

The Genealogy of Aesthetics

Is it body or spirit that makes us appreciate beauty and create art? The distinguished Canadian critic Ekbert Faas argues that, with occasional exceptions like Montaigne and Mandeville, the mainstream of western thinking about beauty from Plato onwards has overemphasized the spirit or even execrated the body and sexuality as inimical to the aesthetic disposition. *The Genealogy of Aesthetics* redresses this imbalance, and offers a radical rereading of seminal thinkers like Plato, Augustine, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida. Professor Faas tells a new and exciting story, of the Platonic inversion of Homeric pagan values, of their absorption into Christian theology and eventual secularization, of Kant's grand reworking of this tradition, of Hegel's prophesy of the death of art in the ultimate triumph of spirit over body; and, finally, of the revival of the aesthetic/ascetic ideal in Heidegger, Derrida and their followers. Faas attacks both the traditional and postmodern consensus, and offers a new prosensualist aesthetics, heavily influenced by Nietzsche, as well as drawing on contemporary neo-Darwinian cognitive science. A work of both polemic and profound learning, *The Genealogy of Aesthetics* marks a radical new departure in thinking about art which no future work in this field can afford to ignore.

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The Genealogy of Aesthetics

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521811828

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First published 2002

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

Faas, Ekbert, 1938–

The genealogy of aesthetics / by Ekbert Faas.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 81182 1

1. Aesthetics – History. I. Title.

BH81 .F33 2002

111'.85 – dc21 2001043619

ISBN 978-0-521-81182-8 Hardback

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For
Bangus,
Maria,
and
Marilyn

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14. Temple frieze at Khajuraho, west of Allahabad in northern India, tenth century CE. Photograph by Ekbert Faas. Cf. Hugo Munsterberg, *The Art of India and Southeast Asia*

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(New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970), 98: “Many of the scenes portrayed in the sculptures at Khajuraho are frankly erotic, showing lovers performing the sex act in various positions, many of which are described in the famous Hindu manual of love, the Kama Sutra. To the Westerner, imbued with the puritan ethics of the Christian tradition, such subjects seem highly unsuitable for a sanctuary designed for religious worship, but to the Hindu no such objections exist, since every aspect of life is looked upon as a revelation of the god who may often manifest himself as a lingam and is frequently thought of as being accompanied by his female counterpart, or shakti.”

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Acknowledgments

Driving from Naumburg to Salzwedel about a year ago, I unexpectedly noticed an old, washed-down sign pointing me off the road to a school mainly remembered for a handful of famous pupils like Fichte, Novalis, the Schlegel brothers, and, most notably, Friedrich Nietzsche. *Schulpforta!* It took only a matter of minutes to become absorbed in its medieval setting, where time has stood still. I visited the chapel and graveyard, ambled around the cloister, explored study halls, refectories, and dormitories – then suddenly he came walking toward me from the far end of a low-vaulted passageway lined with oblong lead-frame windows; stooped over as if searching the ground, a tall figure alternately lit by the sharp sunlight or swallowed by the deep, late afternoon shadows. As he came closer to address me, I could see the colossal forehead, thick mane of brown hair, shaggy eyebrows, and moustache as well as the large, deep-set, somehow unfocused eyes, as of a blind man. Would I please direct him to the Cistercian Chapel? The manner, meticulously self-effacing and polite, the voice low, almost inaudible, but of an intensity as if his life depended on the right answer. Thunderstruck I replied, through the cloister, there, up the stone steps to the left; then I realized we were being filmed for a television programme to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Nietzsche's death in 1900.

The irony of being cast in the role of someone responding to a question by the man who, more than anyone else, has helped me answer (or if need be give up on) innumerable questions I have asked myself throughout life! It is a far-reaching and long indebtedness traceable through at least three previous books (like my *Ted Hughes, Tragedy and After*, and *Shakespeare's Poetics*), but only made fully explicit in the present one. So it is time to acknowledge it here.

For all that, my more systematic reading of Nietzsche's complete works has been of relatively recent date. One reason for this was my looking for further support regarding the first half-dozen chapters I had written from a broadly Nietzschean perspective, drawing on my lifelong, yet casual perusal of some of his major works. The search brought several welcome

confirmations (such as Nietzsche's preference, like mine, for Xenophon's over Plato's Socrates), as well as some disappointments, like his obvious failure to comment on the centerpiece of Plato's transvaluation of pagan values, the Socrates–Callicles debate in *Gorgias*, so aptly mined for its proto-Nietzschean arguments by the great E. R. Dodds. A second reason for these intensified Nietzsche studies stemmed from my trying to resolve a growing unease with the uses and abuses Nietzsche has been put to by Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Paul de Man, and postmodernist critics at large. In the same endeavor I began researching recent cognitive science and particularly neo-Darwinian evolutionary psychology, which promised a more future-oriented way out of postmodernism's megatranscendentalist impasse, its ill-conceived and certainly misnamed “deconstructive” maneuvers, as well as its concomitant misappropriations of Nietzsche. Yet here again seemingly new ideas and perspectives accrued to me around earlier ones, proposed by the philosopher himself.

It has been some dozen years since I started work on this book with a talk about the “Genealogy of Beauty” given at the invitation of Concordia University's English department in Montreal. Since then I have greatly benefited from the (privately funded) labors of a small number of former students, research assistants, and friends who, I hope, remember things with some of my own fondness, or at least humor: Michael Holmes, our oversized index charts of Plato, Plotinus and Augustine; Maria Trombacco, our numerous conversations, and her typing up some early drafts; Shawn Thomson, his checking some 3,000 odd references, paraphrases and citations; Derek Smith, his word processing of early versions of the introduction and afterword; Adam Chalmers, his helping me with revising, coordinating, and finalizing the typescript complete with mottoes, notes, illustrations and bibliography; and Monika Makiel as well as Sandra Morelli for helping me with the index and with seeing the book through the press. To me it was fun throughout, and if it was less so to those who helped me so generously, I would like to not only give them my heartfelt thanks, but also ask their kind forgiveness.

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following institutions in the provision of illustrative material, and their kind permission to reproduce same: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Archivi Alinari, Firenze; Musée de l'Œuvre Notre-Dame de Strasbourg; Schlossmuseum Weimar; Museo Nacional del Prado; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.