

Aesthetics, “Formalism,” and Media Studies

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The most common meaning of the word “aesthetics” today associates it with beauty. We use this word to refer to principles and techniques to make something beautiful, and with our experiences of the beauty. The word comes from the Ancient Greek word that meant “esthetic, sensitive, sentient, pertaining to sense perception”; that word was derived from another word meaning “I perceive, feel, sense.”

Many human cultures developed explicit principles and rules to be used in design in order to achieve beauty. Such principles may concern proportion, symmetry, harmony, composition, use of colors, narrative organization, etc. In between the 17th and 19th centuries in the West, many philosophers developed theories of aesthetic experience, while art academies were teaching artists the practical principles to make beautiful artworks. In the 20th century, such prescriptive aesthetic systems became less important, but some principles still remain widely used, such as golden ratio. Golden ratio is a particular proportion first described by Euclid; classical it was widely used in art and architecture because it was thought to be aesthetically pleasing. Modernist photographers, artists, and architects such as Le Corbusier continued to use golden ratio as basic for their works.

The concept of “aesthetics” has a unique relation to media studies. I can’t think of another concept that is so central to the modern culture industries and yet also to the creation of media by individuals – such as the tens of millions of people worldwide today who use digital tools to make aesthetically refined photos for posting on Instagram, or the hundreds of millions that have the means to purchase beautiful designer clothes and home décor items. The Pinterest social network that reached 100 million users in 2015 is dominated by images of beautiful clothes, home décor, crafts, fashion, parties ideas, etc. The photos that we see around us every day have been refined in Photoshop to achieve visual perfection, and cinematography similarly uses digital tools to control precisely the aesthetics of every shot and frame.

In fact, digital tools and software workflows that industry gradually adopted in the 1990s have led to an “aesthetic revolution.” Until that time, many forms of modern media such as television, cinema, and newspapers had limited ways to control the aesthetics. They also could not use color, or did not have technologies to control its nuances. Digital editing tools and the use of the web as media distribution platforms changed all this. Now every pixel, every line, frame, face, and body can be edited to achieve the desired aesthetic effect. Never before in the modern period were we surrounded by so much “engineered” beauty and perfection as today, especially in the visual sphere.

At the same time, the concepts of beauty and aesthetic pleasure have been almost completely neglected in theories of media. One regularly finds little to no analysis of media aesthetics in media studies textbooks, or in the works of major media theorists after the middle of the 20th century, as instead many media scholars in recent decades in English speaking countries have focused on the content of media and its social and political effects, and ignored the forms of media artifacts. Thus, for example, recent *Introduction to Film Studies* (564 pages) does not even have “aesthetics” or “beauty” in the index [<http://www.amazon.com/Introduction-Film-Studies-Jill-Nelmes/dp/0415582598>], while a search in *Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication* (616 pages) returned five pages where the word appeared, with no single sections or chapters devoted to it [<http://www.amazon.com/Media-Culture-Introduction-Mass-Communication/dp/0312644655>]. I certainly don't want to critique these and many others excellent textbooks in media studies. Their authors aim to represent objectively the topics, theories, and historical and contemporary academic media analysis that are most influential today, so if they omit references to aesthetics and beauty, this is only because these concepts and corresponding industry practices are not studied in media and communication theory and history today.

This exclusion is unfortunate. Forms and the relations between form and content are what make art (including forms of modern mass media and user-generated content) a unique type of human communication and experience. Concern with form and beauty is fundamental in all human cultures for many thousands of years. Rhythm, composition, patterns or repetitions, expectation and variation, systematic use of color, ornament, grids, and other systematic ways of organizing elements of any cultural artifact in space and time are found in every human culture. Today, all students taking studio courses in art, media and graphic design, film, television, fashion and other creative fields are taught how to use form effectively, and how to achieve desired aesthetics. Today, every student in design, film, television, architecture, and fashion programs around the world is taught how to use form effectively, and to achieve desired aesthetics. And while prescriptive aesthetic concepts and rules of beauty are no longer enforced today as they were in the art academies of previous centuries, particular aesthetic choices and systems (such as minimalism in design or pleasing background blur in photography and cinematography) dominate professional fields.

Therefore, if we are interested in historical or contemporary media culture and media arts, we need to study not only the content of artifacts but also their form. However, if you focus too much on “form” in media studies, you may be labeled a “formalist.” I assume that many people who use the label “formalist” assume that media (and the study of media) is about content (or “representations”), that progressive media artists should be creating particular representations to advance some social or moral cause, and that the job of scholars is to analyze cultural representations either to show how they excluded or misrepresented some groups in the past, or to support progressive artists today who want to use representations to make society more fair.

These are certainly legitimate ideals. However, labeling others who are interested in media aesthetics as "formalist" is very dangerous. While today media and art critics may associate formalism with a certain tradition in Western art criticism of the 20th century (such as the works of Clement Greenberg), this label was also utilized in Communist countries to imprison and kill artists who did not want to create correct representations. After Russia's October 1917 revolution, the new Soviet State was first tolerant of some experiments in art, as long as they did not contain anything that could be taken as "counter-revolutionary." (The literature that could not be published included Dada-like movement in Russian poetry, for example.) But already in the 1920s, the term "formalism" was used in the USSR to criticize in print and in public debates all those who were interested in anything other than ideologically "correct" subjects (including the representations of workers, building of socialism, etc.), and who did not use traditional (19th century) realist language.

Between 1930 and 1953, many thousands of leading Russian artists were sent to work camps, prisons, or killed based on such criticism. Often an article declaring that this or that artist was a "formalist" or had some "formalist tendencies" was published first in major newspapers, and after that this artist was stripped of his/her positions, could not get any work, and often was arrested. The term "formalism" continued to be used in a very negative sense by Soviet media and art critics until the end of 1980s. Most Communist countries followed the examples of Soviet Union and used the same practices.

But this attack on artistic form and use of the term "formalism" to destroy many artists did not mean that a Communist society rejected all forms of aesthetics. On the contrary, once Stalin decided it was time to put arts, culture, and media to work helping to construct a new society – and, at the same time, to offer hard-working citizens pleasurable experience – the concerns with form and aesthetics became important. In 1930, the Soviet government dissolved all independent artistic organizations that united Russian modernist artists, and started promoting "classical" and "realist" aesthetic norms in arts. Soviet architects began to build monumental buildings that used rich decorations and followed classical architectural aesthetics (such as golden ratio). In cinema, rapid disorienting montage and usual points of view were gradually replaced by classical Hollywood film language, and by the focus on beautiful stars adored by millions. The Moscow Metro, constructed in the 1930s, offered citizens of the capital and visitors an unprecedented aesthetic experience – dozens of stations featured marble, mosaics, sculptures, and other decorative elements created by the best Russian artists of the time. Clearly, the future communist state would ideally be like this metro, with every building and interior designed to offer best aesthetic experience. If Communist leaders had Photoshop, Final Cut, Flame, Autodesk, and other contemporary media software, they would be required tools for all artists to refine aesthetics and beauty of their creations, from paintings to films, photographs and print.

One can only hope that future media studies students will stop using terms like “formalism” negatively, and begin to study and teach media in ways that better reflect global media production, media environments, and media experiences today. If aesthetics and beauty are so central for media producers and audiences – including not only professionals but also millions of people who produce aesthetically refined content and share it online – media studies needs to pay equal attention to these dimensions.

How can we add considerations of aesthetics in media studies curriculum and textbooks? Given the centrality of aesthetics to contemporary media industry and user experiences, this topic should be also given sufficient space. Its presentation should treat aesthetics not in isolation, but instead show its roles in history of media, structures of media industry, social relations, and other topics. For example, the instructor can show how the standards of beauty in media change historically using the example of modernist art and media that at first were perceived as ugly. The dominant role of aesthetics in contemporary media industry can be discussed using examples of Apple and Samsung that came to dominate in early 2000s using more refined designed. The relations between social structure and aesthetics can be introduced using influential theories from sociology of culture such as analysis of taste by Pierre Bourdieu in his classic *Distinction*, and subsequent debates about taste and social status.