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Anders Lidbeck on the Origin of Art and Aesthetics

On June 1, 1796, Anders Lidbeck started a series of dissertations at the University of Lund named *Almänna aesthetiska anmärkning* (*General Aesthetic Remarks*). He was then 24 years old and served the University of Lund as *Botanices Demonstrator* (lecturer in botany), but he had also been recently appointed lecturer in Swedish belles-lettres.

The position as lecturer in belles-lettres in Lund was modeled on a similar position established 11 years earlier in Uppsala. In 1785 Jakob Fredrik Neikter, librarian at the University of Uppsala, received a chair in "modern literature" (nyare witterhet) which he called a chair in "L'histoire et la theorie des belles lettres." This chair resembled the chair of rhetoric and belles lettres held by Hugh Blair in Edinburgh and was intended by the Swedish king to promote the use of the Swedish language as a tool for the improvement of the national culture.

In 1795 the University of Lund applied for and was granted a similar chair, and in November of that year Anders Lidbeck was appointed lecturer in aesthetics. Lidbeck was also appointed librarian in 1799, and he became the first professor of aesthetics in Lund when the chair was finally established in 1801.

The same type of position as both librarian and professor in aesthetics was established in Copenhagen in 1790, in Åbo, Finland, in 1795, and in Greifswald, Germany, in 1798. At that time the latter two universities were Swedish.

Pleasure as the purpose of the fine arts

In the first of his dissertations from 1796, entitled *Almänna aesthetiska anmärkningar* (*General Aesthetic Remarks*), Lidbeck opens the discussion with a terminological comment. He enumerates the arts which he, in accordance with a common practice established during the 18th century, regards as the fine arts. These are rhetoric, poetry, music, the higher art of dance, painting, sculpture, beautiful architecture, and beautiful gardening.

He then states his position with regard to the purpose of the fine arts and he alludes to a discussion of the role of sensuous pleasure in human life: "When we say that the most important purpose of the fine arts is to provide pleasure, at least those will turn their backs in contempt who believe that the earth is a house of sorrow and that man has entered it in order to glide forward a few steps there under pains and tears."¹ Lidbeck argues that it is an offence against the almighty Creator not to accept the pleasures which nature offers since He has not only given man the means to secure his existence but also the powers to enjoy it. In other words, pleasure is built into human nature and is a part of it. Lidbeck continues with an ardent description of all the boons of sensuous pleasure. This opening statement refers to a change in the assessment of the role of the senses which is quite obvious during the 18th century. It is easy to read this eulogy as directed against other more ascetic views, from Plato and the Church Fathers to modern times, which champion the intellectual capacities of man at the expense of his powers of sensuous experience.

Some authors, Lidbeck writes, claim that the purpose of art is moral in character. However, Lidbeck maintains that although the moral mission of the fine arts is important, it is not their first objective. He states that, "To represent virtue and truth with all their delights and charms and by so doing to improve our morality is, then, the further but very important obligation of the fine arts; their proper office is, however, to please."²

"Pleasure" is taken here in a general sense. Anything which is experienced as positive is a pleasure. "Be convinced," Lidbeck observes,

¹ *Almänna aesthetiska anmärkningar*, Lund, 1796, p.8. "Då vi säge, at de sköna konsternas egentligaste ändamål är at förnöja, lär åtminstone den med förakt vända sig bort, som tror jorden endast vara et sorgehus, och menniska ditkommen, at under plågor och gråt framhalka några steg." All the translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

² *Ibid.* p. 17. "At skildra dygden och sanningen med alla deras behag och retelser, och dymedelst förbättra vår moralitet, är således de sköna konsternas fjärmare, men högst viktiga skyldighet: deras egenteliga kall är att förnöja."

“that the cynic philosopher who rolled hungry in his barrel, in spite of all his denial, looked for pleasure as much as the sybaritic effeminate did, although in a very different but equally extreme manner!”³ Thus, there is a large number of different kinds of pleasure with regard to the quality and manner of generation. A basic question then is what kind of pleasure is basic to and characteristic of the fine arts.

First of all, Lidbeck distinguished between the lower and the higher senses; following a long tradition, he regarded touch, taste, and smell as the lower senses and sight and hearing as the higher. He considered that the lower senses are in direct contact with the sense objects and “report” only on their respective qualities. Only sight and hearing work at a distance from the sense objects and are able to report on the forms of things, something which involves understanding. Only sight and hearing are capable of reporting on both qualities and forms of things while the lower senses can do so only in respect to quality. “That which above all elevates the rank of sight and hearing and which gives them an immense precedence is the fact that understanding immediately participates in their representations and contribute to the feelings they cause. The pleasures of smell, taste, and touch do not presuppose the assistance of the understanding.”⁴ The pleasures generated by the higher senses Lidbeck called “sensuous-intellectual pleasures” and those generated by the lower “sensuous pleasures.” According to Lidbeck the goal of the fine arts is the generation of sensuous-intellectual pleasures.

The first theories of the fine arts

Lidbeck was well aware that the concept of fine art was of comparatively recent origin. In 1826 he published the dissertation *Om det första försök till en Teori om de sköna Konsterna* (*On the First Attempt at a Theory of the Fine Arts*), which opens in the following way: “The Greeks and Romans did not have a particular name for the arts that are called the fine arts; and already from this fact it is reasonable to conclude that they did not have a particular theory of them. This supposition proves to be entirely true.” A similar view was expressed in 1799 by I. Koller in his book *Entwurf zur*

³ Ibid. p. 8. “Varom öfvertygade, at den cyniske filosofhen, som hungrig rullade i sin tunna, oaktat alt des nekande sökte nöjet så väl, som den sybaritiske veklingen, fastän på et högst särskildt, men lika ytterligt vis!”

⁴ Ibid. p. 21. “Det, som framför alt upphöjer synens och hörlsens rang, och som skänker dem et omäteligt företräde, är at förståndet omedelbarligen deltagar i deras föreställningar, och bidrager til de känslor, som de orsaka. Luktens, smakens, och känslens nöjen förutsätta icke förståndets medverkan.”

Geschichte und Literatur der Aesthetik, von Baumgarten bis auf die neueste Zeit (A Sketch on the History and Bibliography of Aesthetics from Baumgarten to the most Recent Time): “The name and form of a general theory of the fine arts along with the criticism of taste were unknown to the ancients. That which prevented them from performing anything in this area was their imperfect psychology.”⁵ Both authors were convinced that the first part of the 18th century was the critical period in which the first attempts were made to put forward a general theory of the fine arts. Both of them also recognized that many authors before the 18th century had written about the individual fine arts in many excellent ways, but they claimed that none of these older authors had considered the idea that there was something which distinguishes the fine arts from all other kinds of art. In his attempts to trace the origin of aesthetics as a general theory of the fine arts Koller emphasized the German tradition stemming from Wolf and Baumgarten while Lidbeck exclusively discussed the French authors abbé DuBos, abbé André, and Charles Batteux. Lidbeck saw an important difference between these two traditions, namely, that Batteux attempted to develop a theory of the fine arts whereas Baumgarten and his followers sought a theory of beauty, both in art and nature. (p. 368) In addition, Lidbeck characterized the French line of argumentation as empirical but regarded Baumgarten’s line as philosophical in character. Lidbeck claimed that since Batteux did not start from an investigation of the soul and its activities, his argument lacked a philosophical foundation.⁶

Paul Oscar Kristeller

In his seminal paper “The Modern System of the Arts” Paul Oscar Kristeller denies, as did Koller and Lidbeck, that there was an ancient system of the fine arts before the modern system appeared at the beginning of the 18th century.⁷ He claims there were a number of classifi-

⁵ Regensburg 1799, p. 9: “Nahme, und Form einer allgemeinen Theorie der schönen Künste, und Kritik des Geschmacks war den Alten noch unbekannt. Was sie im diesem Fache etwas zu leisten hinderte, war die Unvollkommenheit ihrer Seelenlehre.”

⁶ *Om det Första Försök till en Teori om de Sköna Konsterna (On the First Attempt at a Theory of the Fine Arts)*, Lund, 1826. Also printed in a collection of Lidbeck’s dissertations named *Anmärkningur angående ämnen ur Psychologien, Esthetiken och Svenska Synonymiken*, ed. Peter Wieselgren, Lund, 1830. For Lidbeck’s views referred to here cf. particularly p. 368.

⁷ *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol 12 (1951), pp. 496–527, and Vol 13 (1952) pp. 17–46. Also published in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II*, New York, 1965, pp.162–227. Cf. p. 165.

cations of the arts as human occupations which followed rules and habits and were founded on human practical experience, such as the *technai* and *artes* of the Greeks and Romans. However, none of these classifications were related to the modern system of the fine arts as an older version or predecessor of it. For instance, the classification of certain arts as the arts of the Muses was based on mythological accounts, and the distinction between the liberal and mechanical arts was founded on social and economical ideas and circumstances. Kristeller concedes that the classification of the *technai* and *artes* into the arts which produce imitations and those which produce real things resembles the modern system of the arts, including the classification of certain of them as fine arts (*beaux arts*), but he denies the importance of this resemblance. He enumerates a number of arguments against such a relationship:

None of the passages has a systematic character or even enumerates all of the "fine arts" together, it should be noted that the scheme excludes architecture, that music and dance are treated as parts of poetry and not as separate arts, and that on the other hand the individual branches or subdivisions of poetry and of music seem to be put on par with painting and sculpture. Finally, imitation is anything but a laudatory category.⁸

Kristeller maintains that even if the terms "fine arts" and "arts of imitation" to some extent cover the same human occupations, they do so for different reasons.

In most handbooks the theory of imitation is regarded as the oldest known art theory, if by "art theory" we mean "statements that are intended to clarify the nature of art and by so doing draw borderlines between art and non-art, sometimes stated in the form of a definition of art." However, I have argued elsewhere that the theory of imitation, or the theory of *mimesis*, is not an art theory in the sense just given.⁹ It is rather a theory of pictorial representation, not a theory of art, and was designed to distinguish images in a general sense from real things. A house is a real thing, but a painting representing a house is an image or imitation; human actions are real, but what we see on a theater stage or in a movie house is an image; fiction is a sort of image and so is music according to Plato and Aristotle. In addition, mimicry is a form of image making, which is also how Plato characterizes the philosophical ac-

⁸ Ibid. pp. 171-2.

⁹ See my paper "The Theory of Imitation is not a Theory of Art." in *Understanding the Arts: Contemporary Scandinavian aesthetics*, ed Jeanette Emt and Göran Hermerén, Lund University Press, 1992, pp. 217-235.

tivities of the sophists in the dialogue *The Sophist*. According to Plato the sophists present only images of real knowledge to their audiences.

Although the theory of imitation cannot be regarded as an ancient art theory distinguishing art from non-art, I believe that it played an important role in the rise of the modern system of the arts. Both abbé DuBos and Batteux saw imitation as the distinguishing characteristic of the fine arts. How did they come to such a conclusion and how were these ideas received?

DuBos

When Lidbeck tried to trace the origin of theories of the fine arts, he started with abbé DuBos and his very influential book *Reflexions Critiques sur la Poësie et sur la Peinture* (*Critical reflections on Poetry and Painting*) from 1719, which according to Voltaire was the best book ever written on the subject. DuBos maintains that every human capacity, faculty, and property has a purpose answering to a need; for example, human beings have intelligence for thinking, muscles for movements and activity, eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, and so forth. As the body needs exercise in order to be kept in good shape, so does the human mind. According to DuBos, when a capacity or a faculty is activated in accordance with its purpose which answers to a given need, pleasure is generated. "There is no natural pleasure ... which isn't the result of a need. ...And the greater the need is the greater the pleasure will be when the need is satisfied."¹⁰ This also applies to the senses, which need to be activated and exercised like all other faculties.

The intrinsic pleasures of sight and hearing

Granted we agree that the senses, particularly the higher ones, i.e., sight and hearing, need to fulfil their functions and that doing so gives pleasure, it is natural to ask which things are best suited to activate and exercise sight and hearing and how this is.

The senses report on what goes on around us in normal life situations. Sight and hearing are functional to our lives, and pleasure is

¹⁰ Anders Lidbeck, *Om det Första Försök til en Teori om de Sköna Konsterna*. (diss.), Lund, 1826, as quoted in Anders Lidbeck, *Anmärkningur angående ämnen ur Psychologien, Esthetiken och Svenska Synonymiken*, ed. Peter Wieselgren, Lund, 1830, p. 351.

aroused in accordance with grasping the purpose and utility of the things about which they report. It is possible, however, to enjoy the exercise of sight and hearing in themselves without a connection to normal life. In such situations we distance ourselves from ordinary circumstances and the delight of mere sight and hearing presents itself. Joseph Addison exemplified this new form of sensuous apprehension in the series of papers called "The Pleasures of Imagination" in the *Spectator* from 1712. The mere sight of a corn field is a pleasure to the polite gentleman on a visit to the country side, while the farmer enjoys the colour of the field as a sign of a good harvest and the real estate dealer enjoys the prospect of a great profit if he buys and sells the land. Addison calls the former way of looking disinterested whereas the farmer and real estate dealer have pleasures that are founded in personal interest. Addison wrote that, "[the polite gentleman] looks upon the world, as it were, in another Light, and discovers in it a Multitude of Charms, that conceal themselves from the generality of Mankind."¹¹ A new way of looking and listening presented as goals and values of their own was thus introduced in the early 18th century.

It is also possible to produce things for the express purpose of activating and exercising sight and hearing in themselves. For DuBos, paintings, poems, and pieces of music are precisely such things: they are made to be heard and seen. Most other things are made for a given purpose; they have uses and we enjoy them when they fulfil their purposes. A painting can also be made for a purpose, such as to capture a person's appearance or serve as an object of worship in a religious ceremony. However, the new attitude which was introduced in the early 18th century was centered around the pleasure of exercising sight and hearing in themselves irrespective of any other functions.

Batteux

Already in the title of his book from 1746, *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (*The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*), abbé Batteux announced his intention to find what is characteristic and distinctive of the fine arts in respect to the other arts. He opened the discussion by distinguishing between the arts of utility, the arts of pleasure, and the arts that give both utility and pleasure, and he viewed the purpose of the fine arts to be the generation of sensuous pleasure, as did DuBos. However, many arts can give rise to pleasure without being fine arts.

¹¹ *The Spectator* No. 411, Saturday, June 21, 1712.

With a reference to Aristotle as a source, Batteux found the principle of the fine arts in the theory of imitation, even though not all kinds of imitation are counted among the fine arts but only those that imitate Beautiful Nature.

And DuBos, too, regarded painting, poetry, and music as imitation. An important factor in the apprehension of images is the fact that the person having the apprehension knows that it is an image and not a real thing. This fact makes it easier to simply look or listen and disregard any other purpose; since the person knows that the image is not "real," no reaction is necessary except to look, listen, and enjoy the pleasure thus generated.

Just as the polite gentleman looks and is not involved in the piece of land he is looking at, so is it easier to look at a theater performance, for instance, and simply enjoy it because it is not "real." So, too, with poems and pieces of music, which according to the classical tradition are imitations of things and actions, not these things and actions themselves. This fictive character makes it "safe" for the listener and spectator to behold what he or she hears and sees. It will thus be possible to maximize the pleasure of looking and listening, which is the main goal of the activities aimed at by the new uses put to paintings, pieces of poetry, and what are in general called works of fine art. Sight and hearing in themselves as intrinsic goals for human activity are thereby developed as an autonomous realm of human activity.

Lidbeck argues in his dissertation that this idea lies at the very beginning of the first theories of the fine arts and of the new kinds of individual and social activities it fostered. Art as a particular kind of social activity with its own goals and means arose and became autonomous and autotelic. It became a social practice like drinking coffee and smoking cigars, although on a much higher level than the latter insofar as sight and hearing are higher senses. Art could also involve intellectual and moral ideas because sight and hearing imply moral and intellectual elements in their functions.

As much as Batteux has been praised for his attempts to find a single principle for the fine arts, so has he been attacked for the actual principle he discovered. It was maintained that imitation in itself cannot produce the autonomous and autotelic pleasure sought for in art, and that there must be something else. It was thus here in Batteux' attempt to find a unifying principle for the fine arts that the modern hunt for the essence of art began, not in antiquity as is widely held.

In this respect the ancient theory of imitation served as a mediator during a transitory phase in the development of theories of the fine arts between the old outlook centered on a discussion of the nature

of picture-making and the new outlook and behaviour called the fine arts.

Lidbeck's views on art and aesthetics may therefore be summarized as follows: The fine arts produce things called works of art, which are primarily imitations or images, whose purpose is to activate intellectual-sensuous pleasure as a goal in itself. The pleasure thereby created is called aesthetic pleasure.

