

Formalism

Formalism is primarily a view about what it takes to determine the aesthetic characteristics or features or properties of things. Which characteristics are aesthetic? 'Aesthetic' is an elastic term. One approach to giving it a sense is simply to give a list of examples of the kind of features that are aesthetic: beauty, ugliness, daintiness, dumpiness, elegance, and so on. A more ambitious approach is to say that the list of aesthetic characteristics is non-arbitrary in virtue of a crucial role that beauty and ugliness play: other characteristics, such as, elegance, are ways of being beautiful or ugly. Either way, it is clear that works of art have many non-aesthetic characteristics, and nature has many aesthetic characteristics. (Formalism is sometimes thought of as a view of the nature of art, but that is probably because a view about aesthetic characteristics is conjoined with an aesthetic view of the nature of art.)

Formal and Non-formal Properties

Now, what of *formal* aesthetic characteristics? These are sub-class of the aesthetic ones. Rather than offering a definition, we can gain an indication of which aesthetic properties they are by considering debates over various artforms.

Clive Bell (1914) and Roger Fry (1920) thought that formal aesthetic features of paintings are those that are determined by the lines, shapes and colours that are within the frame. By contrast, the meaning and representational characteristics of paintings are not entirely determined by what is in the frame but also by the work's history of production. What a painting means or represents is determined in part by the intentions of the person who made it (Wollheim 1980, 1987). Such intentions are not sufficient, but they are necessary for the meanings or representational properties of paintings. Thus meaning and representation are not formally relevant. The aesthetic formalist about paintings believes that all their aesthetic properties are formal; they are all determined solely by what is in the frame and not at all by their history of production. By contrast, the anti-formalist about paintings believes that all their aesthetic properties are determined in part by their history of production. Sometimes anti-formalists appeal to the context of interpretive practices in which works are embedded, instead of their history of production, or they invoke some combination of interpretive practices and history of production, or some other extrinsic factor. I shall assume, however, that anti-formalists insist on the aesthetic importance of the history of production of works.

Eduard Hanslick claimed that musical beauty was determined by structures of sound (1986, chapter 3). On this view, even if music sometimes has meanings, they are of no relevance to its formal aesthetic properties. The emotions leading a musician or composer to make music, and the emotions generated in listeners are formally irrelevant. In a performance of a piece of classical music, for example, the 'frame'

around the sounds that determines formal aesthetic properties is the tapping of the conductor's baton and the applause (see Cone 1968). That structure of sounds determines the formal properties of the music. Anything outside that, such as the history of production of the sounds or their emotional causes or effects, is aesthetically irrelevant.

Form as Structure

There is another sense of form and formal properties that has currency—especially in reflections on literature, but also in music, architecture and painting—and that is of form as *structure*. This is a matter of the arrangement of the elements of a work with respect to each other. Consider three cards arranged in a line: the 6 of hearts, the 6 of spades and the 7 of hearts. There is a sense in which they have an ABA structure, and another in which they have an AAB structure. Perhaps they have both. Now consider a painting with three human figures in a line: king in a red cloak, a bishop in a red cloak, and a king in a blue cloak. There is a sense in which it has an ABA structure and a sense in which it has an AAB structure. But note that the AAB structure is formal in the previous sense that it is determined by what is in the frame—by the lines, shapes and colours on the surface—while the ABA ‘structural form’ is determined by what they represent (king or bishop), and on most plausible views that structure is not determined just by the lines, shapes and colours that are in the frame, but is determined in part by the artist's intention. So the sense of form as structure does not overlap with the sense of form as the determination of aesthetic features by what is in the frame. Let us put structural form to one side here, interesting though it is.

Formalism vs anti-formalism

Anti-formalists say that in order to appreciate a work of art aesthetically we must always see that work as historically situated. Aesthetic anti-formalism, with its emphasis on historical determination, has its roots in Hegelian history and philosophy of culture (*Kulturgeschichte*) that was popular in prewar Germany and Austria. This was imported to English-speaking countries by refugees from Naziism, becoming very influential in English-speaking art-history, and beyond. Consider Earnst Gombrich's multi-million selling *The Story of Art* (Gombrich 1950). The anti-formalism is right there in the title! The idea became commonplace that the aesthetic value and even the identity of a work of art depend on its place in the story of art. Contrast Bell, the formalist, who writes ‘...what does it matter whether the forms that move [us] were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago?’ (1914: 45-6).

Gotlob Frege famously said that a word only has meaning in the context of a sentence (1967), and similarly most aestheticians would assert that the elements of a work only have significance in the context of the whole work. W. V. O. Quine equally famously said that a sentence only has meaning in the context of

other sentences of the language (1951), and similarly aesthetic anti-formalists assert that a work only has aesthetic significance in the context of other works in the tradition in which the work is located. Aesthetic formalists deny this and insist that works sustain their aesthetic properties by themselves. (There was a similar debate, conducted in different terms, in the Renaissance; see Mitrovic 2004.)

Anti-formalists believe that all aesthetic properties are historically determined and that aesthetic judgements should always be made, and experiences always had, in the light of appropriate historical categories (Walton 1970). Formalists deny this. Anti-formalists charge formalists with a naïve belief in the ‘innocent eye’ according to which knowledge of history is irrelevant to the aesthetic appreciation. Formalists celebrate the innocent eye, preferring it to one cluttered with irrelevances. Innocence is sometimes a good thing, they say.

Arguments?

What can be said in favour of either view? In favour of anti-formalism, Gombrich put forward an imaginary example of physically identical works by different artists and invited us to judge that they are aesthetically different (Gombrich 1959: 313). Philosophers like Danto (1964) and Walton (1970) followed suit. Such arguments are supposed to show that a work’s physical nature does not suffice for its aesthetic properties and that history also plays a role. But the appeal to imaginary examples has limited dialectical efficacy. Fanciful thought experiments—sometimes involving Martians—are supposed to generate possible examples of physically identical artworks with different aesthetic properties; but whether such cases are really possible is far from uncontroversial. The dialectical pressure exerted by such examples is minimal since formalists and anti-formalists will simply interpret the examples differently. Physically identical cases with different histories may have *other* interesting differences. For example, they might differ in originality; but that difference may not contribute to a difference in their beauty, elegance or delicacy—that is, it may make no aesthetic difference. Or so the formalist will say, and merely imaginary examples will not sway them. Similarly, it is controversial whether being a fake makes an aesthetic difference.

Arguments for or against formalism should probably be less purely philosophical and involve more attention to actual cases. The apparently abstract metaphysical issue about what it takes to determine aesthetic properties is probably not answerable without practical critical engagement with works of art in various art forms. Here it is worth transgressing disciplinary boundaries. This need not mean the vacuous kind of ‘inter-disciplinarity’ that is mere deference to the apparent authority of another discipline (so as to avoid the authority of one’s own!). It can be an active engagement with the subject matter of both disciplines with whatever genres of intellectual thought are available (so long as the disciplines really do engage with the subject-matter, rather than being an excuse for undisciplined philosophy).

It is likely that the issue or issues over formalism needs to be discussed artform by artform; there may be no one correct view that applies universally. And even within artforms, it may be that no general theory is right.

Moderate Formalism

Both formalism and anti-formalism have something to be said for them, and yet both also seem too extreme. A possible middle course is what we might call 'moderate formalism' (Zangwill 2001). On this view, many aesthetic properties are formal and many are not; and many works have only formal properties and many do not have only formal properties. Moderate formalism admits some, and indeed many non-formal properties of works. For example, marching music or religious music is music with a non-musical function; it is music *for* marching or praying; but the way it realizes that extra-musical function may be part of its aesthetic excellence. This is unlike music that is for shopping: there the question is simply: 'Does it make people buy more?', or perhaps: 'Does it make shopping more pleasant?' Shopping music is not the aesthetically appropriate expression of the activity of shopping in the way that music may be the appropriate aesthetic expression of marching or praying. Sometimes musical beauty arises when music serves some non-musical function or purpose in a musically appropriate way. The music has a certain non-musical function and the aesthetic qualities of the music are not separate from that function but are an expression, articulation or realization of it. This is what Kant calls 'dependent' beauty (1928, section 16). Similarly, there can be a representation which is beautiful, elegant or delicate *as* a representation, and a building may be beautiful *as* a mosque, station or library.

So non-formal aesthetic properties are important. Bell, Fry and Hanslick overshot in denying that. However, there are many aesthetic properties that are purely formal, and there are many purely formal works. Some paintings are entirely abstract and quite a lot of music is 'absolute'. Moreover, most representational paintings have formal aesthetic features among their other aesthetic features. Extreme anti-formalism, which denies the existence of formal aesthetic properties and purely formal works, goes too far. Moderate formalism insists on the importance of both formal and non-formal properties.

See also AESTHETICISM, ART AND THE SENSES, BELL, DANTO, FORGERY, GOMBRICH, HANSLICK, REPRESENTATION, WALTON

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