
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Review: Daniel Herwitz (2008)
Aesthetics
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The trouble with aesthetics is that it pursues the description of an elusive *beautiful* and an even more elusive *art* with analytical rather than lyrical language. The joy of aesthetics is in the questions it poses.

This book glories in those questions while attempting to make its descriptive language as lyrical as the topic will permit. The author's enthusiasm for his subject suffuses this tour of the history of aesthetics with theories – from Plato to Danto, and some of the questions they suggest. Professor Herwitz unreels his tales and the lessons we can derive from them with the dynamism of an accomplished teacher. The lessons, more often than not, result in more questions, so the book has a very lively feel.

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The trouble begins in the 18th century when aesthetics was calved from philosophy, which at the time, he reminds us was considered the mother of the *sciences*. Herwitz leads us on down through a history of the science of the beautiful and describes the turns that have gradually over the ages attempted to wean aesthetics from that realm of absolutes. He notes as a way station Hegel's recognition of the validity of substituting 'gesture and implicature rather than proof and demonstration' (4) in the equivalence of art with other kinds of knowledge. Then in an almost sly aside he notes a trouble that develops with the purely philosophical bugbear of *essential definition*, a topic I wish he had pursued in more detail.

As Herwitz introduces this idea in the introductory chapter, I encountered my first actual wrinkle in his style of exposition: his tendency to slide without effort into the perspective of the era, or the particular philosopher of which he speaks, so that there is often a moment of uncertainty as to whether it is really the philosopher's perspective or that of the interlocutor that is being related. This amplifies the sensation that the expository style of the book has been honed in front of a classroom, where subtle shifts in tone of voice would have made these distinctions more apparent (now he is speaking with Hegel's voice; now with his own). Nonetheless, this particular stylistic indeterminacy has its impact on how the text is read. Occasionally I found it distracting, more often I found it to be pedagogically provocative. My experience of the book put me in a classroom where ideas were both being teased out and held up for debate at the same time; and it was made for me the more enjoyable for not knowing with whom I was disagreeing, Hegel or Herwitz. Others may differ in this appreciation. But then there is room for wide ranges of disagreement in this book, willing as Herwitz is to entertain that the entire enterprise may be of negative value.

He says of the 18th century: 'The great insight of the eighteenth century is to free sensual experience (of roses, mountain tops, beautiful paintings) to have value in and for themselves. Aesthetics is born as a subject when beauty becomes the central focus' (18). He spins out the implications of this for Descartes - through Locke - to Kant, in an age where the concert hall and

museum were first being introduced. Hand in hand with this institutionalisation, the other debt we owe to the 18th century is the polarisation of taste, as on the one hand objective, and on the other subjective – whether standards of taste can actually be set, or whether questions of taste are irresolvable. This chapter works hard to establish a kind of dialectic between Kant and Hume to demonstrate the intricacies the century brought to bear on the question.

The dialectic is framed around two terms that are not obvious in this context: *disinterestedness* (attributed to Kant), which for Herwitz is exemplified by our reaction to theatre – that is, being able to refrain from rushing up on stage to intercept a stage murder, a condition that sets up aesthetic taste as a unique faculty; and *interestedness* (attributed to Hume), that taste is in the same spectrum as the rest of human preoccupation. He doesn't actually make it clear that disinterestedness is actually the first of Kant's four 'moments of beauty' until much later in the chapter, so that an uninformed reader is left to wonder whether these terms are his, the terms of the times, or the terms of the men themselves. He portrays the Kantian side of the argument as being framed in crisp and absolutist terms, Hume's as having more blurred borders. The manner in which he does this locates Herwitz as a philosopher along another continuum. If you start at Kant and draw a line toward and then through Hume you ultimately will come to Wittgenstein: Kant is portrayed as hard edged and rectilinear, Hume engaged with indeterminacies, Wittgenstein at home with indeterminacies. Herwitz's expository style in this chapter ranges somewhat loosely and toward the indeterminate; discussing issues, perspectives and examples in the same breath. The chapter is alive with examples from contemporary culture, but one needs be familiar with some aspect of the particular example for its place in the tale to become clearly relevant. But again, this may just be me – since I come to these questions with a very well defined point of view that is considerably closer to Wittgenstein's than the one Herwitz allows himself in this book. For if one took Wittgenstein at his word this book's goal: to explicate both a history and at the same time, a theory of aesthetics, would be impossible.

So, bringing my flavour of Wittgenstinian analysis to this book, I found myself wanting to shortcut almost every issue, and cut to the obvious (to me) chase. But in not allowing this, Herwitz unearths for us countless fascinating distinctions, issues and possibilities. These are the things that keep us interested in aesthetics as a subject. For example, he describes Hume's quandary in considering: Since interest in taste is so much like interest in other things, what is it about taste that sets it off from other interests enough for there to be a science of aesthetics at all?

By illuminating Hume's distinction between *delicacy of taste* and *delicacy of passion* Herwitz alerts us to a distinction between the two conditions of active and passive engagement that demarcate the engagement with the beautiful from other accidents of life, and posits as crucial the possibility that we have active choice in one and not the other (something like the distinction one implicitly makes by saying that someone is sensitive in all the worst ways – the good ways being alert to the beautiful, the bad, being alert to insult.)

He immediately follows this analysis of the bifurcation of delicacies with an exposition of Hume's distinction between the moral and the aesthetic. However, I thought this juxtaposition muddied the argument, or at least it did for me, since he described the *moral* as a sentiment requiring action. He then provides a very interesting side observation of his own on the century by mentioning the various ways that art and morality have been fruitfully (or not) confused ever since.

The way he teases out Hume's perspectives on the possibility of objective norms of taste, the examples he gives, makes the question entertainingly hinged around the issue of improving one's taste. However he only barely locates the role of argument, debate and discussion in the formation of taste. From his perspective the person who 'shows up at the university cocktail party wearing a pink thong and a platinum blonde wig' (39) has only negative possibilities. This would have been the place to alert the reader to the possibly didactic role that an expression of taste (making a fashion statement) might play. Rather, he leads us back to Hume's idea of the true judge, and his five criterion for the making of a true norm former. One of these: delicacy of sentiment, or as

we would probably call it now, fineness of discrimination, is exemplified with a wonderful story from *Don Quixote* that especially sharpens one sense of the issue and the difficulty in corroborating it. Instead of resolving the issue however, our hunger for a closer examination of the mechanisms of aesthetic judgment just keeps growing. Herwitz ends his observations on Hume's century with the thought that 'The setting of standards of taste is a *practice* in itself, one whose formation in the eighteenth century was a very central part of the growth of consumerism' (57).

Describing the role of 'disinterest' in Kant's position on the beautiful, without a full-blown analysis of Kant's overall philosophical position turns out to be a much more difficult task. I will leave it to the judgment of others how successful he is. I think this answer will likely hinge not only on one's reaction to the general expository flow of the book, but also whether one has intellectual wiring that is more Kantian or more Wittgensteinian – whether one believes words mean what they do because of their place in a theory or because of their use in a sentence. I confess that occasionally in this chapter and in the last chapter in the book he piles up ambiguous references in some sentences until, for me, the thought simply enters the clouds and comprehension crashes.

Herwitz ends this seminal chapter on taste with an attempt to tease out the aesthetic from the moral and political by referring to the tendency of the avant-gardes to imbue abstractions with political significance and laying the origin for this tendency on Kant's doorstep. A provocative move and an indication of strategies to come.

The next chapter on art and experience focuses on the differences between the 19th century and that preceding it, breaking this difference down into four parts: the distinction between beauty and art; art as human endeavour; the importance of art history; and the distinction between media. He also stresses that the subsequent course of aesthetics can be seen as the legacy of Hume, Kant and Hegel. Curiously, he begins the chapter with an exposition of the dichotomy between art seen as expression and art as a manifestation of pure form, and then almost immediately illustrates why that dichotomy in its pure formulation can be seen to be false. From there he turns directly to Hegel's

statement in his *Lectures on Fine Art*: 'Man brings himself before himself by practical activity' (80). He then spins an elaborate but elegant story about how this idea of Hegel's plays out particularly in painting, one that ultimately involves Richard Wollheim, but courses through numerous excursions on the way: his reaction to a gallery show in South Africa just after the fall of apartheid and how that show illustrated Hegel's third point that art had to be reckoned with in its historical context; the importance of purity for the avant-gardes; silent film's debt to opera; the importance of media specific criticism; and the ambiguity involved in the current idea of what is a medium.

The dichotomy between expression and form that he raised and then dropped, has, meanwhile been a constant ghost in his discussion of Hegel. It is in Wollheim that he means to resolve it. He takes us through the 19th century's transition from expression as a social property, i.e. the expression of an age, to individual expression; the conception of art as a language (which he quickly dismisses) and Wollheim's idea that the appreciation of literature and painting, are necessarily interactive processes unifying expression with form.

Here I have to take exception with one of his conclusions however. He claims that painting is unique in having both surface and depth and contrasts this with film, which he claims has no surface. According to him, film is therefore unable to exert that remarkable duck-rabbit gestalt duality that Wittgenstein held as a central conundrum of perception/language. In this regard he omits an entire tradition in film that mines the screen itself as the surface on which light initially plays.¹ He's not alone however, and I forgive this lapse in the face of his beautiful observation about Manet's working of this duality: 'And by manipulating space like a cook, he allows us entrance into his pictures and then refuses to secure perspective and position for us, so we dream, float, become disoriented' (109). This is as elegant an expression of Manet's powers, and this peculiar circumstance as I have ever read - a circumstance that became ever more prized as the century turned again.

He ends the chapter with a quick review of the shifting perspectives that the century brought to aesthetics and the importance of the very idea of

¹ For an exposition of this topic see Barnett 1988 (16, 41-43)

shifting perspectives to the study of aesthetics. As he works his way into a description of contemporary situations, his perspective as a writer seems to come along and become more contemporary also.

Herwitz begins his fifth chapter on 'Modern Definitions of Art and the Problem of New Media' with an ontological parsing of a few of the current uses of the word medium. He discusses the primacy of criticism with the advent of avant-gardism, and the views on abstraction and experimentation that resulted in a humungous blurring of boundaries: 'The theorist was now an artist, a kind of philosopher, scientist, sociologist, literary critic, journalist, and theoretician all in one' (116). At this point he introduces Arthur Danto, praising him highly: 'it has been his writing about the avant-gardes more than anyone else's that has caused us to think about the putatively philosophical character of that art' (120). What, he asks, makes art, art? And he replies that it is, in this new century, the theory behind it that makes it so.

He discourses at some length on Danto's take on Warhol's Brillo Boxes, and what it is about them that elevates them. In Danto's early writings Herwitz asserts that:

[W]hat it is that makes Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* art as opposed to its supermarket cousin is nothing the eye can discern, since both Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the Brillo Box in the store are (to all intents and purposes) visually the same, indiscernible: and yet one is art, the other not. Hence the art making property, the thing that makes *Brillo Box* art while leaving the box in the store out of this category, must be non-perceptual. That property is, it seemed reasonable to say, a theory; (122 - 123)²

Herwitz has problems with Danto that are obvious (the Brillo Boxes in the gallery are huge, artfully arranged and in a gallery) and I have even more. He suggests that it is the community that regards the Brillo Boxes as art that makes the difference - the language game in which they become a new and exceptional move. I would agree, but add that the new word in this game might

² This argument can take some bizarre twists if one notes that a fake *Brillo Box* was successfully palmed off on the Swedish Museum!
<http://www.sgalleries.net/artnews/2007/11/21/swedish-museum-says-its-andy-warhol-brillo-boxes-are-fakes.html>

just be *ostention*; i.e. that the act of pointing or framing reality *just so* will provide epiphanies. Epiphanies, by the way, are, in general, in my opinion, not dealt with sufficiently in this book.

The issue really is that not only does Danto fail to allow 'for the centrality of the aesthetic experience' (128) but that Danto views art from the outside in, not from the inside out – i.e. 'art is a practice' (ibid). These come together in the observation 'What becomes art is a matter of how experience and market conjoin, not simply how theory rules' (129).

The rest of the chapter on new media focuses almost entirely on film (no longer a new medium) and dismisses the digital symbolically in one parenthetical '(Let us avoid the dilemma of photoshop, which convulses the very medium of photography by turning a photo into a baseball field of cut and paste images from the computer file and the worldwide web)' (142). I felt that his analysis of cinema raised many more questions than avenues to answer them, and I found myself arguing with him at every turn, especially as he writes about film 'being directly tied to its sources' (146) (no longer true in the way he suggests) and his observations on Cavell and Malick. But what's really wonderful about this book is that its tone welcomes discussion, even disagreement.

In his concluding chapter on art and truth, Herwitz raises the view of the central conundrums of art again - expressive or formal, subjective or objective - and links them to the idea, repeated from the opening pages, that even though aesthetics was born in philosophy, it must be reconnected with the other themes of the humanities in general. This, he feels, allows him to end with the question that has bedevilled this forum: 'What does it mean for philosophy to call film (or another art) philosophical? What are the best words to use in trying to make this kind of claim about film, about any art, as clear as one can?' (157).

He discusses a quote from a letter that Cezanne wrote to another painter 'I owe you the truth in painting, and I will tell it to you' and four interpretations that Derrida made of it. He considers these interpretations to be both 'a masterful reading' and a 'dazzling complication' (ibid). The question of truth in art is a complicated topic indeed. Or not.

It is if one thinks of these two words as functions in formulae, touchstones in a theory, that is. But the matter becomes really simple if one just sees them as words in a sentence. Of the words I can think of, these two are used in the most variable ways. We can even be surer in the use of the word *beauty* than the word *art* of just how some one is using it. The issue is, do we want to allow these words this variability, or do we feel the need to pin them down. I am disposed toward the view that all three - art and beauty and truth are best viewed as words and not ideas. We simply have to allow that sometimes they can be used as descriptive terms, sometimes as hortatory, and occasionally even as performatives. Philosophy, on the other hand, spawned by science, clings to *essential definitions*.

Another way of putting the question: Is it that, when we are talking about art and truth and beauty - and for that matter a host of other idealisations, are we happy to regard aesthetics as the general venue of interesting questions; or is it that we want to solve the various conundrums with a different view of how words work among us; a view of language that makes the approach to many 'philosophical' questions much, much simpler?

To me the answer is obvious, and it doesn't actually mean the end of philosophy as Wittgenstein may have thought. It may however, mean the end of aesthetics. And I believe that Herwitz recognises this - but fortunately not quite enough to keep him from writing a comprehensive historical tour of ideas beautifully framed in the work of Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Dewey, Danto, Wollheim and others, and bound in this thoughtful and provocative monograph.

Bibliography

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