

The Aesthetic Theory of Ananda Coomaraswamy and the Judgment of Taste of Pierre Bourdieu: An investigation of the paradox in relation to vernacular

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Abstract

Taste plays a vital role in the appreciation and acceptance of works of art. French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu developed a strong standpoint on judgment of taste, while Ananda Coomaraswamy, an authority on art philosophy of the Indian sub-continent has also expressed his position on aesthetic appreciation. This paper investigates the opposing viewpoints of the two scholars and examines the reasons for the contradiction.

The paper adopts a comparative text method, employing semantics and implied meaning to locate similarities and contradictions. It employs content analysis in its broadest sense and derives conclusions based on the authors reading and interpretation of the available text. The text as research data is randomly chosen, and there is no pre-eminent sourcing of the data.

The paper divulges Bourdieu's position with regard to taste which depends mainly on social background and is shaped by cultural capital. It is elucidated that taste of the dominant class of the society is accepted as the legitimate and good taste. On the contrary, the paper discovers that Coomaraswamy takes a holistic position with regard to art. He stresses that every person in traditional societies had artistic taste, which was not limited to a class or social groupings. According to him, every object is utilitarian and artistic at the same time. The investigation of causes for the contradiction shows that Bourdieu attempts to investigate taste in reference to classical traditions. The arguments of Coomaraswamy are based primarily on the process and products of vernacular traditions.

The paper concludes that the understandings of the two scholars although contradictory to each other are acceptable in respect of the context and the type of artworks each one has focused on. In industrialized, modern societies, taste acts as a symbol of class differentiation, particularly in the works of grand style as the dominating form preferred by people of power with a higher level of cultural capital. The situation is completely different in traditional pre-industrialized Eastern social systems, where the folk or the vernacular practices predominate without any relationship to the social stratification. This understanding has major implications for the ways in which we relate to vernacular, art and architecture.

Keywords: Taste, Aesthetics, Vernacular, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Pierre Bourdieu.

Introduction: The issue

Taste plays a significant role in both the creation and appreciation of art. The discourse on taste has a historical development. According to Morgan (2018), many including Aristotle and Plato to Emmanuel Kant in the 18th century have discussed it. However, taste matters, not only of the artists, but also of the people who engage themselves in the appreciation and understanding of art. However, there is no common agreement on the influencing factors of taste of a person or social groups.

French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu developed a strong standpoint on the judgement of taste in 1980's. He argued that taste is influenced mainly by the amount of cultural capital that one possesses. Ananda Coomaraswamy, an authority on art philosophy of the Indian sub-continent has also expressed his position on aesthetic theory through extensive writings during the first half of the 20th century. He explained that every person has the ability to respond to aesthetes irrespective of his or her socio-cultural background. The detail scrutiny of the discourses points out that the two arguments are developed in the opposite directions.

The previous research studies (Codell, 2009; Yukiko, 2018; Dawei, 2017) have focused on the differences between Eastern and Western philosophies of appreciation of art. Such investigations have referred to the arguments of both Coomaraswamy and Bourdieu, but not one against the other. Codell (2009) argues that Coomaraswamy was critical on Indian Swadeshi movement for the approach in attempt to create imitations of western art works by Indian craftsmen using local techniques and the Europeans for not identifying the spirit of the traditional art of India. Codell refers to the argument of Bourdieu; antiques as signs of cultural pedigree of privileged class, to explain the dominant approaches in European art consumption.

Yukiko (2018) recognizes the divorce between avant-garde art and the daily life of people with particular reference to the Japanese society. Extensively quoting Coomaraswamy, she elaborates the essential contradictions between understanding of art of common people and creations of professional artists. Yukiko identifies neo-impressionism movement as a response to the issue of segregation of art from people. She further discusses the approaches by individual Japanese artists in recognizing the daily acts as works of art, rejecting the notion of distinction advocated by Bourdieu. Nevertheless, Codell, Yukiko and other scholars do not explain the roots for the inconsistency between the ideas of Coomaraswamy and Bourdieu. In spite of the recognition of the differences in approach to art appreciation in Western and Eastern traditions, they do not elucidate the reasons for the difference.

The explanation of Bourdieu on taste in art and the ideology of Coomaraswamy on aesthetics are two significant discourses in the field of art. There is a conflict between the explanations of the two scholars, which has not been adequately discussed in previous research. This paper has two main objectives. First is to investigate the paradox between the two schools of thoughts. The second is to explain the reasons for the contradiction.

Research methodology

The methodology adopted is a detail scrutiny of the writings of Bourdieu and Coomaraswamy on the subject, using content analysis. The findings are supported by the reviews of other scholars. A comprehensive scrutiny of the publications of Coomaraswamy and Bourdieu on aesthetic theory and taste was carried out. Based on the study, the most significant literature of the two authors on the subject was selected for the content analysis. The seminal work of Bourdieu (2010), 'Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste' comprehensively communicated the author's arguments. Two publications, 'Oriental and Christian Philosophy of Art' (1953) and 'Sources of Wisdom' (1979), both collections of articles elaborated the standpoint of Coomaraswamy. In addition, supplementary documents of the two authors were used to support the explanations. In order to screen the relevant works of other scholars, a literature search was carried in electronic data bases for combination of keywords including taste, aesthetic theory, art appreciation, Coomaraswamy and Bourdieu through Boolean operator. The studies comparing the theoretical viewpoints of Bourdieu and Coomaraswamy were selected. In addition the articles with strong interpretations of concepts of one of them were considered relevant. .

Table 1: The key Documents selected for the analysis

Source: Author

Author/s & year	Title & type of publication	Remarks
Bourdieu, P. (1979)	Algeria 1960 : The disenchantment of the world : The sense of honour : The Kabyle house or the world reversed : Essays (Book)	Research study on the traditional social systems of Algeria
Bourdieu, P. (1997)	The Forms of Capital (Book Chapter)	Background to Bourdieu's argument on taste
Bourdieu, P. (2010)	Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (Book)	The most comprehensive document on taste by Bourdieu
Coomaraswamy, Ananda. (1953)	Oriental and Christian Philosophy of Art (Book- Collection of 13 articles)	Communicates the principal arguments of the theory of aesthetics
Coomaraswamy, Ananda. (1979)	Medieval Sinhalese Art (Book)	Evidence of examples for arguments of Coomaraswamy
Coomaraswamy, Ananda. (1981)	Sources of Wisdom (Book- Collection of 07 articles of the author)	Communicates the principal arguments of the theory of aesthetics
Allen, D. E. & Anderson P. F. (1994)	Consumption and Social Stratification: Bourdieu's Distinction (Journal article)	Review of explanations of Bourdieu on taste
Ashwood, L. & Bell, M.M. (2017)	Affect and Taste: Bourdieu, Traditional Music, and the Performance of Possibilities (Journals article)	Discussion on taste in respect to traditional music in Europe, disagreeing with Bourdieu's argument
Codell, Julie. (2009)	Imperial Exchanges of Goods and National Identities: Victorian and Swadeshi Views of Crafts under the Raj (Book Chapter)	Compares the viewpoints of Bourdieu and Coomaraswamy on the subject
Gartman, David. (1991)	Culture as Class Symbolization or Mass Reification? A Critique of Bourdieu's Distinction (Journal article)	Review of the explanations of Bourdieu on taste
Oldmeadow, Harry. (2004)	Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions (Book)	Discusses Eastern traditions and concepts of Coomaraswamy
Yukiko , Kato. (2018)	The Border between Art and Life: Reconsidering Neo-Impressionism within the History of Deconstructing Art (Journal article)	Compares the viewpoints of Bourdieu and Coomaraswamy on the subject

This study focuses on the main arguments as well as the contextual backgrounds in which they were developed. Based on the critical analysis of the information, the paper elucidates the reasons for the existence of the paradox.

Analysis and Discussion

Taste: Interpretations of Pierre Bourdieu

The seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu (2010), "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste" extensively discusses the issue of taste with reference to the influencing factors. The work is based on empirical research of the French culture of 1960's.

Bourdieu's argument on taste could be discussed under three main premises.

- That the judgment of taste is based mainly on social factors and not on individual preferences.
- That taste of the dominant class of the society is accepted as the legitimate and good taste.
- The products with high artistic values are different from those with high utility values.

Bourdieu (2010) argues that taste is associated mainly with the cultural capital. He recognizes three factors: educational qualifications, family background and occupational status as the most significant in influencing taste. “Bourdieu shows that the ability to appreciate art, and possession of a taste for art, are closely connected to one’s education and class status” (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002:153).

Bourdieu states that taste is strongly connected to the class differences of the society. The rich or the dominant group commands the attitudes and values of society. “Bourdieu argues that such judgments are (in one sense) the purely arbitrary preferences of the dominant social classes who are in a position to dictate the cultural standards that separate the high from the low, the legitimate from the illegitimate, and the sacred from the profane” (Allen & Anderson, 1994:74).

According to Bourdieu (2010), people with higher levels of cultural capital have refined taste. The manual workers, and the middle level social groups lacking access to cultural capital do not possess a good taste. Instead, they prefer popular art, which is of lesser artistic taste.

The third category of Bourdieu’s ideas on taste has received less attention from the scholars. He stresses the separation between utilitarian value and artistic appreciation. The argument has the basic premise of art and utilitarian as being separate entities, independent of one another. For artistic products, he draws examples from classical style furniture, interior, dress, music etc. The detachment of functionality from aesthetics leads to significant conclusions. It identifies social groups with predominantly aesthetic-biased taste or a function-biased taste. People with lesser amounts of cultural capital are more concerned with neat but functional objects, which are mass or factory produced. It is claimed that the bourgeois is less concerned on the functional aspects. Their primary attention is on aesthetics. On the contrary, the working class preferences are dominated by the utilitarian considerations (Gartman, 1991).

There are few attempts to discuss the (non) applicability of Bourdieu’s idea of taste in respect to traditional arts of Europe. Ashwood & Bell (2017) raise the issue of taste in respect of classical and traditional music. Dissenting with the arguments of Bourdieu, they argue that traditional music strengthens the social ties of diverse groups of people with varying economic conditions, education status and age levels.

Ananda Coomaraswamy on aesthetics and art

Ananda Coomaraswamy, an authority on art of Indian subcontinent on the other hand, has expressed views on taste, beauty and aesthetics in his publications in respect of the traditional societies. The following key points can be identified in his discourse.

- Beauty lies in the object and is not subjective.
- Every person has artistic taste. It is not limited to certain group or class.
- Utility and aesthetics are inseparable.

It could be observed that the viewpoints expressed by Coomaraswamy differ from those of Bourdieu on the subject of perception of art. Coomaraswamy uses the term ‘beauty’ in his writings and not ‘taste’ in respect of aesthetic appreciation. According to him, beauty is an inherent quality of the object and is not subjective. “One of the most important implications of this position is that beauty is objective, residing in the artefact and not in the spectator who may or may not be qualified to recognize it” (Coomaraswamy, 1981:198).

According to Coomaraswamy (1981), the perception of beauty would not change from a person to person or from one social group to another. However, the description on the ability of the spectator to perceive beauty leads to confusion. It raises the question of who is capable of judging the beauty of an object. Coomaraswamy’s elaboration of the activity of art and definition of artists provides a clue to resolve the quandary. “The artist was not a special kind of man, but every man a special kind of artist. It was not for him to say what should be made, except in the special case in which he is his own patron making, let us say, an icon or a house

for himself. It was for the patron to say what should be made; for the artist, the maker by art, to know how to make” (Coomaraswamy, 1953:112).

According to the description, the patron decides what to be made and the artist creates it. However, when it is stressed that every Man is a special kind of artist, it is expected that the patron would also possess artistic ability. Thus every person, irrespective of social, economic and educational backgrounds, is capable of understanding and responding to art and aesthetics.

The most significant judgement of Coomaraswamy with respect to traditional societies is the relationship of art and function. It is stressed that there is no difference between artistic objects and utilitarian objects. All productions are utilitarian as well as artistic at the same time.

“There can be no good use without art; that is, no good use if things are not properly made. The artist is producing utility, something to be used. Mere pleasure is not of use from this point of view” (Coomaraswamy, 1981: 194).

It is further elaborated that even simple objects of the traditional society conveyed a meaning. It was not an arbitrary meaning but one which is essentially connected to the function (Coomaraswamy, 1981). Hence, there were no pure artistic objects or utility objects. Every product was work of art as well as possessed a functional value.

The backgrounds

In order to understand the paradox of ideas between Bourdieu and Coomaraswamy on taste and beauty, it is necessary to investigate the contextual backgrounds on which the respective arguments were developed.

Bourdieu’s findings and the conclusions are based on the social system in France in 1960’s and 70’s. The data in his book “Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste” is predominantly quantitative, collected through questionnaire surveys in 1963 and 1967. In addition, national level surveys from 1966 to 1973 have provided complimentary data. The samples consist of both rural and urban population in France. According to the author, it is an ethnographic study of France (Bourdieu, 2010).

The arguments are also based on Bourdieu’s concepts of Habitus and Forms of capital. It is evident that the ideas were developed in relation to the post-industrial, capitalist and modern western social systems. Bourdieu (1997) did not identify economic capital as the only cause for the existence of social stratification. For him, the other forms of capitals: social capital and cultural capital were also important factors, especially the latter in shaping taste.

On the contrary, the background to Coomaraswamy was Eastern and pre industrial. During the early part of the 20th century, Indian subcontinent was under the colonial British rule. In spite of this, the traditional social systems existed particularly in the rural areas. Coomaraswamy’s ideology was developed based on the experience in such contexts. The arts and craftworks in Indian subcontinent had a long history. The caste system, connected to the feudal social order, facilitated the continuation of the traditions.

His theories were based on two sources: empirical information and traditional texts dealing with art. He had the opportunity to have a firsthand experience of the production process of craftsmen of all trades in India and Sri Lanka. His comprehensive document of “Sinhalese Medieval Art” raises the plight of the traditional artisans on the expansion of mass production and industrialization (Wagoner, 1999). He was strongly influenced by the writings and activities of John Ruskin and William Morris. In particular, the slogan of former: “Industry without art is brutality” is directly linked to the school of thought developed by Coomaraswamy (Oldmeadow, 2004). Coomaraswamy (1979) saw a similarity in the practice of art in traditional societies of East and pre industrialized medieval Christian West.

The Discussion - The taste in vernacular and grand traditions

How could the inconsistency between the two scholars be interpreted? One may explain it as the essential difference of East and West. It could also be looked at as the result of the modern and pre-modern social orders. However, a comprehensive scrutiny directs us to understand the reasons for the contradiction beyond the cultural or geographic differences.

The analysis of the samples and cases, used for the development of arguments of the two opposing perspectives, leads to a salient outcome. The explanations of Bourdieu (2010) are based on the works of grand tradition while Coomaraswamy (1979, 1981) concentrates mainly on the vernacular system of production. Nevertheless, it could be observed that Coomaraswamy attempts to relate his theoretical position to pre modern medieval period Christian art as well.

In the context, it is necessary to understand the definition of the term vernacular. It is best interpreted with reference to architecture and built forms, though it is used in many other fields of arts and crafts. Allsopp provides a definition of the concept; “Vernacular architecture is a generalized way of design derived from folk architecture. It may be seen as the development of the natural architecture of a region which is definable in terms of climate, culture and materials” (Allsopp, 1977:8). Many other scholars including Oliver (1997) and Baker (1996) agree with the above viewpoint. It is evident that the examples of material culture, referred to by Coomaraswamy, belong to the vernacular tradition as they are produced by artisans with skills and knowledge, representing a developed stage of folk tradition.

In constructing the argument in the book “Distinction”, Bourdieu uses data from varying fields. The most significant statistical data are based on six areas of personal preferences.

Performing arts (Bourdieu, 2010; 528-531)

- Music
- Films
- Paintings

Personal spaces (Bourdieu, 2010; 532)

- Interior of residences
- Furniture
- Dress

In the analysis of performing arts, the main approach adopted was to distinguish the variance of preferences on classical works in comparison with the popular. The well-known artists and works belonging to the grand style were identified by their names. The responses on the familiarity and the inclinations to such productions had been received through a questionnaire (Bourdieu, 2010; 513-520). For example, in the field of paintings, the references were made to Raphael, Van Gogh, Kandinsky etc. (Bourdieu, 2010). The qualitative cases clearly demonstrate the patterns of selection of personal spaces; the classical by those with high cultural capital and functional or efficient by the middle level and the manual working groups (Bourdieu, 2010). He does not attempt to investigate taste in reference to vernacular art products. Based on the personal experiences, Bourdieu had carried out research (1979) on traditional social systems and housing patterns in Algeria, with reference to religious and cultural beliefs. Nevertheless, he does not make references to such vernacular traditions in developing the arguments on taste. Instead, the intention has been to distinguish the patronizing groups for classical works and mass-produced industrial productions.

The arguments of Coomaraswamy (1979; 21-29, 1981; 193-224) are primarily based on the process and the products of vernacular traditions of pre-industrialized traditional societies. The explanations are based mainly on Sri Lankan and Indian art and craft works including architecture. His findings do not segregate people based on social stratifications but considers vernacular as the art of all levels of people. His explanations are from varying fields such as pottery, woodwork, painting, sculpture, and architecture. A salient feature is that the creatures are anonymous in the traditional social systems.

Coomaraswamy (1953, 1981) does not see vernacular traditions and resultant products as romantic work. Instead, it is identified as a pragmatic and utilitarian approach with embedded aesthetic considerations. It is shown that vernacular traditions can be appreciated by all categories of societal groups. It is contrary to the notion that taste is related to stratified social groups.

Coomaraswamy's discourse provides us an opportunity to understand the key characteristics in appreciation of aesthetics in relation to vernacular and folk traditions. People, irrespective of the social standing, are capable of responding to the aesthetics of them. In traditional societies, such works and the related production processes were part of the lifestyles themselves.

Conclusions

The comparison of viewpoints on taste of Bourdieu and aesthetics of Coomaraswamy leads us to significant understandings. The arguments of the two scholars although contradictory to each other could be seen as legitimate in respect to the context and the type of art works each one is referring to. In industrialized, modern societies, taste acts as a symbol of class differentiation and particularly the works of grand style as the dominating form preferred by people of power with higher levels of cultural capital. The situation is different in traditional pre-industrialized Eastern social systems, where the folk and the vernacular practices predominate without any relationship to the social stratification.

It could be argued that the majority of any society, especially those with non-elitist social backgrounds would be able to understand, appreciate and have a sense of belongingness to works of vernacular traditions. Under the circumstances, the interpretation of the non-responsiveness to classical arts by them as lack of artistic sensitivity is not justifiable.

This study provides directions for future research in two important areas of perception of aesthetics. Firstly, it raises the issue of the relationship between the vernacular and the classical traditions during the pre-industrialized periods. Coomaraswamy's (1953) explanations on the similarities between Oriental vernacular and Christian art demands a detail scrutiny with reference to the perception of art by masses and elites during the relevant periods. Secondly, the popular art of the contemporary era demands detail studies in order to understand the artistic value of such works and to make a judgment on the level of aesthetic appreciation of masses, who patronize them.

The key limitation of this study is that it is based only on the theoretical explanations. It does not extend to test the justifications for the contradiction through empirical data. Future research studies with data from different socio-economic conditions including traditional societies focusing on vernacular products would contribute to refine the conceptual understanding developed in this article.

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