

BOOK REVIEW

BOYD WHITE. *Aesthetics Primer*. New York: Peter Lang, (2009). 161 pp. Paper: US\$18.95. (ISBN 978-1-4331-0290-5).

Perhaps it is true to say that beauty has had a bit of a rough ride in western culture over the last few decades. Beauty, as critics tell us, is that quality which seduces our gaze in the art of selling. “Beauty” encourages our youth to adopt an emaciated chic. Beauty is that which we learn to prefer as a quality giving pleasure in appearances but which is largely the cultured preference of a rich or noble elite. And yet, given these excesses and self-interested standards, who among us would not like to have some beauty in life, whether it is in the potted geranium on the window ledge, a view of trees in a park, or a treasured painting on the living room wall. Beauty has its pitfalls but as Plato famously remarked, “Beauty is the only quality we love by instinct.” Not all instances of beauty are cases of persuasion, or the rich person’s fancy. Perhaps it is also true to say that in the lives of many people beauty still has a valued place, and across the world and its varied cultures and arts, beauty thrives. Not only that, it is possible to point to a growing list of new books on beauty and art exhibitions showing the renewed interest by academics and artists in the subject. Important as it may be for academics to deconstruct standards of taste, aesthetics has a continuing role in education and life, as Boyd White, a well known Canadian art educator, and past editor of the *Canadian Review of Art Education*, ably reminds us in this densely packed book.

Actually, for the reviewer this is not an easy book to discuss. It is so rich in resource material and information that it defies easy summary. Also the arguments are sufficiently sophisticated as to represent a plethora of opportunities for learning. It was interesting for me, given the gaps in my knowledge, to say repeatedly, ah, so that is where this all started, and ah, that is what is meant by such a concept, or simply to engage with many new ideas.

White’s book is a crisply annotated and well-referenced study, with a glossary at the end of each chapter. White delves in some detail into the Greek origins of aesthetics (from the early Greek verb “aisthanomai” meaning to perceive),

and guides us through the ideas of Plato and his ideal form of beauty and Aristotle with his ideas about beauty being in the eye of the beholder: as something perceived in our everyday environment. White lays out for view the Neo-platonism of the Middle Ages showing beauty as harmony and unity in the interpenetration of all things. This may be true but for St. Bernard, a Cistercian monk, beauty distracts us from the dutiful meditation on matters spiritual. Indeed as a visit to Abbaye de Fontenay a 12th century French Cistercian monastery will show, decoration is quite subdued and based on natural forms. Interestingly, however, the hand built stone building, still largely intact, has a quiet austere beauty of its own, reflective of the purity of Cistercian interpretation of St. Benedict's Rule. White shows how debate raged about the union of the beautiful and the good, goodness being internal to the character of form, of ideas about proportion and measure, of the views of St. Thomas Aquinas regarding beauty and form as disinterested knowledge, "disinterested" being a (contested) term that recurs later in the history of aesthetics. Far from being dreary as one philosopher once famously declared, aesthetics becomes a fascinating story the threads of which are revealed in much present day thinking.

Continuing on, White takes us through the Renaissance with more of a focus on art, particularly on Leonardo, and Durer and the importance of verisimilitude. Art is seen as springing from a nurturable genius requiring some freedom and individuality that goes beyond rules, beauty being an orderliness of form. During the Enlightenment the arts suffer a downgrading in importance, notes White, similar to that spawned by Plato, due in part to Descartes' separation of mind and body, and the idea that the arts, lacking the rationality of science could not provide true knowledge. I would say at this point, in agreement with Aristotle that the knowledge provided by the arts is shown in particular images that link with something more universal. A self-portrait by Rembrandt as an old man, for example, shows us something of the nature of experience of aging generally. But the towering figure of the late 18th Century, as White shows, has to be Kant and his famous work the *Critique of Judgment*. It is here that our contemporary notions of beauty and the aesthetic are laid out. Little can be covered here but the key ideas of the aesthetic as being a judgment or perception of the form of an object, being based more in intuition and feeling than concepts, that beauty involves an orderliness of form that Kant describes as "purposive without a purpose," that a judgment of the beautiful is subjective and "disinterested," come into play. As Kant acknowledges, art requires concepts; nevertheless, as he wisely recognizes art, and beauty in art, cannot be produced strictly in accord with conceptual rules or it would not be art. Thus the need to balance feeling and reason, and yet there is no rule (so far produced) by means of which, in individual cases, this balance might be achieved. White's treatment of Kant and Baumgarten is comprehensive, sensitive and nuanced and essential reading for anyone interested in tracing

the origin of contemporary debates on the subject. And so White leads us through to the present day discussions of Danto, Duchamp, the Brillo Boxes of Warhol, and Robert Mapplethorpe, who perhaps more than anyone re-introduced beauty and its related philosophies back into art.

Here I should point out that White, drawing on his interest in phenomenology tells us that for him aesthetics is “the study of experiences that people undergo in encounters with art” (p. 52), and that in the book, his hope “is to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 52). This is well put and bring us back to all the important aspects of the subjective viewer, feeling, the senses, embodiment and of course, the cultural and personal histories that inform our engagements with art. How easy it would be to leave out of philosophical analysis, the whole messy aspects of subjectivity, and the even messier idea of experience, yet who can deny that art and beauty are experiential concepts? White is not ruling out our myriad engagements with the aesthetics of everyday life, indeed early in the book he quotes with approval Johnson’s idea that “aesthetics becomes the study of everything that goes into the human capacity to make and experience meaning” (p. 5). Such a study would obviously go well beyond the limits of this book and so he opts wisely to narrow his options for the most part. Later in the book, however, he goes to some pains to connect art and beauty with truth, life, personal meaning, caring and justice.

I would like to comment on one thing and that is the Kantian idea of disinterestedness. The usual view is to say that taking a disinterested perspective, on art or beauty is impossible. Disinterest, meaning not a lack of interest, but the lack of an interest drawn specifically from a person’s set of private wants and desires. Indeed, White seems to accept this line as I do myself in part. But why is disinterestedness important? Well for one thing it means attention is directed towards the beauty or expressiveness in the artwork. I hope to find something aesthetically rewarding in the painting on my wall, but such arises from the intrinsic nature of the work rather than, say, its price, or capacity to fit in with its surrounding décor. So now what is meant by “intrinsic” and is this not also to some extent a matter of value? And are not all our dealings with art instrumental? Well a guarded yes is the answer to both questions. But in our aesthetic dealings Kant would argue, the *aesthetic* means that we are responding to something for its own sake, a term White rightly draws upon later in the book (see p. 132), and not for our own pragmatic or political benefit. Beauty we might say has a value in itself. If by disinterested we mean unselfish, then perhaps we may see in beauty an opportunity for a little “unselfing” as Iris Murdoch argues in *The Sovereignty of Good*. In observing the flight of a hawk, for example, as a thing of beauty, she is lost in the moment and notes a link with the ethical. How would it be possible ethically, to see another person with compassion or caring, to place our selves in their shoes, without a little unselfing, which is necessary in order to see the other as an end and not as

a means? Being disinterested may be impossible absolutely but that does not mean the idea has no value in aesthetic or ethical response. Aesthetically we respond to the being and form of something in its very existence, as with the appreciation of an old growth forest for example, without wishing otherwise to use it for some selfish purpose. And, accepting the importance of subjectivity in response to beauty, does not strangely, rule out disinterestedness. This is, without doubt, a controversial and thorny topic. Perhaps White's book will tempt readers to open Kant's *Third Critique* for themselves.

White discusses the relation of aesthetics and ethics and offers an interesting approach for research but if there is an area where White excels it is in his writing on the teaching of art criticism and in particular on what he calls "evocative critiques" (p. 108). He notes that he wants to foster writing in response to art that "matches the intensity and involvement of [his] students personal experiences" of art that shows "what they saw and felt themselves" (p. 108). Crucially he says, "I encourage [my students'] attempts at expressive writing ...because the attempt reinforces the concept of aesthetic response" (p. 108). Experience with art is directed towards meaning making which, White argues, gives it a rightful place in education as a meaning making enterprise. Throughout his writing on teaching he offers many practical examples and personal anecdotes. White reserves the last twenty or so pages for a thoughtful exploration of aesthetic education and its educational value, that is, its meaning making potential and deeply human and moral values in the face of the instrumental focus of the global economy. I finished the book feeling much more knowledgeable about aesthetics, seeing it as intrinsically significant for education and life, and feeling uplifted by the strong humane direction of White's thinking.

This book would be of great value for both pre-service teachers and graduate student in arts education and also philosophy of education.

STUART RICHMOND *Simon Fraser University*

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