

Addressing the Bourges-Academy 2002

As a start I would like to give a few general remarks on the term Aesthetics and its concepts. In a traditional sense Aesthetics has always been connected(linked) to the arts ever since the term was introduced by Alexander Baumgarten in the middle of the 18th century. Some contemporary aestheticians like Wolfgang Iser thinks that we live in a society that is overly(?) aesthetic on the surface. Therefore the term “Aesthetics” is no longer relevant and the art of music is just surface and studies should instead be aimed at “Socio-cultural domain”. Iser has underlined that the term “Aesthetic“ suffers heavily from what he calls “the Aesthetic´s semantic ambiguity” (Iser: Undoing Aesthetics,1997). According to Iser the meaning of the term has today been so diluted that it stands for almost anything and everything. When EAM for instance is discussed among various practioners, one gets easily the notion that everything that is not technology or perception is regarded as aesthetics. Aesthetics could be seen as some form of garbage can for left over notions in, when they can´t be placed(included?) in these two categories. That seems to support Iser´s opinion.

Iser distinguishes between two kinds of usage of the term: 1) The surface aestheticization, where the most superficial aesthetic values dominates and that is very often found in the consumer area and 2) an aesthetic that aims for the deeper layers of artforms.

Considering what I just said, I think the first question we should ask ourselves is: Do we regard Acousmatic Music and Electroacoustic Music(EAM) as artforms? This question may not be as rethoric as it seems. When I read articles and essays about Acousmatic music or EAM I often get a peculiar feeling that the authors are writing about something that more relates to Cognitive Psychology or studies in Social-Anthropology. It is hard to link(related?) these discourses to an artform, since the term “Art” is scarcely used. In periodicals like “Computer Music Journal” you easily get the impression that Computermusic or EAM constitute nothing more than another branch of engineering .

Quite a few major contributions have been made in recent writing about the Acousmatic in terms(in the fields) of Typology, Classification, and Perception. This semantic ambiguity of the term Aesthetic appears once in a while also in these ambitious essays about electroacoustic

music, but unfortunately the authors seem to think that terms like “Electroacoustic Aesthetics” or “Digital Aesthetics”, etc. are self-evident and therefore stop at these points instead of elaborate or explain what it means to the naive readers. For some unknown reasons they halt where the Art issues start. It leaves the reader in the dark and in frustration.

If the perceptual processes involved in the acousmatic listening are correctly observed as a different way of listening, compared to traditional music, it is fair to think that the aesthetic response and experience could also be different.

Schaeffer's typology and classification of the sonic objects was of course a major breakthrough, but from an aesthetic point of view it looks more like a biological classification of flowers. All the flowers are carefully classified and catalogued according to observed data, but such a system does not tell us anything why we think some flowers have more attractive scents, forms and colors than others. The sensual qualities and the emotional response to sound objects and world of sounds have not been studied much as far as I know.

Simon Emmerson has pointed out that “sound objects do not suggest their own montage” and that it is likely that a value system is at hand, “to a large extent unconscious”. However it does not imply that we are hindered to start to investigate such a value system. In my view this is a very important aspect of the Aesthetic domain. Value theory is also from a long tradition connected to Philosophical Aesthetics. As far as I know very little has been accomplished in this area. A consensus of aesthetic values among members of group of artists can definitely give rise to a set of aesthetic norms of what is bad or good, interesting or banal, repellent or attractive, ugly or beautiful, etc. Stylistic properties will emerge and we will be able to recognize a group of artists from their aesthetic views.

Throughout the history of art a number of art theories have emerged starting with the ancient Greek concept of “Mimesis” and leading up to contemporary theories like Marxism, Structuralism, Decomposition and Postmodernism. In addition we could find quite a few so called “nut-shell” definitions of art like:

Kant: Purposiveness without purpose (Avsiktighet utan avsikt, ändamål?)

Benedetto Croce: Art is the expression of intuition

Clive Bell: The essence of Art is significant form.

Susan Langer: "Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling."
(Over-head dia?)

Several problems are attached with these theories. They are all aimed for a global or general view over the arts and they try to describe and explain a number of important aspects of the arts; like the difference between art and non-art, the difference between art proper and lower forms of art - like kitsch, craft, amusement, entertainment - the value of the arts, if art is a separate endeavor in the life of man, the place of the art in society, the nature of aesthetic experience, etc.etc.

One major problem with these theories is the difficulty to come up with a theory that could be applied to and cover all the art-forms. The American aesthetician Morris Weitz has pointed out that the task of formulating an over-all art theory is really an impossible task, but there is no harm in trying. After all, some interesting ideas and observations about the arts could come up as side effects.

Maybe we can be more modest in our ambitions. I would be happy if we could start working on a "local Art theory" aimed solely for the Acousmatic Arts - a theory that could describe, illuminate and perhaps even explain various aesthetic aspects of the Acousmatic Arts.

Such a theory should discuss and shed light on a number of issues like:

- 1) The intrinsic nature of Acousmatic art (AA)? What are the properties which constitute AA?
- 2) Boundaries between A.A. and other artforms
- 3) The nature of aesthetic experience and satisfaction from AA
- 4) Emotional aspects
- 5) Discuss normative and value factors attached to AA
- 6) The influence of Technology on AA:s aesthetics and vice versa
- 7) The role and place of AA in society from a socio-cultural and socio-economic point of view.

The British aesthetician and philosopher Gordon Graham introduces, in his book "Philosophy of the Arts"(1996), a normative theory of the arts, which I find attractive and no doubt useful for the purpose I just presented. Graham's point of departure is that in most art-theories "art" is treated as a neutral classification". He also gives us a warning about the danger in George Dickie's approach, the "social art world", that

Graham thinks could easily lead to more radical social conceptions - in Marxist, structuralist or post-structuralist forms - in a way that the distinction between art and non-art disappears, so that there remains no subject to theorize about. An example along these lines is John Cage's conception that there should not be any pronounced borderlines between art and life itself.

Inspired by these thoughts I will now discuss more in detail one of the issues I have mention in connection to a "local" theory for the Acousmatic Arts, namely item # 2 of my list - especially the boundaries between Acousmatic Arts and Art Music. The "bottom line" in my discussion is that I think it is about time now to change the name of electro-acoustic music in its acousmatic form to "Acousmatic art" and completely avoid the term music, which I personally find very repelling in a time when the media industry has taken over music completely and corrupt it to a point it has become an environmental plague and a terrible intrusion of our lives.

In my presentation I use only obvious and simple arguments and observations to prove my ideas.

It quite fair in my view to borrow some ideas from other Art theories to be included in a local AA-theory.

An art theory like Goerge Dickie's "Institutional Theory" could be useful in order to understand - from a "social" point of view - how a set of aesthetic values emerges. Also Acousmatic Artforms have an Art-world of its own.

To my knowledge there is very little written about aesthetic issues related to the acousmatic artforms. As i said earlier, we lack an Art Theory of the acousmatic artforms that can be used as vehicle for further discussion and understanding of this area.

I think therefore it would be wise to have a general discussion, here in this Academy, about the core of Aesthetics and what areas of the aesthetic field that could be relevant, useful and pertinent for the acousmatic artforms.