

Alessandro Giovannelli (ed.)

Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers.

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In *Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers*, Alessandro Giovannelli compiles eighteen essays on significant thinkers and concepts that have shaped the field of aesthetics. This is an ambitious undertaking in that so many figures and issues warrant inclusion; tasked with such a project, it would be difficult to determine what is and should be essential to such a volume. Here, Giovannelli has solicited essays from respected contemporary aestheticians and artists who are active in the field. (The essay on Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno by Gerhard Richter is an exciting contribution of the latter sort.)

Organized chronologically in order to highlight the development of concepts and questions throughout the history of aesthetics, the essays address issues including: mimesis, catharsis, beauty, ugliness, presentation, representation, how sad or tragic works can be pleasurable, the relationship between art and knowledge, the relationship between art and truth, the role of harmony in art, the relationship of beauty to the divine or to God, the relationship between art and nature, the subjective versus objective dimensions of taste, the role of the critic in art, the relationship between production and reception, the relationship between art and culture, the notion of the artworld, the worldmaking capacities of art, the importance of aesthetic experience individually and socially, the connections between aesthetics and epistemology, the connections between aesthetics and metaphysics, and aesthetics as a distinct field of its own, among other issues.

As even this brief enumeration makes clear, this volume addresses many issues that are central to the field of aesthetics. Alongside primary texts, *Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers* would serve as an excellent addition to an upper level undergraduate course or perhaps a graduate course in aesthetics. The volume can also function as a useful reference for scholars in the field. Each chapter features a list of primary resources and also suggests additional reading for those interested in going further with their research.

Reading the essays in order reveals the interconnection, development, transformation, and problematization of concepts and issues throughout the history of aesthetics, and at times, within a single thinker's career. As we trace out these relationships, a picture of the history of aesthetics begins to crystallize. Recalling or discovering these connections by reading the essays in order is a powerful and revelatory experience. Sometimes, the authors make these links a focal point of their essays; other times, we must explore the comparisons and their implications for ourselves. This invitation to critical inquiry is a strength rather than a limitation of the volume. For instance, reading Gary Kemp's essay on Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood in proximity to Thomas Leddy's essay on John Dewey, I was struck by how closely related their views on expression seem to be. In particular, Collingwood and Dewey both argue that through the process of artmaking, we discover what we are trying to express. As Kemp argues regarding Collingwood, "The creation of a work of art – the expression – and the becoming conscious of what one is expressing, are all the same thing" (p. 103). Alternatively, as Leddy argues regarding Dewey, "The artist only understands what she was trying to do at the end of the process, when the meaning initially stirred up finally becomes conscious" (131). The idea of figuring out our meaning as we work through expressing it could, in

turn, be related to the issues of art and knowledge or even art and worldmaking. This speaks to one of the strengths of *Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers*: discovering connections among the figures inspires the reader to trace out the development of concepts and questions throughout the history of aesthetics.

With the recognition of the conceptual web of interrelationships in mind, Giovannelli provides interesting suggestions about how individuals might direct their reading of the volume based upon thematic clusters. In describing one of these units, he states:

Perhaps the most obvious of such clusters is one that concentrates on the role of representation in art, the notion of realism, and more generally art's symbolic relation to reality. To that effect, the reader might want to look at the chapters on Plato and Aristotle, at the medieval discussion on iconoclasm (Chapter 3, section 2), and – for the contemporary approaches – at the essays on Goodman, Wollheim, Danto, and Walton especially. A nice contrast could be achieved by adding the essay on Fry and Bell. Naturally, all the above-mentioned authors are particularly relevant to addressing the relationship between art and knowledge, although in that respect it is also significant to look at Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Benjamin, and Adorno (p. 5).

Giovannelli goes on to offer alternative clusters by which we might structure our reading including: a cluster on the role of representation in art, the notion of realism, and more generally art's symbolic relation to reality, a cluster on the relation of art and emotion, a cluster on the place and role of art in society, a cluster on beauty and aesthetic experience, a cluster on the role and nature of interpretation and art criticism, a cluster on creativity, a cluster on art's ability to construct worlds, including the notion that the world we inhabit is God's work of art, and a microcluster on music. All of these suggestions offer exciting possibilities for ways in which our experience of the volume and its concepts might be structured or organized around a specific question or issue in the history of aesthetics.

This makes me curious about how *Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers* might be restructured based upon one or more of these thematic orientations with additional essays that reflect upon the selected themes. Even though this would mean that there are several potential organizational schemes, this would be a unique way to reorient us in the spirit of rethinking the text, and along with it, the history of aesthetics. In addition, I wonder about the possibility of a binder structure for the volume by which the essays might be *physically* reorganized based upon the reader's interests. While this might be unrealistic or idiosyncratic, it reveals how Giovannelli's suggestion of thematic clusters opens up creative potential for rethinking the structure of *Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers*.

While several of the volume's essays contextualize the history of aesthetics in terms of its metaphysical or epistemological connections, few (aside from the concluding essay by Giovannelli) explore the ethical or social and political dimensions of this discipline. The included essay on Immanuel Kant, for instance, steps back from this aspect of aesthetics when Elisabeth Schellekens does not engage with his notion of clipping the wings of genius for the sake of culture. As Kant frames the point, "Taste, like the power of judgment in general, consists in disciplining (or training) genius. It severely clips its wings, and makes it civilized, or polished; but at the same time it gives it guidelines as to how far and over what it may spread while still remaining purposive. It introduces clarity and order into a wealth of thought, and hence makes the ideas durable, fit for approval that is both lasting and universal, and [hence] fit for being followed by others and fit for an ever advancing

culture” (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Pluhar translation, §50). While Schellekens discusses Kant’s notion of genius in terms of its innovative exemplarity, little to no mention is made of genius’s role in the development of culture, or of the potential for genius to be marginalized or censored by that same culture. The inclusion of these considerations could help fill out the cluster on the place and role of art in society by introducing questions of inclusion and exclusion in relationship to judgments of taste.

Here, I would like to propose one potentially missing link in the volume that would serve to round out the same social and political cluster on art and society. While I understand that it is impossible to include every figure relevant to the history of aesthetics, the inclusion of an essay on Friedrich Schiller, and in particular his work, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, would emphasize the social and political stakes of aesthetics; it could also be a contribution to the discussion of art’s worldmaking potential. Schiller is concerned with the troubled relationship between art and culture, and in particular with the alienation and fragmentation of human experience in the modern era. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller argues for the transformative effect that aesthetic education in the experience of beauty can have upon humanity. In the Second Letter he claims, “if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice, he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to freedom.” (Second Letter, p. 9). According to Schiller, art, beauty, and play can help us to reconcile the sensuous, intellectual, and moral aspects of human nature. Moreover, Schiller argues for the importance of reconciling the individual with the universal and the individual with the State. It should be noted that Schiller addresses his arguments in a series of letters to the Duke of Augustenberg, further establishing how interrelated aesthetics, ethics, and politics are on his view.

While I am outlining what I consider to be the missing links in this volume in the discussion of Kant and Schiller, please do not weigh this criticism too harshly. As Hume claims in “Of the Standard of Taste,” “We choose our favourite author as we do our friend, from a conformity of humour and disposition. Mirth or passion, sentiment or reflection; whichever of these most predominates in our temper, it gives us a peculiar sympathy with the writer who resembles us” (Hume, p. 244). While Hume makes this claim in the context of selecting our favorite artists or works of art, the point may be extended to include our favorite aestheticians with whom we feel a close connection. Just as I argue that the addition of an essay on Friedrich Schiller would enrich the volume as a whole, I can imagine another who might insist upon the inclusion of essays on Thierry de Duve, Clement Greenberg, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. (For the record, I would endorse the inclusion of essays on all these figures, especially if space were not a limiting factor.)

As a concluding thought, I would like to consider the final chapter of *Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers*, which is one of the strongest in the volume. In “Some Contemporary Developments,” Giovannelli explores issues from current aesthetic debates including: aesthetic attitude, aesthetic properties, and aesthetic pleasure, definitions of art and the question of whether art can be defined at all (Giovannelli briefly discusses Wittgensteinian family resemblance, readymades, and found objects here), the ontology of art, the question of the proper approach to art interpretation (intentionalism, anti-intentionalism, or constructivism and criticisms of these views), affective engagement with art, and dimensions of artistic value, including questions of epistemic and ethical value. Because *Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers* ranges from ancient aesthetics beginning with Plato to influential aestheticians from recent decades like Richard Wollheim, Arthur Danto, and Kendall Walton, the final chapter concludes by following the developments of aesthetic inquiry into the

contemporary moment. I recommend this compilation to those with a burgeoning interest in aesthetics as well as to those who are continuing their study. *Aesthetics: The Key Thinkers* is a welcome contribution to anthologies in the field, especially based upon the range of critical essays by contemporary aestheticians included in the volume.

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