

The social organisation of aesthetics – a note

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When reading [Robert Witkin's paper](#) from 20 years ago, I am, first and foremost, reminded that aesthetics – in even the broadest of definitions – have had a patchy and, on the whole, disappointing history in sociology. It may therefore be beneficial for me to provide a relatively broad commentary on the field of aesthetics and sociology to which Witkin's paper was an early contribution. In my own fields of interest - the ethnographic study of organisations, work and culture - the aesthetic orders of everyday life have received rather scant attention from most authors. It is as if the sociologist were so concerned to stress the mundane, the practical and the organisational that the aesthetic content and the achievement of aesthetic effects were relegated to the margins of inquiry. In one way, of course, this is entirely understandable. The sociologist or anthropologist does not wish to appear in the guise of amateur critic (although some social theorists, such as Adorno, have made their reputation through aesthetic judgements embedded in and justified by cultural commentary).

In many ways, some of the most successful of sociological perspectives have been especially problematic with regard to aesthetic aspects. This is especially true of the sociology of cultural forms such as theatre and music (including opera and dance). The performing arts lend themselves especially well to sociological and anthropological treatment. After all, the 'performative' aspects of everyday social life have been the emphases from multiple theoretical and disciplinary strands (from Burke's and Goffman's dramaturgy, to Judith Butler's performative gender studies, to Geertz's account of the Theatre State). But there have been too many accounts that have, as it were, stripped performance from its performative content, and art from its aesthetic imperatives.

Nowhere is this more true than in the 'social worlds' approach to art, associated with Howard Becker. Becker's work reflects the Second Chicago-School of sociology, established by Everett Hughes and his circle. This generation of sociologists made immeasurably significant contributions to the study of work and professions, socialisation, work and organisations, deviance, health and illness. But all their empirical studies share a common weakness. They placed so much emphasis on generic social processes, and on the mundane organisation of ordinary work that they all but voided the social world of any esoteric knowledge or practice. To cite just one example that has been central to my own interests: the classic study of medical education, *Boys in White* (Becker, Geer, Hughes and Strauss 1961), has a great deal

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to say about student culture and the development of shared strategies of coping among medical students – but it has remarkably little on the content and organisation of the medical knowledge that the students are grappling with. Many years ago I was struck by the comment of a colleague about *Boys in White* - ‘Ah yes, it’s got everything in it except what’s really going on’. That is too cruel, but it has a grain of truth. My own contribution to the field was an attempt to insert what was ‘really going on’ (Atkinson 1997).

I think that a similar observation and criticism could be levelled at Howard Becker’s highly influential *Art Worlds*. Becker’s work is devoted to the demonstration of collective social action in the production of an art work. This is, of course, a valuable antidote to any kind of analysis based on the assumption that ‘art’ is dependent on the intrinsic merits of the art-work alone, or that it is the ineffable product of a solitary artist. On the other hand, there is a danger that the analysis becomes so thoroughly based on generic social processes that it could apply to virtually any and every form of cooperative work and collective social action. It was one of the insights that Everett Hughes promoted, and that has been taken up ever since, that the sociologist can find common properties between the physician and the plumber, the psychiatrist and the prostitute. In many ways that is true, but it can mask important differences as well. The production and circulation of an art work is thoroughly dependent on the circulation of aesthetic judgements about the art-work, evaluations of the artistic worth and integrity of the artist, the validation of authenticity and so on.

I take it that this is, in part at least, at the heart of the possible critique that is the rationale of the collection of papers edited by Becker, Faulkner, and Kirshenblatt-Ginblett (2006), with a new emphasis on the ‘work itself’, even though – as Becker’s own contribution to that collection of papers makes clear – the idea of a ‘work itself’ remains sociologically problematic at best. The work never stands independently of social networks, cultural contexts and shared (and contested) judgments. Never the less, if we reduce the content and organisation of the work or the production to a mere epiphenomenon, then we lose many of the features of the social action and organisation that frame the work, and the significance invested in the work – by producers, performers, critics, consumers, collectors and others – become just as mysteriously invisible as a romantic appeal to intrinsic artistic worth.

Of course, we are not to be seduced into accepting every or any aesthetic judgement as if it accounted for the art work; nor should we impute some intangible quality to the art-work (such as its *aura*). On the other hand, we need to make sense of what we might call the *ethno-aesthetics* of artistic and cultural productions. We need to recognise – and therefore to study systematically – the socially shared and collectively organised practices that underpin the aesthetic judgements that are invoked to endow performances and products with value. If we do not, then we have no way of making sense of the collective commitment to art and performance, of the socialisation of the artist or audience, or of the circulation of value that attends the enactment of art works and art worlds.

Let me try to illustrate what I mean with reference to some recent work we have been doing in Cardiff on ‘masterclasses’ for young opera singers. Cardiff University’s International Academy of Voice is the brainchild of the internationally famous tenor Dennis O’Neill. It was founded quite explicitly, by O’Neill, in order to foster a particular vocal style in younger singers. He is not alone in believing that too many

younger singers are not benefiting from the sort of vocal technique that previous generations were taught, and that as a consequence, young voices are put at risk. In part, this commitment reflects the *bel canto* tradition – which is at once an aesthetic and a technical approach to singing and voice production.

If, therefore, one is to make any sense of the Masterclass as a particular kind of event – simultaneously performative and pedagogic – one cannot overlook or wish away the aesthetic aspects of music and singing. Equally, one cannot ignore the extent to which aesthetic issues are simultaneously matters of technique. For opera singers, singing itself is an intensely practical, embodied matter. In other words, aesthetic and technical interests are mutually constituted through the local practices of singers and coaches.

Masterclasses, including public masterclasses enacted before an audience, have some common features, even though the detailed content varies depending on the individual teacher. Typically, singers perform their chosen ‘piece’ in its entirety, and are praised for their performance. Then the performance is repeated, but the teacher stops the student at intervals, and makes suggestions or criticises the student’s performance. This is often accomplished through a repertoire of physical gestures that constitute a register of didactic resources. Full explication of this needs more space than is available here. But in brief, there is a dialogue of music and singing, explicit advice - sometimes in the form of maxims – and physical gestures.

Gestures are used by singing coaches and masterclass mentors to convey technical advice. For instance, there are characteristic hand gestures used to convey matters of voice production. For instance, in the *bel canto* tradition, singers are encouraged to visualise a continuous ‘wheel’ of breath in front of them, on which they place the note. This can be represented not only in explicit verbal instruction, but also through a characteristic wheeling motion of the hands. Likewise, teachers make hand gestures – usually near their own face – to encourage the student-singer to sing on the note, rather than scooping at it from beneath. They use physical gestures – including physically touching the student – to encourage her or him to support the voice on a column of breath, from the diaphragm.

These, and many other combinations of talk and gesture, are deployed in the interests of beautiful singing. Apparently small physical adjustments can result in audibly different voice production in the course of a single Masterclass. The purely technical matters blend into matters of interpretation. For instance, singers are encouraged to *interpret* their music as well as being technically precise. Technique and interpretation are inseparable in practice, as the ability to ‘shape’ a vocal line depends simultaneously on vocal technique and interpretative confidence.

Now these issues deserve much more detailed exploration than I can give them here – and they will be in future papers. For the moment I want merely to use them to illustrate some more general points. First, it is clear to me that aesthetic issues are at the heart of our understanding of any such performative work, and of any encounter such as the Masterclass. Secondly, the aesthetic and the technical or practical are mutually constitutive. Here, aesthetics does not inscribe an appeal to general canons of beauty. The styles of operatic singing in general, of the *bel canto* tradition in particular, are highly context-specific (and reflect highly evolved performance conventions). They are examples of ethno-aesthetic codes.

Moreover, the work of singers and teachers in encounters like Masterclasses highlight the importance of *felicity* in performance. Felicitous enactments are simultaneously technically accurate, interpretatively sensitive, and produced with the appearance of effortlessness. The requirement for such felicity is not confined to the world of performative art. Indeed, composure and felicity are among the features of everyday action that are available to reflection and evaluation, by actors themselves or by others. It is one of the shortcomings of recent treatments of *expertise* that no account is taken of the felicitous performance of specialised activity (Collins and Evans 2007). An emphasis on *technique* however allows us to take account of both practical and aesthetic components of everyday activity.

These remarks have taken us a long way from the kinds of phenomena that Witkin was writing about in his original paper. But rather than merely recapitulate his contribution, I have wanted to provide a more personal commentary. Recent developments in ethnographic research on the part of sociologists, anthropologists and others have clearly opened up the possibility of sensory ethnography (cf Pink 2009). Whereas many generations of ethnographic writing were oddly disembodied and jejune, nowadays, there is a greater willingness to document such features of everyday life as soundscapes, smell, visual codes and texture (Atkinson, Delamont and Housley 2008). The rise of interest in the body (embodied action and the body of the ethnographer) also brings sensory phenomena to the forefront of analysis. These in turn make possible a renewed interest in the aesthetic dimensions of everyday social life.

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