

**Robert B. Pippin**

*After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism.*

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For more than two decades, Robert Pippin has explored the idea that German idealism is a form of modernism, and that Hegel, in particular, is best understood as a modernist thinker. Pippin also has a longstanding interest in the philosophical significance of art, and has written instructively on film noir, the novels of Henry James, and many other literary and visual artworks. So it was perhaps inevitable that he would publish a book on modernist painting: that is, painting ‘produced under the pressure of art having become a problem for itself, in a period when the point and significance of art could no longer be taken for granted’ (1). This is not completely new terrain for Pippin; he has already examined modernist painting in a number of places, including his 2002 essay ‘What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel).’ But *After the Beautiful*—first presented as the Adorno Lectures at Frankfurt’s Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität—is his most sustained treatment yet of pictorial modernism and its significance for philosophy. The book asks how Hegel can help us understand the revolution in painting that started around 1860, paradigmatically in the work of Manet. Though Pippin presents Hegel as ‘the theorist of modernism, *malgré lui* and *avant la lettre*’ (38), he rejects several of Hegel’s most famous conclusions about art. The one from which he is keenest to distance himself is the claim that art is *ein Vergangenes*, a thing of the past. For Hegel, this conclusion was linked to a belief that modern society had become sufficiently rational that it no longer needed art’s ‘distinctly sensible-affective’ (37) mode of self-understanding. But Pippin thinks this conclusion is ‘clearly false as a claim about European modernity in the first third of the nineteenth century’ (37). Rapidly modernizing European states still had all manner of ‘conflicting commitments in intellectual, cultural, and political life’ (38). To understand pictorial modernism, however, we must understand these conflicts, and Pippin believes Hegel can help us do so. Pippin’s goal, in short, is ‘to see what Hegel missed, but to see it in *his* terms’ (61).

*After the Beautiful* consists of five chapters, including a lengthy introduction and a brief set of ‘Concluding Remarks.’ Most of the book’s heavy lifting takes place in Chapter 2, entitled ‘Philosophy and Painting: Hegel and Manet.’ The chapter sketches the main features of Pippin’s Hegelian approach to art, and makes some suggestions about how this approach illuminates Manet’s revolution. The core of Pippin’s approach is the idea that ‘Hegel’s view of the intelligibility of artworks is parasitic on his general view of social intelligibility, our intelligibility to each other’ (135). There are deep links between our ability to recognize a bodily movement as an action, and our ability to recognize a physical object as an artwork. In both cases, we are confronted with a meaning that is *in* the action or the work, not merely represented by it. Hegel’s great insight is that our ability to apprehend such meanings is social and historical. Both deeds and artworks can be understood only ‘as that deed or work counts as this or that *to* a community at a time’ (20). Understanding a particular form of art is inseparable from understanding the norms that have come to govern ‘the making and especially the displaying of artworks’, norms that ‘cannot but express an underlying assumption about the possibility of some public, shareable meaning’ (50). To understand what is new in modern art, then, one must understand how this art manifests shifts in the norms of social intelligibility. For there is clearly something revolutionary about a painting like Manet’s *Olympia*. Its tone ‘is far from idealizing; if anything, it is anti-idealizing,

even ironic. There is no serious attempt at verisimilitude ... and so no invitation to any experience of sensible-intellectual harmony' (48). Strangest of all, the subject of *Olympia* (and many other Manet paintings) stares out at the beholder with both defiance and 'a strange, flamboyant indifference' (48). If one accepts Hegel's overall approach to art, but rejects his conclusions about the rationality of nineteenth century European societies, paintings such as *Olympia* look like very particular refusals of meaning—manifestations of a loss of confidence in our ability to make sense of one another's actions. One will also be struck by the historical specificity of this loss of confidence. The lack of 'animated subjectivity' (57) in Manet's faces, for example, will appear not as statements about the difficulty of social relations as such, but as expressions of the 'failure of the historical world to allow for the realization of such subjectivity in the only way it can become actual' (57).

The book's third chapter, 'Politics and Ontology: Clark and Fried,' fleshes out Pippin's approach by putting it into dialogue with other theories of pictorial modernism. His key interlocutors are T.J. Clark, who emphasizes modernism's political aspects, and Michael Fried, who emphasizes what Pippin calls its ontological side. Pippin greatly admires Clark and Fried, and he is less interested in attacking them than in explaining how his Hegelian approach can complement theirs. He presents Clark as chiefly concerned with the ways in which beholding paintings is connected with power relations, especially the relations of production characteristic of modernizing nineteenth century economies. Clark's interpretation of *Olympia*, for instance, attaches great importance to the fact that it seems to be a painting of a prostitute (75), and that it therefore suggests that 'prostitution is not just consistent with capitalist exchange value but *paradigmatically representative of it*' (77). Though Pippin finds Clark's approach 'extraordinarily illuminating' (79), he worries about what he sees as Clark's tendency to characterize modernism in overly sweeping terms—for example, as a 'moral holocaust' (136) all but discontinuous with what precedes it. Pippin suggests that a Hegelian approach helps avoid such tendencies, by presenting modernity's failures as 'a *determinate* "lack" at a time and for a community and painfully intelligible as such' (82, emphasis added). Pippin's engagement with Fried focuses on the issue of 'theatricality' (83): the risk paintings run of becoming nothing but objects for their beholders, perhaps by trying too hard to 'please or entertain an audience', or by taking too much account of 'how they look to others' (84). This issue is 'ontological' in that a theatrical painting is in some sense not a painting at all, so 'the defeat of theatricality is an essential condition of the work's *being an artwork*' (85). Pippin largely accepts Fried's story about the ways in which painters have adopted ever-more radical strategies for avoiding theatricality since the mid-eighteenth century. But he thinks Hegel can enrich this story, because a painterly concern with "'not being merely *for others*" lands us in the middle of the Hegelian recognition problematic' (84). Pippin further argues that a satisfactory response to the problem of theatricality actually requires an approach like Hegel's. If the problem of not merely being for others is 'defined only in terms of that "not" [it] will prove to be quite unstable because so undialectical' (84). Seen in this way, the attempt to produce non-theatrical paintings—paintings that neither overwhelm their viewers nor are overwhelmed by them—is deeply linked to the quest for mutually satisfying forms of social life.

Chapter 4, 'Art and Truth: Heidegger and Hegel', contrasts this Hegelian approach to art with one of its most influential rivals: the one articulated in Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art.' Like Hegel, Heidegger sees art as a source of truth and thus of great philosophical significance. He also agrees with Hegel that something about modern life prevents art from playing the role it did in earlier eras. 'The Origin of the Work of Art' famously characterizes art as 'the "event" or happening of a kind of truth' (102), 'a happening or *Ereignis* (or *Geschehen*)' (105). This event seems to be something like the sheer fact of meaningfulness—something historical, but far more primordial than anything in the ontic sphere. In this respect, Heidegger's approach differs

starkly from Hegel's, who sees the revelation of truth in artworks as 'much closer to an intentional deed or action (a collective social practice), a *result* of some collective human effort' (105). Pippin suggests that both the distinctiveness and the limitations of Heidegger's view of art may be usefully approached through that philosopher's admiration for Cézanne. There are interesting parallels between Heidegger's concern with the sheer event of meaning and Cézanne's attempt to present 'the *bare* intelligibility of the object, its simply and meaningfully being there at all' (121). This concern with "'sheer" meaningfulness' (124) is especially disorienting when applied to human beings, as it is in the paintings known as *The Large Bathers*. In their concern with sheer, brute meaningfulness, both Cézanne and Heidegger stand opposed to Hegel, for whom the truth revealed by art does not just happen '*in the work*.' It happens "in between" the relation between what is attempted by the artist (the idealized maker postulated in accounting for the work's intentionality) and the responsiveness of beholders. *The logic of aesthetic intelligibility is the logic, the social logic, of a deed, not a mere event, even a "happening of truth" event* (125). Despite the parallels between Cézanne and Heidegger, Pippin thinks *The Large Bathers* 'are nevertheless extraordinarily powerful, effective *paintings*' (129). They keep alive questions about modern life first raised by Manet, questions to which satisfactory answers have still not been found. Like Manet's paintings, they manifest a historically specific breakdown in intelligibility.

*After the Beautiful* is a dense book, but a rewarding one. The link Pippin establishes between aesthetic and social intelligibility is extraordinarily useful, particularly in making sense of the breakdowns in meaning that mark developments such as modernist painting. Pippin is a sensitive, astute viewer of artworks—something that is by no means a given in philosophical discussions of the arts. Of course, how sympathetic one is to his story depends to a large extent on one's view of Hegel. No doubt some readers will suspect that Hegel's outlook is far too problematic to be of much help in making sense of modern art. Pippin does a good job of responding to the most common worries of such readers, especially worries about the alleged defects of any dialectical account of historical change. He has less to say about criticisms from the other direction: that is, from those who think Hegel's approach to art is promising, or even indispensable, but who have doubts about Pippin's interpretation of him. Then again, this is a short book, and Pippin has defended his reading of Hegel at great length elsewhere. *After the Beautiful* is an important work, and anyone writing about Hegel's aesthetics, or about the philosophy of pictorial modernism, will have to take it seriously.

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