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## The German Aesthetic Tradition

This is the only available systematic critical overview of German aesthetics from 1750 to the present. The book begins with the work of Baumgarten and covers all the major writers on German aesthetics that follow, including Kant, Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and Nietzsche up to Heidegger, Gadamer, and Adorno. The book offers a clear and nontechnical exposition of ideas, placing these in a wider philosophical context where necessary.

Such is the importance of German aesthetics that the market for this book will extend far beyond the domain of philosophy to such fields as literary studies, fine art, and music.

Kai Hammermeister teaches in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literature at The Ohio State University.

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*For Matthew Crosby*

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## Preface

The questions regarding art and beauty are as old as philosophy itself, or older, considering that Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar already reflect on the role and particular gifts of the poet. Yet for the longest time, art and beauty have been treated separately for the most part. The two notions were generally discussed in the context of other philosophical issues in which art and beauty played only a subordinate role. Philosophically, beauty more often than not was treated in the context of metaphysics, be it for Plato, Plotinus, or Thomas Aquinas. The concept of art, on the other hand, underwent a long series of permutations that have by no means reached an end. The tendency was for the concept of art to become narrower and to exclude more and more activities and products. Crafts, trades, and skills were originally all included in the concept of art, understood as τέχνη and *ars*; the equation of art with the fine arts was a very late development.

No art, whether as practical know-how or as a member of the fine arts family, was ever considered autonomous before Kant. Art was imbedded in a social, pedagogical, theological, or merely economic program that regulated its production. Not until the eighteenth century were the questions regarding art's epistemological and practical value, and about the nature of the work of art and of beauty, integrated into a systematic, independent philosophical discipline that then became known as aesthetics. Before this time, the term "aesthetics," derived from the Greek *aisthesis*, meaning perception, had referred to the philosophical theory of sense perception. Baumgarten and Kant both

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still use it in this sense, although Kant adopts the new meaning of the term between the first and the third *Critique*, that is, between 1781 and 1790. Taking up some British and French ideas from Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Burke, Dubos, and others, as well as from rationalist metaphysics, a unique philosophical discipline emerged in Germany around the middle of the eighteenth century. This book tells the story of the emergence and the subsequent development of aesthetic philosophy in Germany.

Philosophical aesthetics was not only born in Germany; the development of this discipline is also a predominantly Germanic affair for two specific reasons. First, the German aesthetic tradition is resistant to outside influences to an unusually high degree. The writers who belong to this tradition respond to one another without introducing ideas adopted from contemporary discussions in other languages, the standard references to antiquity notwithstanding. Second, while the German tradition of philosophical aesthetics is self-sufficient, philosophers outside this discourse respond to German concepts without themselves having a significant influence in shaping the tradition. Thus, Dewey, Sartre, Croce, Satayana, Danto, Langer, and Ricoeur, to select a random few, all take up concepts developed within the German context of aesthetics. Philosophy of art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries written in Britain, France, Italy, the United States, and elsewhere constantly has recourse to the German tradition. In short, philosophical aesthetics as a discipline is thoroughly grounded in German thought and, hence, cannot be understood without a detailed knowledge of this tradition.

This book is true to its title insofar as it tells the story of the German aesthetic tradition. Yet, its title is not entirely true to its subject. Properly, the book would have had to be called *The Germanic Aesthetic Tradition*. As a glance at the table of contents will make evident, not all of the authors discussed herein are German. In fact, some have not even written in German. In three cases, the extension from German to Germanic is especially in order. First, Søren Kierkegaard is a Danish philosopher who wrote his books in Danish. Even though Danish is a Germanic language, other characteristics of his work not only justify his inclusion but make it a necessity. Kierkegaard developed his thought in opposition to the tradition of German idealism, primarily the objective idealism of G. W. F. Hegel. Much of what Kierkegaard writes

is directed against the systematic philosophy of the eminent Berlin thinker. This holds true as well for his aesthetics: Kierkegaard's conception of this philosophical discipline is a direct challenge to Hegel's position. Without Kierkegaard's specific contribution to aesthetics that later becomes important to Heidegger, Adorno, and Lukács, the narrative of the German aesthetic tradition would be incomplete.

The second case concerns Georg Lukács, who was a Hungarian citizen and wrote both in German and in Hungarian. Although his early essays on aesthetic questions were written in Hungarian, Lukács was educated in Germany, lived there, and took classical German philosophy as his frame of reference.

Since I read neither Danish nor Hungarian, I rely on existing translations of the works of Kierkegaard and Lukács into English. All other translations from all other languages are mine; in the case of Baumgarten's writings, I translated from the Latin into English, consulting a German edition where appropriate.

The third case concerns both Ernst Cassirer and Herbert Marcuse, both of whom were German expatriates. Marcuse became an American citizen and published a good number of his books and essays in English. Still, his work is connected to the Frankfurt School and takes up the traditions of German idealism, Marxism, and Freudian psychoanalysis. Where his texts have first appeared in English, I naturally quote these editions. Where Marcuse himself or his wife translated (and often edited) from original German publications into English, I take this to be the authorized translation and quote from it. Cassirer happened to write down most of his aesthetic philosophy late in life during his years in exile. Hence, some of his most important pronouncements on this subject were written in English, either in the context of an introduction of his philosophy to an English-speaking readership or as classroom lectures.

This book on the German aesthetic tradition serves several purposes. First, it introduces the major positions in German philosophical aesthetics and elucidates their interdependence and their attempts at overcoming and renewing previous positions. Second, the book introduces the important figures of this tradition, not merely as a collection of isolated portraits but in the context of a historical narrative. Hence, the grouping of the individual thinkers under the rubrics of *The Age of Paradigms*, *Challenging the Paradigms*, and *Renewing the*



Paradigms indicates their belonging to larger historical movements. Third, the book gives expression to the conviction that the history of philosophy cannot be separated from systematic philosophy. History only comes into view when questions of problems, concerns, and philosophical interests are raised, and these interests must naturally be those of our own age. This hermeneutic principle forbids the claim that our narrative exhausts the historical material. No single narrative can ever accomplish such a feat. On the other hand, the same hermeneutic grounding demands that our engagement with historical philosophical texts be motivated by questions that concern us today. What is of merely historical interest is of no interest at all.

This book also argues that there is an internal logic to the narrative that unfolds. The examined positions in philosophical aesthetics do not simply follow one another; they adhere to a larger pattern that becomes clear in retrospect. In short, the thesis of this book is that paradigmatic positions in aesthetic philosophy were established during the period of German idealism and romanticism, that these paradigmatic positions were subsequently challenged by writers in the nineteenth century, and that in the twentieth century all the positions were renewed precisely in the order in which they first emerged. This last fact, and I take it to be a fact, still allows for a number of possible conclusions to be drawn. These can be aligned along a spectrum of which the two extreme positions would be the following. On the one side, the weakest version of this stance argues for a simple coincidence in the historical pattern by claiming that the positions of idealism and romanticism are so rich and varied that they attract new interest after a period of challenges and attempts to dismantle them. Nevertheless, the renewal of the paradigmatic positions could have started as well with Hegel, then moved to Kant and progressed to Schelling from there. That the original order – Kant–Schiller–Schelling–Hegel – held up in the twentieth-century revival is seen as more or less a convenient pattern for organizational purposes, but hardly an essential feature. On the other side of the spectrum, though, we find a strong stance that might be called hard-core Hegelianism. In this view, the idealist positions are challenged, only to be amended and elevated later to a higher level. True to the dialectical model, this view does not regard the historical pattern as a coincidence but, rather, as the display of logic and hence of necessity in history.

Both positions are plausible, and good arguments can be advanced against both of them as well. It is less important to subscribe to either than to acknowledge a historical pattern in the first place. To attempt an explanation of this pattern would bring us into the field of the philosophy of history and, hence, further away from our subject than we might like. It is not our aim to venture into this other philosophical discipline, let alone the *prima philosophia*, namely metaphysics, which is very likely to enter into this discussion as well. But to write intellectual history means to narrate a story and, hence, to believe in a beginning, a middle, and an end. The assembling of facts or the portrayal of a number of individual thinkers is not yet historiography, but merely the preparation for it. To stop at this point means to have failed as a historian of philosophy.

In the present context, it is unnecessary to abstract from the material at hand, that is, the aesthetic discourse, in order to examine overarching patterns of the movement of thought. Instead, the material must speak for itself. I did not write this study with a theory of history in mind to which the material was meant to conform. Rather, a pattern emerged as I read and reread the texts in a historical sequence. All I ask of the reader for now is to pay some attention to the striking historical parallels and the repetition of questions and approaches in different ages. And while my thesis of the patterned progression of Germanic aesthetics might not be in sync with the spirit of our times – in fact, it probably runs against its current – the book can be read without subscribing to any such narrative. Before I establish historical influences and similarities, I take each thinker on his own terms. Most of the space in every chapter is devoted to the detailed discussion of the aesthetic theory of one or more philosophers. Hence, all chapters can be read independently, in reverse order, or selectively. But to say it again: What makes this study a book, rather than a collection of portraits, is its narrative.

It could be argued against our narrative of an inner logic in the history of German aesthetic thought that it is achieved at the cost of eliminating those contributions to aesthetics that do not fit the scheme. I do not believe, however, that this charge can be substantiated. Certainly there are omissions: Little if any reference is made to the writings of Marx and Engels, Freud, and the artists' aesthetics of J. W. Goethe, Jean Paul, R. Wagner, W. Kandinsky, and P. Klee, to name

only some. Still, I hold that an inclusion of these writers would not have changed the historical pattern significantly. They were omitted not because their writings would disturb or overturn the presented narrative but for two very different reasons. The first is that these writers themselves did not situate themselves within the tradition of German philosophical aesthetics. Generally speaking, one joins a philosophical discourse – at least in the continental tradition – when one responds to problems previously unsolved or inadequately solved by referring to writings of other philosophers and by continuing or challenging a certain vocabulary. In respect to philosophical aesthetics, this gesture of joining the discourse is hardly present in any of the omitted writers. The second reason for the omission of these thinkers is that their writings on art generally do not advance a position that answers to the basic questions and concerns of the aesthetic tradition. Rather, one aspect from which to view art is singled out and made the sole focus of the writer's contribution. This is not to say that these texts can be neglected in our philosophical inquiry into questions of art, beauty, ugliness, and so on. Quite the contrary is true, since much originality can be found in these books and essays. And still, all of them fail to respond to some concerns that are central to philosophical aesthetics, for example, the arguments for or against a practical and epistemic value of art, the inclusion or exclusion of nature in philosophical aesthetics, and the relation of aesthetics to other philosophical disciplines. In the end, the omissions were not mine. The tradition of philosophical aesthetics itself selects those who belong. In this process, the votes of those who opt out of that tradition count most.

To facilitate the comparisons among the many different writers in the German aesthetic tradition, we will consider their contributions under three specific aspects, although our discussion will nowhere be limited to these moments. The first is the philosopher's ontological discussion of art, the second the epistemic role attributed to art and beauty, and the third the practical function the writer locates in artworks. While many other aspects of aesthetics will demand our attention in addition to these factors, they nevertheless serve well as principles of comparison. To be sure, the selection of these criteria does not imply that all aesthetic philosophy must answer these questions. Rather, I isolated only those issues in the history of the philosophy of art and beauty that were addressed by thinkers time and again. Not all

philosophers were interested in all of them, and the fact that all of them were discussed by one thinker or another does not make for a better or more complete aesthetic philosophy at all. Yet the comparison of many varied approaches to the same discipline becomes much easier if we focus on a few characteristic features. This procedure might have a certain artificiality, but I hope that it will facilitate the comprehension of aesthetics as a historical process in which similar questions find similar or radically different answers, or in which certain questions are dismissed, ignored, or forgotten. Historiography depends on comparability, and comparability rests on the identification of elements that are neither unchangeable nor radically unstable.

Many friends and colleagues took time to read the manuscript or parts of it. All of them offered helpful comments, although I could not incorporate every single one. Among those with whom I discussed the manuscript in its entirety or in parts, I would like to thank especially Bernd Fischer, John Davidson, and Paul Reitter. My student Benjamin Beebe helped greatly with the editing process of the last draft of the book. An anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press offered helpful suggestions. As always, my first reader was Matt Crosby. His presence is the most important reminder for me that art, despite its inexhaustible richness, cannot fill a life. To him this book is dedicated.

This study was written in Columbus, Ohio, the Black Forest, and New York City. To dwell in these places while working with the great texts from the German aesthetic tradition brought home once more the relevance of philosophical aesthetics to the understanding of both the beauty of art and nature and the ugliness that is thrust to the foreground in modernist art and the cityscape of Manhattan. The advantage of life in a metropolis, however, is that our large cities allow for multiple encounters with a wide spectrum of great art that force philosophical aesthetics into the background and remind us that it is of secondary status only. What comes first and foremost are the works of art themselves.

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