

Symposium I

What Happened To Aesthetics?

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Three recent books—Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of The Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*; Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics*; Eliot Deutsch, *Essays on the Nature of Art*—offer a sampling of what philosophers have to say about art and the aesthetic realm at the end of a century that has not been particularly kind to philosophical aesthetics.¹ Perhaps it is just that the nineteenth century was such a hard act to follow in this regard. For example, after an aborted professional career, Arthur Schopenhauer, with his sombre but heady mix of aesthetics and speculative metaphysics, eventually became one of the most widely read philosophers ever. More spectacularly still, in the last decade of the century his erstwhile follower Friedrich Nietzsche had scrambled over him, changing his pessimism into an aesthetic affirmation of life, and achieved cult status. But with the new century, aesthetics as a big ticket item seemed to suffer the same fate as many other aspects of nineteenth-century life—the art, music, literature, architecture, and, not least, the religiosity, characteristic of it.

In this century it has more generally been writers at the edge of or outside the parameters of conventional aesthetics that have received a significant readership. A variety of movements have competed with the older aesthetic framework to capture the imagination of those who reflect upon the reception of art works. Many have had the modern look of that quasi-scientific formal orientation towards literary texts seen in Russian and Czech poetics in the early century and in movements like structuralism and semiotics in the nineteen sixties and seventies. More recently, such formal analyses have been often blended in a 'post-structuralist' manner with orientations to cultural creations viewed in terms of their relations to existing social institutions, such that the various moral and political critiques of the latter (marxist, post-marxist, feminist, and so on) have been extended to the former. Thus these rivals to aesthetics have not simply competed with it but have challenged the legitimacy of aesthetic value itself. As one commentator on the current situation within academic literary studies

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has noted: 'The reaction to "the aesthetic" has been so strong and persuasively articulated that it may now seem nearly impossible to pilot ourselves between the Scylla of intrinsic literary analysis and the Charybdis of extrinsic cultural critique, between a concern for the peculiarly literary qualities of language and the radical democratizing of all language as *écriture*, between our substantial love for poetry for its own sake and our deep suspicion that all such loves are poisoned by the ideological masters they secretly serve'.²

It is this situation that is commonly portrayed in the popular press as one of on-going culture wars in which post-'sixties 'tenured radicals', with heads filled with 'continental philosophy', continue their assault on established institutions and values. But such racy journalistic accounts invariably fail to capture the historical depth of the disturbances within humanistic culture in general, and the aesthetic realm in particular. One could go back to the challenges posed to the classical aesthetic tradition by the massive dislocations and discontinuities within the various art forms early this century. It was the new sensibility, characteristically thought of as 'modernist', with its various complicated relations to the broader changes to 'modern' life, that had already left the nineteenth-century aesthetic tradition looking distinctly fusty. To some extent those first-order appreciative discourses constituting criticism in the particular arts could adapt to the new sensibility by becoming formal, but, as indicated above, by the 'sixties and 'seventies this type of formalism had been annexed to various types of political and ideological critique. Moreover, in the last decades of the century this early modernist sensibility, together with its critical articulation, has itself been on the defensive against 'post-modern' challenges to assumptions on which it relied—the firm opposition of serious art to popular culture, for example. It is little wonder that the more general type of reflection on the arts that we typically think of as philosophical aesthetics has been struggling to keep up. In order to avoid the arrogant emptiness of a type of external legislation on aesthetic matters, philosophical aestheticians have had to rely on these more concrete first-order appreciative discourses of the critics, but there they have been able to find less and less that is identifiably 'aesthetic'.

The three books here exemplify different approaches to aesthetics and even different views of the role of aesthetics within philosophy. Given the very different intentions behind each of them—one, for example, is meant as an introductory textbook—comparisons may be unfair; and yet, unfair or not, such comparisons can still be illuminating.

And in certain superficial respects these books are comparable: while Graham's book is explicitly presented as an introductory textbook in philosophical aesthetics, those of Welsch and Eliot might be thought of as directed to much the same target audience—a readership relatively new to aesthetics and philosophy, and interested in finding some language within which to reflect upon the role that art and other aesthetic phenomena play in their lives. Furthermore, all three books have a similar format, beginning with three or four more general, theoretical chapters, which are then followed by a number of chapters in which the ideas sketched earlier are applied to concrete cases involving differing art forms, or more broadly, different types of cultural creation. But within these superficial commonalities it is the differences that are interesting—differences that might, on first pass and in a crude way, be correlated with the geographical locations of their authors.

Wolfgang Welsch is Professor of Philosophy at the Friedrich Schiller University at Jena, a location that could be thought of as the birthplace of classical aesthetics. As a work of a philosopher in a major continental European university, *Undoing Aesthetics* may not be entirely typical of the genre of 'continental philosophy' but, at least in its contrast to one of the other books, it can serve as representative. Essentially an assemblage of thematically overlapping essays and occasional lectures, Welsch's book presents sketches of a broad theoretical viewpoint that he has developed in more detail elsewhere,³ a viewpoint signalled in the title of the book, and perhaps even more accurately in the title of its fourth chapter, 'Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics'. With titles like these, one is not going to expect this work to be any narrowly 'aesthetic' one confined to a philosophical reflection on beauty and the arts. Its contrasting 'other' in this and further respects is *Philosophy of The Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics* by Gordon Graham, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen. In general its approach is fairly representative of 'analytic philosophy', albeit a rather older style than is practised in many parts of the analytic world. The geographical location of Eliot Deutsch, the author of the third work, *Essays on the Nature of Art*, also seems significant. Deutsch is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hawaii, a location neatly emblematic of his willingness to venture beyond the boundaries of Europe and to talk of art works from Asian traditions as well. But further, his geographical location reflects something of his relative philosophical distance from centres of traditional continental European and Anglophone culture, seen here in

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his capacity to use and to choose between the different traditions to suit his own purposes.

That western philosophical culture is now divided between two different ways of doing philosophy, the 'analytic' and the 'continental', is a commonplace, and, like all dichotomising stereotypes, this can be as distorting as it is illuminating. Thus, while the adjective 'analytic' at least says something about typically Anglophone ways of doing philosophy, 'continental' tells one nothing other than conveying the somewhat misleading idea that it is philosophy as practised in 'continental Europe'—misleading, because it is not particularly usual for the continental European counterparts of American or English philosophy departments to pursue philosophy in this way. (One might even suggest that the category of 'continental philosophy' is itself an Anglophone rather than 'continental' one, characterising more a particular style of cultural reflection and analysis found within some philosophy departments and more widely within other humanities departments within the English-speaking world.) But while it is easy to ignore the overlaps, parallels and convergences, it is true that there are characteristic differences between these approaches. Indeed, these differences are particularly clear in their respective attitudes to the aesthetic realm.

From about the late 1960s on, frustrated by what they took to be the narrow limitations of the analytic style, and driven by the desire to make philosophy relevant beyond the walls of the academy, some analytic philosophers and their students 'went continental'. In doing this they were often reacting to certain perceived characteristics of the analytic philosophy that had become the institutionally dominant form of philosophy within English-speaking philosophy departments. These features—a rather strict demarcation from both other humanistic and scientific disciplines, a narrowing of focus to often technical journal-article-sized problems, a method centring in close analyses of logic and language, and a complementary uncoupling from the traditional 'big' philosophical problems of the past—were regarded by the rebels as depriving philosophy of that breadth of application which alone justified its name. With this, these philosophers were part of a larger movement within many humanities and social science departments which looked to the work of various continental European thinkers—to French, German, dissident eastern European, and Italian thinkers, as well as to philosophers, literary theorists, social theorists, psychoanalysts and so on—to provide their own work with some broader framework. That is, disaffected with what academic philosophy had to

offer at home, they went to continental Europe on a type of theoretical shopping spree, and 'continental philosophy' was what they brought home.

It could be argued that, within philosophy itself, while the 'continentals' typically saw themselves on the side of progress and as against a rigidified status quo, it was the analytic movement that was in fact the most typically 'modern' version of philosophy around, and that it was the comparative lack of its modernising characteristics that attracted the rebels to a philosophical culture existing as much outside the walls of universities in France, Germany et cetera, as within them. We might see this, for example, in the typical demand that philosophy be 'relevant' to everyday life, for what looks like 'irrelevance to everyday life' is often a reflection of just those characteristic features of 'modernisation' within cultural spheres (their institutionalisation, professionalisation, and autonomisation, the role of specialisation within them, and so on) to which diagnosticians of 'the modern' have pointed. In the twentieth century, English-speaking academic philosophy had become institutionalised as a distinct discipline standing alongside other humanistic disciplines and various natural and social sciences. Like other cultural domains attempting to justify a separate institutional existence, academic philosophy had to face the question of what was distinct about what it did. What was eventually to become 'analytic philosophy' had done this by an appeal to a method that owed much to the crucial developments in mathematical logic around the turn of the century. By narrowing the types of questions philosophy asked and tried to answer, and by invoking various techniques for separating well- from ill-formed questions and so on, analytic philosophers thought of philosophy as now, finally, able to progress. Its critics saw this same process more as reflecting a degeneration of a tradition into narrowness and irrelevancy.

The picture I have sketched is, of course, little more than caricature but, if there is any truth in it at all, then it will be clear why continental philosophy has never been a unified movement. And so, in order to have some loosely coherent self-image, continental philosophy, like many other 'traditions', had to retrospectively reconstruct itself. Here, one factor that has been commonly seen as linking its diverse parts has been the sense of a historical relation to the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century philosophical tradition of 'German idealism'—the tradition running from Kant through Fichte to Schelling and Hegel. And without too much distortion, it might be said that from these latter two thinkers can be reconstructed two different strands winding their

way into the present, strands which have always stood in what has at best been an awkward relation. On the one side, from Hegel has stemmed the more rationalist political and 'critical' side in which a reflective move is typically made from forms of thought to their broad social and cultural conditions, usually with an eye to the identification of their disruptive tensions and 'contradictions'. On the other, from Schelling has evolved a more aestheticist and irrationalist or arationalist dimension, more suspicious of conceptual thought, on the one hand, and modernity, on the other. It is this latter strand that runs through thinkers like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and in this century, Heidegger and Derrida, and it was this strand which produced the high points of nineteenth-century aesthetics—an aesthetics never far from a type of aestheticised metaphysical picture of the world, most explicit in Schelling and Schopenhauer. In different ways, both identified a type of 'first philosophy' with aesthetics, and regarded art works as the locus of a special and deep kind of 'truth', unable to be captured by the conceptual languages of science.

As suggested, these two strands of the post-Kantian tradition have wound themselves into current continental thought in complicated and unstable ways. More recent inheritors of the aestheticist side of the tradition, such as Derrida for example, have tended to reject such metaphysical appeals to deeper philosophical truths manifested in art works or anywhere else. Nevertheless, works of art and literature still generally occupy so central and significant a place within the continental tradition as a whole that any equivalent seems unimaginable for the more science-centred analytic philosophy. It is hard to imagine, for example, anyone influenced by the post-idealist tradition as ever uttering anything like the opening sentences of Graham's book: 'The arts', he informs the reader, 'are an important part of human life and culture. They attract a large measure of attention and support.' (p.1) For Schelling, Nietzsche or Heidegger, art works are not important parts of human life; rather, they have so central a role in those processes giving form to human life and making each of us who we are that they might be thought as constitutive of human life itself. Thus, for Nietzsche, for example, human lives are rightly viewed as art works, rather than as natural kinds, and the only 'ultimate' purpose there could be in life is that of creating oneself into a strong and exceptional piece of art. It is obvious that from this perspective there is going to be much more drama in aesthetic thought than could ever be generated within the analytic tradition. This type of difference concerning the nature of the aesthetic hits one between the eyes when

one puts down Welsch's book and picks up Graham's.

As is readily apparent when one reads Graham's textbook, aesthetics has never been a growth area within mainstream analytic philosophy. One would only have to place this book besides an equivalent introductory text to, say, the philosophy of mind or philosophy of language, to be struck by the modesty of typically analytic contributions to aesthetics. Significantly, the particular work within Anglophone aesthetics which gets most attention here is R. G. Collingwood's *The Principles of Art*, a work which is over sixty years old by an author who had little to do with the analytic movement. The only significant bodies of analytic work of a general kind touched on are mainly from the 1960s and '70s dealing with issues such as the meaning of 'expression' in the context of expressivist theories of art. This is not to say that there have been no contemporary and significant works on art by 'analytic' philosophers—Arthur Danto, Stanley Cavell, and Richard Wollheim, for example, come immediately to mind—but usually these works are far from exemplary of the analytic approach. In this regard it seems significant that Cavell and Wollheim only scrape in with bare mentions in Graham's introduction under 'suggestions for further reading', and Danto doesn't achieve even this: in some respects, it is difficult to see how they could fit the image of philosophy as exemplified in Graham's approach.

As might be expected from the tone of Graham's opening lines, his analyses never stray far from reflections upon views on art that might be attributed to the fabled rider on the Clapham bus. While Schopenhauer could send the mind spinning with his discussion of art works against the background of a striking and quasi-religious image of an individual's attempts to transcend the process of the world conceived 'as will', Graham's approach is to appeal to the likely views of the late twentieth-century reader on the nature of the value of art works: Are they there to give us pleasure? Do they express emotions? Do we learn anything from them?

It is not that Graham never introduces the bigger aesthetic theories of the past, or even those of contemporary continental philosophers—he does, and he even concludes his book with a favourable look to Hegel and Schopenhauer as representatives of the type of normative approach to aesthetics he wants to espouse. The point is, rather, that these types of approaches can only really be presented within the contexts of reflections upon these sorts of everyday questions mentioned above. Thus, we find both Kant and Hans-Georg Gadamer briefly dealt with in the context of a discussion of hedonistic analyses of

aesthetic value. That Gadamer's approach belongs to a very different order is acknowledged when Graham quotes Gadamer's 'compelling' (and Schopenhauerian) view that it is perhaps only through art that 'it ... is granted to us finite beings to relate to what we call eternity'. But to this the author adds a caution about 'a certain vagueness' in Gadamer's view, 'for we have not been told what the nature of this form of 'relating' is ... this is a crucial omission' (p.17).

Each time Graham touches on such ideas, a note as to their vagueness, difficulty or obscurity is predictably forthcoming. It is not that these comments are wholly unjustified: by the standards of analytic philosophy, the writing of continental philosophers *is* typically unclear. But this reveals as much about the expectations of what type of clarity philosophy can achieve with respect to aesthetic phenomena as it does about the attraction of continentals to obscurity. Analysis emerged at the start of the century from revolutionary developments in mathematical logic, and, while by no means as centred on logical analysis as it once was, it seems fair to say that this early focus encouraged a style of philosophising that has persisted, and that that style has not been easily extended to all other domains, least of all aesthetics. The difficulty facing analytic aesthetics might be best exemplified by invoking an issue not in aesthetics but rather at the centre of contemporary debates in philosophy of mind—the issue of 'phenomenal consciousness'. Analytic thought about the mind seems to have taken decades to get around to acknowledging (and many still refuse to do so) that there is something about the nature of consciousness that the uninitiated might regard as obvious—that there is always something 'that it is like' to be conscious, or that there are certain characteristic 'feels' to it. Habituated to particular ways of talking about the mind (talking in terms of the having of 'attitudes', such as belief, to 'propositional contents', for example), analytic philosophers simply do not seem to have the resources for talking about this issue of 'subjectivity' and, if this is the case, one might expect that they are not going to have much in the way of resources for engaging with the sorts of experiences most people think to be what art and literature are all about. So, while analytic writers, against the demands of a style forged in reflections on such experience-distant issues as the reducibility of mathematics to logic, might see the style of their continental colleagues as unnecessarily baroque, these colleagues are just as likely to be incredulous at the idea that anything interesting about aesthetic life is ever going to be caught in the analysts' methodological nets.

In contrast to Graham's background and approach, Welsch's work

assumes these interlacing aesthetic and critical strands as pretty well constitutive of modern philosophy, and for this reason many analytic readers will be nonplussed, or more likely outraged, at many of his seemingly extravagant claims. For example, in place of Graham's sober utterances about the importance of the arts in life, Welsch says things like: 'Reality has proven itself again and again to be constituted not "realistically" but "aesthetically".' (p.ix) Like Schiller or Schelling, Welsch treats aesthetics as the central discipline of philosophy, and not just as an academic activity, but as a type of general orientation to life. But, being an 'aesthetics beyond aesthetics', his aesthetics is far from reducible to such classical approaches. For him aesthetics is central to thought not because it reveals some higher reality, but because it reflects the ubiquity and depth within modern life and thought of the process of 'aestheticisation'. But if this aestheticisation of the world can be thought as a triumph of the classical aestheticist program, Welsch is certainly not celebrating it. We live in a world in which the Schillerian dream looks more like a waking nightmare, a world in which beautification, embellishment and stylisation can be overbearing to the extent of forcing a retreat into the *anaesthetic* as a survival mechanism. Moreover stylisation is not restricted to the traditional realm of aesthetic—art works, or even to the surface look of things: it goes all the way down. Welsch treats even the deep processes of our interactions with nature as aesthetic: even 'genetic engineering is a kind of genetic cosmetic surgery' (p.82). Furthermore, aestheticisation is a process of 'derealisation', turning the solid into surface. In a diagnosis that recalls the speculations advanced by a number of commentators upon the recent grisly phenomenon of student shooting sprees in the US, Welsch observes a form of life which is lived as if within a computer game.

I have mentioned that Welsch is not a typical representative of 'continental philosophy'. This is, perhaps, because, being in fact a continental philosopher, his interests and references are not trapped inside this as a genre. But the atypicality that I refer to resides more in his attempt to hold onto the aesthetic at the same time as critically reflecting on it; more common is that more reductionist dimension to critique that one finds in Pierre Bourdieu, for example. But if Welsch doesn't fit easily into the 'critique' side of the tradition, neither does he easily fit into the Schellingian wing. For one thing, his rather breezy and readable style contrasts with many of those who, in the face of the collapse of aesthetic metaphysics, have turned to a type of aesthetic analogue of negative theology. Many readers will inevitably

respond at some stage to Welsch's big claims with scepticism, will find fault with his readings of Kant and others, with his controversial analyses of modern science and technology and so on. But regardless of one's particular criticisms, it is still possible to be left with the sense that Welsch is forging interesting ways of making apparent something that is important and disturbing about the direction in which our culture is heading.

Martin Heidegger commenced a famous set of lectures on aesthetics with the observation that we put art works in museums precisely when they cease being real presences in our lives. Following Schelling he thought of art paradigmatically as the way in which 'the gods' are introduced into the lives of the members of a community, gods who were concrete instantiations of the values by which such people directed their lives. That art was now confined to the museum reflected something about the fact that the gods have now departed from our world.

Welsch's aesthetic critique of aestheticisation shares some aspects of Heidegger's critique of modernity, but it was Heidegger's idea that came to mind when I turned to the list of art works that Gordon Graham has appended to his textbook. These are art works used as examples in the book and 'readers are recommended to take steps to familiarise themselves with a good number' of them. (p.178) Just about everything on the list is, predictably, a type of 'museum piece', and I suspect that of those undergraduates at whom the book is aimed many would need to take many steps indeed in order to make the merest dint in this formidable list. (My quick count of the novels alone came to twenty two.) One might guess that the only examples with which many potential readers would be familiar occur under the heading 'Film and television' which mixes *Battleship Potemkin*, *Breathless* and *Citizen Kane* with *Melrose Place*, *Neighbours*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. But if these last three examples look like some spiritless concession to the postmodern, this view is corrected when one goes back to the contexts in which *Melrose Place et al.* are invoked—they essentially stand in for Bentham's example of 'pushpin' in a reflection on the utilitarian approach to aesthetic pleasure. That is, the only aesthetic examples with which many will not have to 'take steps to familiarise themselves' are examples of what aesthetic value is not. It seems striking that for analytic aesthetics such a fact is not itself a problem for philosophical aesthetic thought.

I earlier described Eliot Deutsch's *Essays on the Nature of Art* as combining elements of both analytic and continental traditions, but in

this postmodern age it would be unwise to expect or even wish for any reconciling synthesis here. Deutsch's book starts like Graham's with chapters devoted to common sorts of answers to questions about the nature of art—art as imitation, art as expression, and so on. Although short, these chapters are, again like Graham's, informative surveys, although Deutsch goes on to use the ideas sketched here to reach a type of synthetic definition of art for his own application. Following on from these, again like Graham, he has chapters devoted to specific art forms within which he applies the ideas clarified in the earlier ones. Not being restricted to the format of an introductory text, Deutsch's can presuppose a greater degree of sophistication on the part of the reader, but it is nevertheless clearly written and accessible and could be easily used in an introductory course. As mentioned earlier, one of the more attractive aspects of Deutsch's book is his use of examples from Asian as well as European art, which give it an added sense of freshness. And in comparison to Graham, Deutsch is also much more willing to call on ideas from the continental tradition, especially Heidegger, whose ideas on the nature of the artistic 'disclosure' of truth are sketched evocatively and economically. As Deutsch points out, 'Heidegger, perhaps more than any other modern philosopher, tried to formulate a conception of truth that does not assume the primacy of propositional truth as such and to integrate that conception into an understanding of art' (p.72). In contrast, it is striking that Heidegger does not even receive a mention in Graham's book, despite a chapter devoted to 'Art and Understanding'. Deutsch deftly shows that it is possible to talk intelligibly about Heidegger and Nelson Goodman on the one page.

This comparison which puts Graham in a negative light is still to some degree unfair, however, because there is a price to be extracted for Deutsch's rather easy oecumenicity. I quoted earlier Graham's concern over 'a certain vagueness' in Gadamer's invoking of a relation to 'what we call eternity' without telling us what this relating is. Indeed, much of Deutsch's ability to evoke the experience of the art works he discusses seems to trade upon a definite vagueness over the use of a type of language that many philosophers will refuse, the language of 'the spiritual'. Of course it may be that there is an undeniable historical link between art and religion, but endorsing this link as somehow essential is an option that is not going to be available to all those who wish to give some systematic account of the role of aesthetic value in their lives.

Notes

- 1 Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of The Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*, London, 1997; Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics*, London, 1997; Eliot Deutsch, *Essays on the Nature of Art*, Albany, 1996.
- 2 James Soderholm, 'Introduction' to James Soderholm, ed., *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in an Age of Cultural Studies*, Tuscaloosa, 1997, p.3.
- 3 In particular, in *Ästhetisches Denken*, Stuttgart, 1990, 5th edn, 1999.