



Redefining Ancient Aesthetics: An Exploration of Percy Jackson Fan Art and Digital Aesthetics

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Abstract

The contributions of ancient philosophers about discussions of beauty and mimesis are part of aesthetic traditions. Rick Riordan's contemporary postmodernist children's fantasy novel series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2009), represents a shift in aesthetic consciousness and the subsequent construction of a new digital aesthetic. The historical evolution of aesthetics, particularly in the context of literature and its transformation in the digital age are explored through Percy Jackson fan arts, tracing the impact of digital aesthetics and fan culture on the fans as well as the series. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* is not a mere replication of Greek aesthetics in popular fiction but a Greek mythological retelling that authenticates a liberating space for individual freedom of thought, expression, and action without the sophistication and conventionality of ancient aesthetics.

Keywords: aesthetics, Greek mythology, pop culture, digital aesthetics, fan art

Introduction

Aesthetics, a captivating realm of human experience encompassing "the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, and the elegant," has its roots deeply embedded in history (Daniel 123). The term "aesthetic" is derived from the Ancient Greek word "aisthetikos," signifying

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perspectives related to sensory perception, an idea rooted in “aisthanomai,” meaning “I perceive, sense, learn,” with a lineage that traces back to “aesthesis,” denoting “perception, sensation” (Flensburg 1). The definition of aesthetics is related to the production of beauty, and “[t]he pleasurable experience a reader goes through when reading a literary work can provide an aesthetic value to the work” (Attard 81). According to *Britannica*, aesthetics is “[t]he philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is closely related to the philosophy of art” (which is the study of the nature of art, including the concepts, interpretation, representation, expression, and form), and is “concerned with the nature of art and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated” (Aesthetics n.p.). The scope of aesthetics is broader, as “. . . it does not only deal with the nature and value of the arts but also with the response to natural objects that find expression in the language of the beautiful and the ugly” as there are several ways of saying that something becomes beautiful and ugly; the ‘how’ of it is what matters (Aesthetics n.p.).

Historical Account of Aesthetics in Literature

The inception of aesthetics can be traced back to the collection of articles titled “The Pleasures of the Imagination,” penned by the journalist Joseph Addison in the initial editions of *The Spectator* magazine in 1712. The term “aesthetics” was appropriated with a new meaning by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, who is often credited with coining the term “aesthetics” in his work *Aesthetica* (1758), published in the mid-18th century (Gregor 357). Baumgarten used the term to refer to the study of sensory experiences and the appreciation of beauty in art and nature. Over time, aesthetics has become a broader field within philosophy, encompassing not only the philosophy of art but also the philosophy of beauty, taste, and sensory perception. The exploration of aesthetics, as a field deeply intertwined with philosophy, art, and beauty, finds its roots in the rich tapestry of human thought and cultural evolution. Ancient Greek philosophers, notably Plato and Aristotle, laid the foundation for the philosophical discourse on aesthetics. In Plato’s *Symposium*, discussions on art and beauty reveal an early contemplation of aesthetic experiences (385 BCE).

Aristotle, in his *Poetics* (330 BCE), expands the discourse by examining the nature of artistic representation of epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, painting, sculpture, music, and dance, which he identifies as fundamental acts of mimesis or imitation. Key concepts within the philosophy of aesthetics have been extensively examined in literature. Mimesis, derived from Aristotle's theories, remains a cornerstone in discussions on artistic representation and imitation. In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), Erich Auerbach delves into mimesis's historical development and cultural significance in literature.

Throughout the centuries, influential thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, and John Dewey shaped the philosophical landscape of aesthetics. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) explores the nature of aesthetic judgments, contending that they possess four crucial traits – first is disinterestedness, wherein pleasure results from recognising beauty rather than personal preference; second and third, universality and necessity, respectively are the products of human mind, rather than an object property, suggesting an inherent expectation for agreement; and fourth, the idea that beautiful objects convey a sense of purposefulness without a specific purpose, challenging conventional notions of functionality in aesthetics (Burnham). In *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), Schiller explores the interplay between aesthetic experiences and human existence. Dewey's pragmatist perspective in *Art as Experience* (1934) emphasises the transformative and participatory nature of aesthetic encounters. The interpretation of art depends upon beauty and taste, central concepts in aesthetics. The concept of beauty has been scrutinised by philosophers like Edmund Burke, in the book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) that distinguishes between the sublime and the beautiful, associating the former with fear and astonishment, and the latter with qualities like smoothness and delicacy (Quinton 72). Arthur Schopenhauer's exploration in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) considers the sublime as an aesthetic experience transcending ordinary beauty. Taste, as a subjective and culturally influenced aspect of aesthetic judgment, has been a recurring focus. David Hume, in the essay "Of the Standard of Taste"

(1757), proposes that a refined and educated taste emerges from exposure to diverse cultural experiences.

The literature reflects a notable shift in the focus of aesthetics from traditional interpretations to contemporary expressions, particularly in digital spaces and popular culture. Walter Benjamin, in the book *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), discusses the influence of technological advancements on the authenticity and aura of artistic creations. Benjamin's insights foreshadow the contemporary prevalence of digital aesthetics. Ancient aesthetics drive home the immersive capacity of art, and "ancient authors provide fascinating material for the current discussion on aesthetic experience. Their emphasis on the immersive power of art can stimulate an aesthetic theory" (Grethlein 311). Aesthetics prefer not only the pleasant experiences that art offers but also the profound experiences of one's reality, like intense representations of real-life experiences of death and loss. Moreover, it provokes an aesthetic experience that is more intense than real life by exemplifying it. A perspective that exclusively considers art in connection to ideology is bound to overlook the deep contemplation of the profound essence within the intrinsic aesthetic encounter (315).

Technological Impact on Aesthetics

In the digital age, aesthetics has expanded beyond traditional forms, embracing new forms, interpretations, and contexts by infiltrating popular culture through social media platforms. The Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), constructs an aesthetic theory based on the dynamic nature of media. Additionally, the work of the contemporary digital culture theorist Lev Manovich, in the article "Post-media Aesthetics" (2001), explores the intersections of aesthetics, technology, and the evolving nature of cultural expression in the digital era.

Percy Jackson and the Olympians

The article navigates through the evolution of aesthetics, tracing its evolution from ancient Greek philosophy to its contemporary

expressions in popular culture with a specific focus on Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2023), a contemporary postmodernist children's fantasy, which is a retelling of Greek mythological tales. As readers explore re-contextualised stories from Greek mythology, the article aims to illuminate not merely a replication of Greek aesthetics in popular culture but a transformative retelling that fosters individual freedom of thought, expression, and action. The series serves as a lens through which shifts in aesthetic consciousness and the construction of a new aesthetic becomes evident. The article endeavours to unravel how *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* contributes to the contemporary aesthetic landscape, navigating the complexities of digital aesthetics and fan engagement and creativity, called fandom, which is a manner of the readers of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* show their love for the series that in turn popularises the series manifold, keeping the fandom visible and relevant, which is a broad impact. Fan engagement, in which the word "readers" is substituted with the word "fans," arises as "young people are motivated to invent and illustrate imaginative "stories, which often feature characters from popular culture," in response to "unconscious needs and drivers" ("Enchanting Tales and Imagic Stories" 13). Henry Jenkins writes in *Fan, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006) that "Fans frequently express pleasure in an object of affection that is "not about holding it as a distance" but about "being awash in it . . . about not having control and mastery of the beloved subject, pulling it close and integrating it into . . . sense of self"" (qtd. in "What art educators can learn from the fan-based" 259). A similar idea has been expressed by Katherine Anderson Howell, who states that "In cultures saturated with media, fans authorise themselves to critically respond and engage with their chosen texts" (qtd. in Romero n.p.).

Review of Literature and Research Gap

A robust body of literature exists on fan fiction and literary adaptations, highlighting the intersection of literature and fan culture, yet within the expansive realm of fan activities, there remains a noticeable dearth of academic exploration of the unique expression of fan creativity through visual mediums, namely fan arts that have cropped up over the years in the context of Riordan's *Percy Jackson*

and the Olympians on social media platforms. Investigating the dynamics of fan art communities on various online platforms offers insights into how fans collaborate, share, and critique visual creations. The article explores the role that the platforms play in shaping the visual culture of the Percy Jackson fandom and how fans interpret and visually represent the characters, settings, and events within their artwork.

Method

The methodology for the analysis of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* integrates the phenomenon of fan art, considering its role in shaping the aesthetic experience of the series. The framework draws upon concepts from participatory culture and aesthetics to explore the dynamic relationship between the original literary work and the creative contributions of the fan community. It provides a lens to examine how *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* becomes a cultural phenomenon, transcending its literary boundaries. It considers how fan art contributes to the evolving cultural landscape by reshaping and reinterpreting the series. The analysis delves into how fan art functions as a form of cultural expression, extending the narrative beyond the books. By exploring the visual representations created by fans, the framework seeks to understand how the reinterpretations contribute to the cultural significance and reception of the series. The participatory culture of active fan engagement emphasises the creation and dissemination of content related to the fans' favourite works, considering how, as active participants, they contribute to the expansion and enrichment of the narrative universe. The framework explores how fan art serves as a manifestation of participatory culture within the Percy Jackson fandom. It investigates how fans build on the original narrative collaboratively, creating a shared visual language reflecting their collective interpretation and imagination. Aesthetic elements incorporated in the series guide the analysis of fan art, considering how visual elements contribute to the overall aesthetic experience of the series, which involves examining the use of colour, composition, symbolism, and thematic consistency in fan-created visuals. The framework investigates the aesthetic choices made by fan artists within the Percy Jackson fandom. By exploring the visual components of fan art, the analysis seeks to

understand how these choices enhance or alter the aesthetic appeal of the series, creating a parallel visual narrative that resonates with the fan community.

Fan Art Digital Aesthetics in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*

Fan art comes under the broader purview of cultural studies under the participatory culture of fandom that proliferates online (Thompson 512). Fan arts are powerful catalysts that inspire creators and consumers to reimagine different versions, fostering a continuous cycle of creativity within fandom for fan communities. The main idea behind creating fan art is to envision the artists' and the readers' favourite characters into more easily perceivable artistic visuals that visually represent characters, settings, and events that complement the series. Fan art engagement fosters a personal connection between the fans of the narrative and text, and it also introduces the series to new audiences and helps maintain its relevance for years. The fan art of the series does not conform to the canonical text while the fans perform their fan identity. They deviate from the cannon by juxtaposing various visuals, making the audience aware of cultural blindspots and creating a network of possible meanings. Fan arts further expand the narrative beyond the books, creating illustrations by depicting scenes not explicitly described in the series, providing additional layers to the storytelling and sparking the imagination of fans. Therefore, the original narrative is changed and compressed to integrate a new story into the narrative every time a new thematic artwork is presented. Fans can collect fan art and create a string of fan artwork to create unofficial graphic novels. Fan art eventually starts becoming stories because they become unofficial graphic novels when fan artists start creating their favourite scenes. Several fans create similar art works, contributing to the "aesthetic canon of a fandom" where "the next stages of growth involves collaborative interaction with other fan artists. Each participant is self-motivated to improve his or her work in direct proportion to the work of others of the group so the integrity or the entire ensemble of players" ("Enchanting Tales and Imagic Stories" 15).

Fan arts, as a form of extended storytelling, contribute to the fandom's creativity and imagination, offering fans new ways to

experience *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. Fan art not only serves as a source of inspiration for fans but also wields influence over the original creators. Rick Riordan has openly acknowledged and expressed appreciation for fan contributions, recognising their impact in sustaining the series' resonance with readers. The reciprocal engagement between creators and fans fosters a symbiotic relationship within the fandom. Examining fan-created aesthetics allows readers and researchers to explore how fans engage with *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and interpret them in a visual format that is easy to comprehend instead of reading, which is time-consuming. Social media platforms become hubs for sharing and celebrating fan-created content, attracting new fans, and maintaining the enthusiasm of the existing community. Some popular platforms to explore Percy Jackson fan art are Devian Art, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, ArtStation, and Reddit forums, Discord, Wattpad, Archive of Our Own (AO3), where fans, both amateurs as and professionals, expand on the existing narrative by creating scenes, scenarios, or alternative storylines that are not explored in the official books by sharing fan art, discussing the series, collaborating on creative subjects, and sharing stories including fan fiction.

Fan art can be created using various digital techniques, using smart phones, laptops, computers, and tablets to create digital fan art by sculpting and rendering characters or scenes and collages of images, videos, and animations from scratch, amplifying existing artwork, and even converting texts to visuals with softwares like Adobe Photoshop, Procreate, Autodesk Sketchbook, Inkscape or Clip Studio Paint. Artificial intelligence has made the creation of fan art easier with numerous Artificial intelligence (AI) tools have also become increasingly popular for generating unique and stylised fan art. Aligned with the fan artists' preferences and goals AI tools can assist and enhance the creative process with Google's DeepDream, Artbreeder, DALL-E, RunwayML, Midjourney, PaintsChainer, DeepArt, Blender, Autodesk Maya, and ZBrush. Combinedly, the softwares and tools are also used for visual marketing and brand-building or as a hobby where users seek visual perfection with pleasing visuals with great lighting or props in the background, colour palette, or AI artwork to make it cohesive and appealing to the eye.

Technological advancements have reshaped the meaning of aesthetics, moving it away from traditional interpretations. These days, aesthetics is not related to the perception of art and is extrapolated from the world of philosophy but to the continuum of cultural forms and ordinary experiences, forming a new phenomenon framed in terms of appreciation of literary works but less of contemplation and reflection, solely as digital aesthetics. Digital aesthetics has evolved into a notable phenomenon, influencing daily vocabulary and trends to the extent that it has transformed into slang, seamlessly integrating into everyday language. This linguistic shift is propelled by the pervasive influence of social media, where trending phrases like cottagecore aesthetic, academia aesthetic, etc., mostly on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, gain prominence and contribute to the ongoing evolution of digital aesthetics in daily communication. Alyana Olivar writes in “That’s so Aesthetic! But What Does it Mean?” that the overarching meaning of “aesthetic” is nowadays used as an adjective to denote a person’s dynamic fashion, style, and mood – “It’s not so much their physical appearance, though it does still fit. A person’s aesthetic can mean their fashion sense, their demeanour, or their taste in items aside from fashion” (Olivar). Focus has shifted from aesthetic objects to aesthetic experience, the rediscovery suggesting that narrative is more than a means of representation – the strong reactions it can provoke hints at its capacity to create presence.

The approach does not imply a return to the traditional meaning of aesthetics that celebrates antiquity as the ideal model. Earlier, the nets of the concept of aesthetics were cast wide, but now, they are constricted. The concept of sublimity is not included and is all about outward appearances – the new aesthetics, which are seen in the digital world, popularised on the digital space or the internet by the fans of the series, who popularly call themselves “demigods.” *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* is ground-breaking in its redefinition and re-contextualisation of Greek aesthetics with the popular culture phenomena in it. The digital aesthetics make *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* relatable to contemporary readers. As much as the series incorporates aesthetic pleasure and vocabulary, the artistic aesthetics in the digital space prove that literature holds a firm place in contemporary aesthetics. Digital aesthetics contributes to

experiencing pleasure in the act of reading, making it a distinguished characteristic of the reading experience. Monroe C. Beardsley exemplifies the principle through his assertion that “In calling an artwork a good one, we must be ascribing some form of value to it, and that it must be a distinctive and special form, properly labeled ‘aesthetic’” (qtd. in Hanson 418).

Percy Jackson aesthetics incorporates aesthetic visual elements inspired by the characters and themes within the Percy Jackson universe that includes character portraits – artistic depiction (fan-art) of characters; using iconography of blue and sea motifs that speaks of Percy’s love for blue coloured food and his connection to Poseidon; magical items, orange motifs that denotes Camp Half-Blood setting and fashion where demigods sport orange t-shirts, blue denim shorts, and colourful clay beads; mythical imagery like Greek symbols of gods; Greek typography; and book cover page artwork. Fan art that extends beyond the confines of the books involves creative depictions of character portraits accompanied by humorous imaginary conversations between different characters. Fan artists also envision characters’ appearances as they age; imagining their phone wallpapers, WhatsApp group messages, Instagram pages, and DMs. Fans contribute artistic reinterpretations through character redesigns, offering their unique visual interpretations. They create comic strips that further explore the relationships between various characters in the series, adding an extra layer of creativity to the fan-driven artistic expressions. Thus, myths, which are cultural icons, when adapted into digital aesthetics, represent the newness of culture and aesthetics in the new era, which is a natural extension of its earlier form, without interrupting or breaking the classic mythology and its significance, connoting its artistic/aesthetic value and quality. Aesthetics on social media include the colour palette used across profiles and visual elements like the incorporation of images, graphics, or videos that align with a particular style, theme, or mood of the series. This can be achieved using typography, the choice of fonts and text styles used in captions or overlays on visuals; composition, which is concerned with how visuals are arranged and presented within a post or on the profile; application of filters and visual effects to create a cohesive book; and thematic consistency by sticking to a particular theme or subject matter that defines the overall

aesthetic of the content. Thus, aesthetics has moved away from its conventional meaning, which concerns the interpretation of source material and emotional tone.

Conclusion

Greek mythology is spread out in the form of mythological retellings like Rick Riordan's fantasy adventure series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and used in a popular cultural context, making it more graspable and popular than it already is. The series is an example of classic aesthetic ideals, which create a great sense of pleasure, complexity, and grandeur to the readers, creating a relatable modern myth. Riordan the new-age mythmaker, chooses an aesthetic classic work and situates himself in the traditional conception of art/aesthetics that is related to pleasure and form. Fan arts have a cultural impact on the readers' influence interpretation and enjoyment, thereby setting the trend and, hence, popular culture itself.

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