When we initially think of aesthetics, we probably most commonly think of art and then of design. They certainly are aesthetic media. But aesthetics also refers to all of the many different ways that we relate to the world through pattern, shape and form. Aesthetics can be contained in an art gallery or in a concert hall. But it also permeates everyday life. And in doing so, it deeply influences and facilitates the way in which we know the world.

The most powerful kinds of human thinking and knowing rely on patterns. This is the basis of abstraction, and the most imaginative kinds of human cognition rely on abstraction. We create, in part, by abstracting things. Abstraction is the most formidable kind of cognitive medium. It is also central to art. The faculty of art, along with the faculty of imagination, appear at a specific time in human evolution. Dominique Bouchet in his essay in this issue of *Knowledge Cultures* stresses the importance of this. The human species, in his view, is *Homo aestheticus*. This seems very true. Human technology, economies, and its greatest collective creation, the city, appear to be closely woven together with the human aesthetic capacity. Bouchet thinks that aesthetics are a product of the cognitive faculty of the imagination. Stephen Mithen in 1998 dated the emergence of the imagination as a higher human cognitive capacity to the period of the Upper Palaeolithic, around 30,000 years ago. We cannot be specific about the dating; new archaeological evidence continuously changes dates but it is also clear that a certain kind of high-level human cognitive capacity appears quite late relatively speaking in the development of the human species. This cognition is marked by abstraction (in aesthetic terms, by geometric forms) and by ambidextrous, bisociative, imaginative thinking (Murphy, 2012; Koestler, 1964) seen for instance in the human-bison figures of early human art. Bisociative abstraction is the key cognitive component of human creativity. Such creativity proved to be a great advantage in human development and continues to be so. A large proportion of human ingenuity is a variant of that original human ability to blend and splice the image of the human and the image of the bison. Such blending relies on pattern thinking of a very high order. The bio-cognitive mechanisms for achieving this have been to date only lightly investigated.

Aesthetic knowledge is pattern thinking. It is thought conveyed through pattern. The most congealed type of such thinking is art. This intense congealment is what makes art, in the sense of the art of the art gallery, memorable. Great art crystallises human themes and stories in absorbing abstract shapes and forms. Sometimes this occurs in words but often it occurs in non-linguistic media, like colour or sound. With or without words, what matters most is form, the systemic arrangement of similarity and difference in a pattern. From this arises aesthetic form. Andrea Vestrucci in this issue investigates the case of the most abstract of all arts, music. He takes the side of those who say that music is not “about” something. Even when music appears in a representational form like a narrative film with a story-line, what makes the film music great is not its contribution to explicating what the story is “about” but rather the fascinating nature of its abstract shape. Strangely enough that is also true of stories. Yes they are “about” something. But what makes a great story is the artist’s mastery of aesthetic structure, of beginning-middle-end and the contrast of dark and light, humour and tragedy, epic scale and intimate detail. This is the beauty of things. As Vestrucci insists in a second essay in this issue, this beauty is not forged by the dry technicalities of music's harmony, rhythm, timbre, intensity, or frequency (fascinating as these can be to the music expert) but rather something more sweeping and sometimes more mysterious than any of the technical-formalist aspects of music.

Beauty is a function of certain kinds of patterns that permeate human existence. These include the patterns of contrast, symmetry and asymmetry, proportional arrangement, balance, and equilibrium. They appear not just in the art gallery or in the concert hall. They also inform our houses and furniture, our tools and technologies, and our economics and cities. Greg Melleuish observes that when institutions fail, what falls by the wayside is any desire to create things of beauty. As he notes, that is what has happened to the contemporary university. As it has declined, its lack of grace has become increasingly evident. Its contemporary works—along with its practices, processes and buildings—more often than not are ugly. In a second essay, Melleuish traces a shift in modern intellectual ideals. From the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the dominant intellectual ideal moved from that of beauty—signified by the beautiful harmony of faculties—to that of criticism. The contemporary intellectual adores the shrill, biting ideal of criticism. In the world of criticism, the desire is to tear things down not to build them up.

While there are few individuals left in universities who today defend the ideal of beauty, the same is not true of the larger society. One of the most intriguing cultural shifts of the past half century has been the shift of art (and beauty) out of the institutions of high culture into everyday life, where markets for aesthetic goods have grown visibly (Murphy and de la Fuente, 2014). As Stephen Naylor in this issue observes, today the contribution of a graduate of an art academy is more likely to be in politics, commerce, hospitality or the media than in an art studio or gallery. One of the more interesting trends in contemporary art education is the increasing readiness of its leaders to think about the contribution of artistic ways of thinking to general social creativity and innovation. Design schools call this design thinking. Naylor reflects on the example of a graduate from the Conservatorium in Sydney who works in accounting. It is notable, conversely, that the origin of accountancy owed a lot to Renaissance art and the mathematical explorations of that art. Robert Johnstone in his essay reminds us of this in another way. He explores the rise of contemporary Sound Art and its conflation of art and mathematics in aural aesthetic explorations. The ambition of this art is summed up neatly in the view of one of its practitioners—the Japanese sound artist Ryoji

Ikeda—that “the purest beauty is the world of mathematics”. Even if beauty has been forbidden in contemporary art ideologies, beauty nonetheless survives in science and mathematics and artistic meditations on these—for example in contemporary works that translate large science data-sets into aesthetic sound patterns, work that Johnstone himself is involved in.

Like Stephen Naylor, Susanne Weber looks at aesthetics outside of the gallery system. She takes us into world of organizations. She explores whether and how an aesthetic approach to organizations can bridge incommensurables. This is an interesting issue—as it takes us back to the human-bison thinking of the Upper Palaeolithic human who had an emerging imaginative faculty. To bridge incommensurables is one of the great human capacities. In a modern organization, we daily experience the antinomies of politics and money, means and ends, and ambition and capacity. Creative organizations find ways of harmonizing such antinomies. As Weber notes, images, pictures, and icons often are more effective ways of blending the antinomies of multiple clashing perspectives than are the conventional managerial tools of instructions, plans, and documents.

In his essay on the aesthetics of responsible business Carlo Tognato makes a similar point. He discusses the difficult case of businesses that operate in countries that are defiled by terrible acts. There are endless modern codes of behaviour and bureaucratic declarations of rights meant to guide businesses in these circumstances. Most of these are pretty meaningless as they make little impression on anyone. Aesthetics can make more of an impression. This is because, as in the case of Weber’s iconography, it trades in incommensurables. Tognato offers the example of the torturer who is a good husband. The power of art is that it targets the “tragic” dimension of human existence. That is, much better than the vacuous legions of “correct” linguistic declarations, art grasps the man-beast aspect of humanity. It is aware that sweetness and pitilessness can consume the same being. Tognato’s point is not that we should better “understand” the doting torturer but rather that our accounts of rights and wrongs are more meaningful if they are authentic. If they are then they have a better chance of properly informing behaviour—as in the case of those businessmen who have to tread a very difficult path in bad situations where they encounter human beings who are men and beasts on different days. The aesthetic imagination grasps this intuitively.

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Peter Murphy is Professor of Arts and Society at James Cook University. His books include *Universities and Innovation Economies* (2015), *The Collective Imagination: The Creative Spirit of Free Societies* (2012) and *Civic Justice: From Greek Antiquity to the Modern World* (2001); *Imagination* (2010), *Global Creation* (2010), *Creativity and the Global Knowledge Economy* (2009) with Simon Marginson and Michael Peters; and *Dialectic of Romanticism* (2004) with David Roberts.