

Aesthetic Imageries: A Look at the Ideas of Sartre and Levi-Strauss

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Abstract: *The purpose of the paper is not to do a review of the theories of art and aesthetics but to focus on the contrasting views of the two French scholars, Jean Paul Sartre and Claude Levi-Strauss with a view to prepare the launch-pad for an exploration into the world of art and aesthetics, without which, I firmly believe, there cannot be any form of creation (not even in the field of social sciences). It primarily deals with the contrasting views on the modes of aesthetic creations and examines whether aesthetics is founded on the concrete or is completely an act of imagination.*

Keywords: Existence, nature, aesthetics, imagination, perception, nihilation, structuralism.

Introduction

We, human beings, make a lot of effort to live a good life, and therefore use our individual and collective labour, physical and mental, to meet our material/physical needs. We observe the bounty of nature and shape them into consumable items through production and reproduction. We do not stop at coercing the nature; we create social divisions, the powerful and the powerless, institutionalizing patterns of control over the forces of production, and cast a kind of social relation, where the powerful subjugates and coerces the powerless. This could be one of the ways of looking at the progress of human civilization from a presumed state of prehistoric “wild”.

The other way is to take note of an inevitable and long history of aesthetic creation, right from the so-called wild state of human existence to the present state. While working on or with nature, in coercion and empathy, people have always keenly observed nature and created the world of art and aesthetics, signs and symbols or the collectively shared elements of culture. Once created, such cultural elements went on adding to the richness of art and aesthetics by engaging in an endless process of production and reproduction and exchange across space and time. Aesthetic creations,

thus, have been a part of human existence in all phases. The primary question, therefore, is, whether there is a particular method to artistic or aesthetic creation, or there are many. How do we move from the concrete objects of nature, from the materiality of life to the aesthetic and the symbolic world, mediated through perception, abstraction, and creation of imageries?

Claude Levi-Strauss has devoted a full book, *The Savage Mind* (1966) and a good number of articles in explaining how we move from concrete to the symbolic. He saw an integrated whole in the natural/physical objects, their hidden interlinkages, the sensation, thus observation and perception, cognition of the concrete and abstraction through aesthetic creation. The method, for him, is the same for science and aesthetics, in savage and the modern. The other French Scholar, Jean Paul Sartre also had a rich theory of aesthetic creation, who, contra Levi-Strauss, proposes “nihilation” of the object and sensory experiences for creation of aesthetic imageries. Foucault, a post-structuralist scholar, argues, in agreement with his friend Deleuze, that any system or school of aesthetics is like an archive and can have a delimiting and disciplining effect on aesthetic creation, which, in all circumstances, has to be non-archaic and therefore free-flowing and decentred (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 192). The members of the German Critical school have left a rich tradition of Marxist interpretation of art and aesthetics. Besides, we have a famous book by Michel Foucault, named *Aesthetics* (1994) which adds riches to the discourses on aesthetics. It is quite a task for a student of social science, who has trained in empirical tradition, to grasp the abstract, rich theoretical, philosophical writings on art and aesthetics, a subject which has been fine-tuned, thus partially obviated, to be taught at the university level globally; albeit difficult, it could be a journey full of aesthetic pleasure. The understanding of aesthetics is so fundamental to the growth of a scholar in particular and a human being, in general; an exposure to the world of aesthetics enriches an individual in her/his social as well as intellectual existence.

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What is aesthetics?

In ancient Greece, the word *aisthesis*, which is taken as the root of modern-day word aesthetics, was used to mean “life experience” or “feeling” at the level of perception that follows sensation. It was taken as a body-mind play in unison. In modern time, the word aesthetics has evolved in its meaning. Foucault, for example, found an obscure but articulate engagement with experiences in the works of Surrealists, albeit many modern philosophers (one being Sartre) have ignored the connection between the sensory experiences and aesthetic creations (Faubion 1994: XIII). A subjective sense of what is beautiful connects heart with mind to generate a moment of elation and ecstasy, or elation, followed up with imageries of aesthetic creations in different forms of art, writings, to be imbibed into the individual self. This moment of elation or “feeling extraordinary” finds translation in artistic creations of different forms. In my understanding, there cannot be any creation, not even social science writings, unless it is founded on artistic realizations or aesthetics.

The subjective sense of aesthetics is rooted in its historical understanding and in collective reproduction in the field of culture. The late 19th-century European art movement established the idea that art should be for the sake of its beauty alone. Immanuel Kant, for example, proposed that aesthetic standards should be separated from morality (*Britannica Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 1: 26). Conceptually, art should not be utilitarian; but in reality, utilities cannot be separated from creation of art forms. The creation of an art form is an act in self-expression, hence, the element of self-satisfaction; the craving of the artist for recognition cannot be ruled out. An object of art - poems, music or paintings - become a source of aesthetic pleasure, and sometimes (for professional artists) they are exchanged for a material value. Even when the objects of art are exchanged as cultural obligation or an expression of love or care they have their utility in cementing social relations and cultural bonds between the individuals and groups involved. If we take art as the face of the artist then art cannot be bereft of morality since we cannot think of human beings without morality (or a commitment to the collective or social) and a philosophical/ideological understanding of reality. Let me illustrate the point with what Levi-Strauss saw in an act of magical healing performed by a Shaman in primitive communities. Levi-Strauss saw it as a theatrical performance by the Shaman with all his props and unintelligible chanting that create a magical moment for the audience and the ailing individual. This, in the eyes of the members of the community, is an aesthetic as well as a utilitarian moment (Levi-Strauss 1963a: 179).

The act of artistic performance, belief, the morality and the utility are thus integrated into a structural whole and therefore inseparable. The performance art thus gets socially acknowledged, hence institutionalized, and culturally reproduced, although, in Levi-Strauss, the aesthetic creations are essentially independent of a utilitarian end.

We cannot think of an individual or a collective that does not have an aesthetic sense or some sense of art forms. Even the cave men, illiterate peasants, the tribal people living in forest villages sing, paint, play flutes or drums, make and reproduce myths as an expression of their will to aesthetics, in their search for beautiful as a part of their “unconscious” efforts to live a good life. Even when they make tools for cultivation or for fishing or cooking utensils, aesthetics finds its expression in the associated craft works and designs.

The aesthetic moment and after

We move around, get into sensory interaction with elements and events in nature, fellow human beings, artefacts, the artistic creations, at the level of concrete materiality, and are often awe-struck by something extraordinary and exceptionally beautiful and we try to capture that moment of magic in our mental camera to make abstract and aesthetic images. Not everything catches our poetic or aesthetic eye, only some extraordinary frames do; we select these artefacts or events on the foundation of our existing (and subjective) aesthetic epistemology and begin to make (new) mental aesthetic images to be internalised into our selves. This is how we go on adding to our subjective aesthetic capital, which in turn and through empathetic sharing becomes shared cultural capital. The magical moment of connect with the beautiful, the extraordinary, “the absent in the present” is, according to Levi-Strauss, the first step to aesthetic creation. Levi-Strauss has recorded many accounts of such aesthetic moments in his autobiographical book *Tristes Tropiques* (1963b). Here is an illustration of how the aesthetic moment appears:

And sometimes the miracle happens. On one side and the other of a hidden crevice we find two green plants of different species. Each has chosen the soil which suits it; and we realize that within the rock are two ammonites, one of which has involutions less complex than the others. We glimpse, that is to say, a difference of many thousand years; time and space suddenly [become one]; the living diversity of that moment juxtaposes one age and the other

and perpetuates them. Thought and sensibility take on a new dimension, in which every drop of sweat, every movement of muscle, every quick-drawn breath becomes the symbol of a story; and, as my body reproduces the particular gait of that story, so does my mind embrace its meaning. I feel myself [immersed in a denser form of intelligibility, in which time and space answer one another and speak languages that we have at least been reconciled] (Levi-Strauss 1963b: 60).

After the magical connect with the objects the mind becomes active in capturing the moment and the beautiful, the moment of realization and, hence, joy and emancipation. The mind goes on making aesthetic images that the poet (the romantic self) in the human beings carries in her/his aesthetic treasure, to complete the cycle of aesthetic creation. Levi-Strauss thus looks at the process of poetic/aesthetic creation as a structural whole. He argues that the act of aesthetic “representation” necessarily involves a sensory simplification or “reduction” of the original object, which loses one or more of its “original” dimensions. A keen observer of painting, Levi-Strauss thus creates his own imagery or understanding of a painting while leaving out the painter, his thoughts and his lines of expression. The imagery, thus created, becomes the creation of the observer and not that of the painter (the original creator).

One can question whether an aesthetic creation, stored in the mind of the observer, is fixed in its shape and content or not, or if the observer stops reflecting on the very moment of the magical connect; or does the artist-agency visit the moment again and again to come up with new images. These are the post-structuralist questions and the post-structuralist answer would be in terms of multiple reflections and multiple imageries. Because, the agency in the artist is always active, creating and recreating (in a deconstruction), and therefore an image cannot be frozen in a time and space. Applying phenomenological reduction, the subjective aesthetic creation of an object, event, a poem or a painting can go through several rounds of modifications; (1) through repeated reflections on the object and (2) through dialogues with the other observers of the same object or event. Going a step further, we can say that the artist is not bound by any commitment to stick to the original imagery that was construed at the magical moment; rather, he can transcend from one imagery to the other, thus abstracting himself from the original in shaping a piece of art. I would call this aesthetic freedom of the creator.

We have to understand that there are varied and highly sophisticated interpretations of the modes of aesthetic creations. In the following section, I would discuss the views of two French scholars, Sartre and Levi-Strauss.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean Paul Sartre, outlined his phenomenological conception of aesthetic image in the last section of *L'Imaginaire* (1940), translated into English as *The Imaginary* (2004). Sartre identified imagination as a special faculty, which is distinct from the mental representation of the perceived objects. The mental image is construed as a double of the thing-in-itself, upon immediate sense contact on one hand, and from recollection, on the other. In his understanding, image making (of an object) or “imaging” consciousness posits its object and non-being. In other words, it “nihilates” its object, which is taken as “irreal” (2004: 191). For him, *image-making consciousness* is distinct from *perceptual consciousness*. In the former the object is bracketed but in the latter the object is altogether banished as the consciousness is not taken as the representation of the object. Sartre elaborated the distinction further saying:

... the object as imaged is an irreality. Without doubt it is present but, at the same time, it is out of reach. I cannot touch it, change its place: or rather I can indeed do so, but on the condition that I do it in an irreal way, renouncing being served by my own hands, resorting to phantom hands ... to act on these irreal objects, I must duplicate myself, irreal myself (2004: 125).

The mode of existence of imagined images are taken as “totally inactive”; they are neither the effects nor the causes.

Sartre’s core argument is that the imagined image is the seedbed of all forms of art and music. In the work of art, the mental image is attained through an external object – the work of art itself - which he terms as an “analogical representative” or *analogon*. The work of art construed as an *analogon* is no more than the means of generating the true object through the imagined work of art. The aesthetic experience requires a dissolution of the *analogon* (the material object), which vanishes into an “abyss” (2004: 189) of nothingness as soon as the imagined object appears. In Sartre’s illustration, the aesthetics of a painting (say, the portrait of Charles VIII) is not there in the frame, the colours and the shades; the realizing consciousness is hidden beyond all this materiality. The realizing consciousness is a part

of perception but the imaging consciousness is completely independent of the objective reality. In order to draw an imaging or imagining consciousness one has to 'nihilate' the material part of a painting. Sartre said: "It appears the moment that consciousness, effecting a radical conversion that requires the 'nihilation' of the world, constitutes itself as imagining" (2004: 189).

Art, in Sartre's understanding, is unreal, a "nothingness: the aesthetic object is constituted and apprehended by an imaging consciousness that posits it unreal" (2004: 191). The work of art appears only with the total 'nihilation' of the materiality of a piece of art (or the thing-in-itself). This happens with non-figurative art (such as music) as well; what is experienced is never what is immediately given to perception, but "a phantomatic double of the object" (Wiseman 2007: 98). Illustrating on Beethoven's Seventh Symphony Sartre wrote: "the symphony is not there, between those walls, at the tip of the violin bows ... I do not really hear it; I listen to it in the imaginary" (2004: 192-93). In case of natural yet aesthetic event like sunrise or sunset on the sea one has to forget about the actual event and remember the imagery of it, independent of the actual even. The virtual (unreal) object thus created in mind becomes the true source of aesthetic emotion. Thus, Sartre arrived at a general rule of aesthetic appreciation as thus: "the aesthetic enjoyment ... is nothing but a manner of apprehending the unreal object and, far from being directed on the real painting, it serves to constitute the imaginary object through the real canvas" (2004: 191).

The idea that objects are to be taken as unreal and the imageries real, as Sartre perceived, seems to be problematic. It is true that our imaginative power and hence the power of aesthetic creation is infinite and which may not directly be indexed to the real objects, but all the imageries although fictional are provoked by and inspired into something concrete. Some events in nature or culture, which create a magical moment, are taken further in imagination culminating into an aesthetic creation. In the writings of Sartre, this perpetual dialogue between the perceptual order and the world of imaginations is missing as for him the world of aesthetics has nothing to do with materiality. The poems, the paintings, songs are often inspired by real and every time we reflect back on the event we may come up with different kind of aesthetic imageries. Similarly, we take poems, music or art as "discourses" (in Foucaultian sense) they can definitely shape our perceptions and actions. At this juncture we would move on to discuss Levi-Strauss's position on the problematic.

Levi-Strauss

All the works of Levi-Strauss has a “mythopoetic” content (Wiseman 2007: 217). In all his anthropological works, he sought a reconciliation of nature (reality) and culture. In structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss, in contrast to Sartre’s views, imagining (or imaging) and perceiving are integrally interconnection. “Levi-Strauss’s anthropological analysis of totemic, mythical and poetic thought reveal the imbrication of the creative imagination and sense perception” (Wiseman 2007: 98). For Levi-Strauss, precepts, images and signs are connected in a single chain of symbolic production. Levi-Strauss uses his idea of “bricoleur” to explain how the symbolic system is created:

Images cannot be ideas but they can play the part of sign, or to be more precise, co-exist with ideas in signs and if ideas are not yet present, they can keep their future place open for them and make its contours apparent negatively. Images are fixed, linked in a single way to the mental act which accompanies them. Signs and images which have acquired significance, may still lack comprehension; unlike concepts they do not yet possess simultaneous and theoretically unlimited relations with other entities of the same kind. They are however already *permutable* (1966: 20).

In Levi-Strauss’s model, the *percepts* (or non-signifying images) drawn (hence removed) from the reality are converted into signs (or signifying images) and then integrated into the broader symbolic order, called culture. Thus, contrary to the position of Sartre, Levi-Strauss did not see any discontinuity between the concrete, the *percepts*, mental images and sign systems; he, in reality, saw a gradual progression from one to another. The imagery in Levi-Strauss is based upon the foundation of the object, its physicality and not through “nihilation” of the objects or the reality.

For Sartre, the object or the real-life experience itself is not the source of knowledge, but Levi-Strauss shows that for the mind in its wild mode of operation it may be a tool of understanding. Criticizing Malinowski’s crude functionalism, Levi-Strauss has asserted that plants are not only good to eat, but “good to think with”. Levi-Strauss’s aesthetics is founded on the concrete existence of the objects, a foundation that Sartre negates and nihilates and terms it unreal. For Levi-Strauss, the meaning of the aesthetic object is sought in the body of the image. Illustrating the point, Levi-Strauss observed how the Cunas differentiate kinds of leaves based on how they are folded by the wind, or how the Blackfoot used to forecast the arrival of

spring by observing the evolution of the fetuses of bison. Levi-Strauss, in his structuralism, noticed an inherent nature of human mind and that is to minutely observe the concrete reality, which he has termed as the wild mode, which serves as the first step towards production of the aesthetic and symbolic order. The dialogue with nature for the primitive scientist as well as the modern artist is the foundation of abstract, aesthetic creation. On this Levi-Strauss observed:

Savage thought is definable both by a consuming symbolic ambition such as humanity has never again seen rivalled, and by scrupulous attention directed entirely towards the concrete, and finally by the implicit conviction that these two attitudes are but one (Levi-Strauss 1966: 220).

Whether the stages can be separated, whether or not the observation of the concrete, percept formation and aesthetic creation happen simultaneously or chronologically in progression. Primitive aesthetic sense; the universal movement from concrete to abstract. Whether one concrete results into one image only. The ways we relate to the concrete – all continue to impress our cognition and keep the endeavour to dive into aesthetic experience alive. However, Levi-Strauss refused to reduce artistic creations or the imageries as mere reflections of the perceptual order; they are much more abstracted from that as they happen in the world of imaginations and dynamic reflections.

Conclusion

Aesthetic imagination and artistic creations, the use of signs and symbols and cultural reproduction have been a part of human existence since time immemorial, irrespective of the wild or modern ways of life. One can see a journey here - from concrete to abstract; if nature is concrete, art (or any other form of aesthetic creation) is abstract as the latter finds its fruition in the romantic space of the creator(s). The question is whether they are discrete or continuous, whether the artistic creations can happen independent of the observations of the concrete (or natural) objects or they are just stages in a process of transformation. Whether the aesthetic creations are rooted in concrete objects or completely decentred, whether aesthetics follow ethics and a system (or ideology) or are completely free of any system of thought – these are some of the questions that intrigue me.

In this paper we have dealt with two contrasting approaches to aesthetics, one is by Levi-Strauss and the other is in the tradition set by Sartre, Deleuze and Foucault. In the first, we come to know that aesthetics, although in romantic tradition is rooted in the objects and aesthetic events and a psychic moment of aesthetic elation; as Levi-Strauss claimed that aesthetics is a part of holistic human existence. In the latter tradition, aesthetics is decentred and can be made possible only by nihilating the object or concrete; aesthetics is non-archaic, non-systemic, and discrete. The latter argument, especially by Foucault and Deleuze, brings forth ideas how any patterned (by ideology or discourse) aesthetics has a delimiting and hegemonic impact on the artist, who cannot operate in an ambience of absolute freedom. Foucault is in favour of decoupling even the ethical issues from aesthetics.

The question that continues to haunt me (at the end of the exercise of writing this paper), is whether we can think of a human being (every single human being has some aesthetic sense), who can be totally decentred from concrete existence, a sense of value or ethics, and ideology. My answer would be a “no”, and hence the rootedness of the artist is bound to find reflection and representation in all forms of artistic creations. Then comes the question of whether the artist can be absolutely free of the systemic forces, the market, and the pressure of the forms and trends that are the creations of time and space, and interest, both individual and collective. An artist has to respond to the tensions created by these pressures, which want to discipline the artist, on the one hand, and the will to aesthetic freedom, on the other. The tension never deserts the artist.

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