

REVIEWS

J. Colin McQuillan. *Early Modern Aesthetics*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 204 pp. ISBN 978-1-78348-212-2

The title of J. Colin McQuillan's new book raises far more questions than many might think at first. Among such questions are those concerning not only the position and significance of early modernity in the overall history of aesthetics, but also the question of the proper subject of the inquiry, which asks, What can legitimately be labelled 'aesthetics' in the early modern period? At first sight, it seems that *Early Modern Aesthetics*, aiming to be an introduction to the field, gives a rather simple answer by stating that the book offers an 'overview of philosophical discussions about beauty, art, literature, and criticism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (p. ix). But, seeking to disentangle the conceptual and methodological problems and to avoid anachronisms, McQuillan then promises to 'provide a more authentic account of the history of aesthetics than is found in much of the scholarly literature; and separate philosophical discussions of beauty, art, literature, and criticism during the early modern period from the part of philosophy that came to be called aesthetics' (p. x).

By raising questions concerning early modern aesthetics, McQuillan joins a debate that haunts the historiography of aesthetics and revolves around the seemingly simple question when did aesthetics start, or, as McQuillan formulates it, 'How are we to understand discussions of subjects that are now considered part of aesthetics, but which took place before aesthetics became a part of philosophy?' (p. 7) Surveying the history of the historiography of aesthetics, it appears that the solution that restricts the history of aesthetics to the history of the discipline called aesthetics introduced by Alexander Baumgarten in his 1735 dissertation has never satisfied most philosophers. Instead, one plausible suggestion traced the history of aesthetics back to the known beginning of philosophical thinking, asserting that there have always been philosophical reflections of some sort on beauty, human sensate life, or the various arts.¹ Another view does find the beginning of the history of aesthetics in early modernity but not because of the introduction of the discipline, but because the way of thinking about our productive or receptive encounters with the beautiful or the arts underwent essential changes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (just like these concepts themselves). Or, as McQuillan

¹ McQuillan refers to Bosanquet's seminal work as a representative of this position (p. 101). See Bernard Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1892).

describes this position: according to the philosophers who ‘focus on the thing rather than the name’ (p. 102), the history of aesthetics begins in early modernity ‘not because it was the first time philosophical reflections on art, beauty, and taste were called “aesthetics”, but because it was in the eighteenth century that these reflections first came to resemble what we now call “aesthetics”’ (p. 101).

It is not clear what exactly McQuillan means by ‘resemblance’ here, and I think his formulation does not represent this position accurately, since its best representatives do offer theoretical bases for this expansion. One of the fountainheads of the ‘analytic reading of eighteenth-century aesthetics’,² Jerome Stolnitz, for example, writes that ‘it is simply frivolous to allow [the use of the terms “aesthetic” or “aesthetics”] to decide who “created” aesthetic theory’, and his reason to say so is that he credits the British with the idea that disinterestedness marks off a certain aesthetic mode of perception, one attentive to certain kinds of objects or properties, which allows them ‘to envision the possibility of a philosophical discipline, embracing the study of all of the arts, one which would be, moreover, autonomous, because its subject matter is not explicable by any of the other disciplines.’³ Even though rigorous philological criticism has revealed how Stolnitz’s retrospective expansion of the concept of the aesthetic to the terrain dominated by that of taste appropriated history in order to support his own theory of aesthetic attitude (not to speak of his dubious concept of ‘disinterested perception’),⁴ many historians of aesthetics are still convinced that it is not the birth of the discipline but the emergence of a certain kind of experience that can be regarded as the overture of aesthetics. Most recently Paul Guyer has presented such a history based on the suggestion that ‘[a] great deal of the history of modern aesthetics, then, can be captured by following the intertwining trails of the three [eighteenth-century] ideas that aesthetic experience is an experience of key truths, of the most fundamental emotions of human experience, and of the free play of the imagination.’⁵

There is of course a more rigorous contextualist position present in the Anglo-American historiography of aesthetics of the last decades, which confines its

² For the characterization of the ‘analytic reading’ based on the works of Monroe Beardsley, Jerome Stolnitz, and George Dickie, focusing on the emergence of the concept of the aesthetic as the new centre of theory, see Peter J. McCormick, *Modernity, Aesthetics, and the Bounds of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 39–60.

³ Jerome Stolnitz, ‘On the Origins of “Aesthetic Disinterestedness”’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2 (1961): 131–32.

⁴ See Miles Rind, ‘The Concept of Disinterestedness in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 2 (2002): 67–87.

⁵ Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *The Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 27.

inquiry to the history of the discipline and finds the starting point in the Wolffian School.⁶ McQuillan represents this view, marking his position by means of a deliberately polemical style: he justly remarks that the role of the British is often overemphasized and that it even casts a shadow over the actual German forefathers of the discipline.⁷ But McQuillan does not take account of the theoretical foundations of the retrospective expansions that annexed authors like Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Dominique Bouhours, and Jean-Baptiste Dubos to the history of aesthetics, and his *Early Modern Aesthetics* is generally not concerned with the philosophical underpinnings of the historiography of aesthetics. His aim is to offer ‘a more historical perspective’, since ‘much of the scholarly literature lacks a clear understanding of what aesthetics was and was not during the early modern period’ (p. x). His aim, he states, is thus to ‘emphasize the difference between philological critique, reflections on the arts, the critique of taste, and aesthetics because I think this is the best way to understand aesthetics in the early modern period’ (p. x).

Arguing against the ‘ahistorical’ approach and ‘unclear definition of aesthetics’ of the analytic reading of early modern aesthetics and teleological narratives as well, McQuillan defends an emphatically contextualist position,⁸ and sets out to

⁶ See Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Stefanie Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment: The Art of Invention and the Invention of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). McQuillan relies heavily on both of these works.

⁷ See Timothy M. Costelloe’s characteristic statements: ‘Today the term *aesthetics* refers to an identifiable subdiscipline of philosophy concerned with the nature and expression of beauty and the fine arts. The discipline covers a broad spectrum of issues, problems, and approaches, but students and practitioners generally agree that its origins can be traced unequivocally to eighteenth-century British philosophers working predominantly, though not exclusively, in England and Scotland.’ Or a bit later: ‘if Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks* heralds the birth of philosophical aesthetics, and Hutcheson’s *Inquiry* is its inaugural systematic treatise, then Addison’s essays stand as the sustained treatment of ideas and concepts that in one way or another dominate the new discipline up to and beyond the publication of Burke’s *Enquiry* in mid-century.’ Timothy M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition: From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1, 38.

⁸ Quentin Skinner’s famous criteria for a contextualist historiography have recently been revisited by Mogens Lærke. As I see it, the methodology McQuillan attempts to follow can be properly described by Lærke’s ‘historical perspectivism’ (although McQuillan himself refers to the contextualism of Kuhn and the ‘new history of early modern philosophy’): ‘The requirement of understanding past philosophies “on their own terms”, or what we can call the requirement of *historically immanent reconstruction*, implies then that the parameters and guiding principles of the reconstruction must have been formulated from *a perspective situated within the historical context* of these past philosophies.’ Mogens Lærke, ‘The Anthropological Analogy and the Constitution of Historical Perspectivism’, in *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Mogens Lærke, Justin E. H. Smith, and Eric Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21.

investigate early modern aesthetics 'on its own terms' by reconstructing the context of certain ideas or theories, more precisely the debates they contributed to, which also enables him not to take sides on the project of the Enlightenment.

In the fourth chapter of the book, McQuillan turns to the early modern 'history proper' of aesthetics, arguing against those who consider 'Baumgarten's naming of aesthetics incidental at best' (p. 102), or who, like Guyer, call Baumgarten's naming an 'adult baptism'⁹ as if it were only an institutional continuation of previous discussions on the arts or the beautiful, or as if one could easily mark out a field of study or a 'central issue' of these discussions, or, as a matter of fact, of the new discipline itself. Analysing Baumgarten's proposal for a 'science of things perceived, which guides the lower cognitive faculty to perfection' (p. 105) and the aesthetic programme of his follower, Georg Friedrich Meier, but also the subsequent debates around the subject and method of the new discipline, McQuillan emphasizes that even after the birth of the discipline 'it was not at all clear that the subjects that are now associated with aesthetics all belonged to the same parts of philosophy' (p. 9).

Similarly to Stefanie Buchenau's book on the various conceptions of art and aesthetics produced in eighteenth-century Germany, *The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment* (2013), the fourth chapter of McQuillan's book also seeks to demonstrate that philosophical aesthetics in the eighteenth century was far from homogeneous. Indeed, there were several competing programmes and proposals: the chapter briefly surveys how the conception of the new discipline was formed through Moses Mendelssohn's Wolffian heritage, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's criticism of Baumgarten, Johann Gottfried Herder's aesthetic programme, and Immanuel Kant's 'transcendental aesthetics' and third *Critique*. As the result of these discussions about the subject and status of aesthetics (that is, whether it can become a 'science' or not), '[t]he name (aesthetics) and the thing (Baumgarten's new science) came to be separated in the course of history, one being retained and the other fading into obscurity' (p. 103). After describing the standpoints of Friedrich Schlegel and F. W. J. Schelling concerning the discipline of aesthetics or the philosophy of art, McQuillan ends his brief historical survey by outlining how aesthetics came to be reduced to the philosophy of art at the beginning of the nineteenth century, thanks to G. W. F. Hegel's definition of aesthetics as the philosophy of fine art. The great number of thinkers and positions McQuillan seeks to encompass inevitably makes his analyses brief, but this chapter is nevertheless far more coherent than any other in the volume.

⁹ Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *The Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7.

I find McQuillan's emphasis on the complex, versatile nature of the young discipline a substantial contribution to the discussion on the subject, but wonder about two things. How does the new discipline relate to its 'prehistory', the word that in McQuillan's book covers the quarrel between the ancients and moderns, the systematic understanding of the arts, and the critique of taste, and what are the advantages of such a strictly contextualist historiography for understanding early modern and contemporary theories? Unfortunately, McQuillan leaves these questions mostly unanswered, even though he discusses the 'prehistory' of early modern aesthetics in the first three chapters, and its afterlife in twentieth-century and contemporary theories in the final one.¹⁰ Apparently, he does not want to lose the parts of early modern thought concerning these subjects just because they fall outside the disciplinary borders of philosophical aesthetics, since they proved to be crucial to its later development. He thus chooses to deal 'with discussions of subjects currently associated with aesthetics in the historical contexts in which they appeared, whether or not they were recognized as a part of aesthetics at the time' (p. 8). This is what 'prehistory' means, and at this point it becomes clear, as McQuillan later admits, that '[a]lthough I have insisted that early modern aesthetics is to be distinguished from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century discussions of the ancients and moderns, the fine arts, criticism, and taste in earlier chapters of this book, I have only done so for historical reasons' (p. 133). To make things even more complicated, there are authors, such as Herder and Kant, who are discussed both in the chapters dedicated to the prehistory of aesthetics and in those on the 'history proper'. All in all, I think that even though reconstructing the historical context of the birth of philosophical aesthetics and elucidating the proper meanings of the term in the period do help our understanding of the theories under scrutiny to some extent, the fact that McQuillan does not clarify the relation between early aesthetics and its 'prehistory' and that his distinction loses its relevance when it comes to discussing the heritage of early modernity today raise questions about the advantages of this strict distinction without any further elaboration.

Now it is time to turn to the chapters focusing on the 'prehistory' of aesthetics. In the first chapter, McQuillan turns his attention to the famous quarrel between the ancients and moderns, surveying the most important contributions to the debates in France and Britain, from Perrault and Fontenelle to Wotton and Bentley on the one hand, and from Boileau and Madame Dacier to Temple and Swift on the other. But why is it important for the history of aesthetics? McQuillan's answer is rather shallow: the battle of the books, he argues, is significant insofar

¹⁰ McQuillan remarks in one of his notes that 'a complete history of aesthetics [...] would have to explain how all these subjects came to be associated with aesthetics' (p. 133).

as it can not only 'show how judgments about art and literature were made before judgments of taste and the principles of criticism were incorporated into philosophical aesthetics' (p. 33), but it can also illuminate the deep connections between art theory, science, and philosophy in the birth of modernity. These connections, however, remain mostly undisclosed in the book. Furthermore, McQuillan mentions that the contributors to the quarrel make 'proto- or quasi-aesthetic claims' (p. 34), and 'it would be wrong to mistake these claims for aesthetic judgments, since aesthetics is a distinct part of philosophy that emerged almost a century later and differs from other ways of thinking and writing about these subjects' (p. 34). Is McQuillan suggesting here that aesthetic judgements can only be made within the institutional and theoretical framework of philosophical aesthetics? What is, then, that peculiar 'way of thinking and writing' which can produce aesthetic judgements, and in what way do such judgements differ from 'proto-aesthetic claims'? Unfortunately, there is no further explanation here, and the problem of aesthetic judgements is only taken up elsewhere in the book where McQuillan writes about what Kant had to say about the concept.

By examining different treatises on the arts and their various contexts, the second chapter investigates the systematic understanding of the fine arts and the philosophical systems they were integrated into. The chapter covers a spacious historical terrain, and its selection sometimes seems to be contingent: we read about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French, German, and British treatises on the five major arts, rushing from well-known works by Johann Joachim Winckelmann or Denis Diderot to lesser known ones, often leaping almost a whole century in time. In the section about 'the art of gardening', for example, Henry Wotton's *Elements of Architecture* (1624) is followed by William Gilpin's *Dialogue on picturesque landscapes* (1748), and while writing about treatises on music McQuillan jumps from René Descartes's and Marin Mersenne's works from the second and third decades of the seventeenth century to the debate between Jean-Philippe Rameau and Jean-Jacques Rousseau a hundred years later. Concepts that could easily make up whole chapters in the (pre)history of aesthetics, like that of the *je ne sais quoi*, the sublime, or the picturesque, are also mentioned only incidentally. The survey of the appearance of 'national traditions', the eighteenth-century debate on the characteristic features of a nation's art and taste, winds up with the questionable conclusion that because of their twentieth-century totalitarian appropriations 'national traditions' are 'antiphilosophical systems of the arts, in which historical narratives supplant rational, philosophical reflection on the nature of the arts and their relation to one another' (p. 53), an assertion that hardly satisfies the criteria of contextualist historiography laid down in the introduction. The early modern debate on

the diversity of tastes, arts, and manners encompassed not only philosophical but also 'scientific' approaches, and it offers a perfect terrain to investigate how the arts, philosophy, and scientific views on geography, economy, politics, or climate intertwined in the period. What makes his argument even more problematic is that McQuillan revisits the very same lines of the very same text, Herder's 1766 fragment entitled by his editors 'On the Change of Taste',¹¹ in the next chapter when he discusses the reflections on the historical changeability of taste without a similar verdict, and he even claims there that Herder 'turns the table on European chauvinism' (p. 86). The chapter concludes by briefly outlining the different systematic arrangements of the arts in relation to one another (by Joseph Addison, Dubos, Charles Batteux, Mendelssohn) and their incorporation into the 'comprehensive order of philosophical and scientific knowledge' (by Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, Jean le Rond D'Alembert, Christian Wolff, Kant; p. 60). McQuillan's aim seems to be to 'illuminate' the various ways in which the arts were systematically understood, and not to substantially contribute to or challenge the Kristellerian model of the emergence of fine art.

In the third chapter, McQuillan investigates the possible grounds of the critique of taste, a 'genuine European obsession' (p. 72), turning his attention towards physiology, psychology, history, and society. He thus surveys many kinds of theory of taste, and although he mentions George Dickie's assertion according to which these theories 'highlight the sensible, intellectual, and emotional dimensions of our experience of beauty, as well as the pleasure we derive from that experience' (p. 72) – the contextualist approach, unfortunately, means McQuillan can ignore the task of examining the difference between the concept of taste and that of the aesthetic, between judgements of taste and aesthetic judgements. The chapter encompasses various theories from Descartes's mechanistic account of the passions as a source for the later physiological explanations of taste, through Shaftesbury's Neoplatonism and Hutcheson's *Inquiry* on the internal sense of beauty, together with other British empirical psychologists discussed within James Shelley's parcelling (imagination and association theorists), even to Herder and the growing recognition of the influence of society and history on judgements of taste. The chapter starts out by visiting the state of philological critique and literary criticism at the beginning of the eighteenth

¹¹ I am referring to the following part of Herder's fragment: 'Time has changed everything so much that one often needs a magic mirror in order to recognize the same creature beneath such diverse forms. The *form* of the earth, its *surface*, its *condition*, has changed. Changed are the *race*, the manner of *life*, the manner of *thought*, the form of government, the taste of nations – just as families and individual human beings change.' Johann Gottfried von Herder, 'On the Change of Taste', in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 255.

century. McQuillan revisits the heritage of Renaissance humanist philology already touched upon in the first chapter, and underlines its importance for the formative years of literary criticism, while also describing how the two activities gradually parted ways. It proves to be important, since McQuillan also asserts that the 'origins of the critique of taste in the early modern period can be traced back to Renaissance philology' (p. 72), and that the 'critique of taste can be understood as an attempt to formulate more extensive and more general principles than either philological critique or literary criticism' (p. 75). I find these arguments highly problematic: tracing the critique of taste back to literary and textual criticism reflects our contemporary orientations and interests, since the early modern history of taste, dating from authors like Baltasar Gracián, was concerned not predominantly with questions of art, but rather with interpersonal encounters and pleasures of nature: 'the concept of taste was originally more a moral than an aesthetic idea', describing 'an ideal of genuine humanity'¹² and aiming at promoting a refined sociability. McQuillan does mention that the early modern discourse of taste had metaphysical, moral, and theological dimensions together with the 'interdisciplinarity' of early modern philosophy, but he does not offer a satisfying reconstruction of these contexts, while other subjects like philological critique are discussed more than once in the book.

The final chapter, entitled 'Early Modern Aesthetics Now', focuses on the ways early modern discussions influence contemporary aesthetic thought, in order to 'show that interest in early modern aesthetics is not merely antiquarian' (p. 135). At the end of the previous chapter, McQuillan turns to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates about the subject of philosophical aesthetics, whether it is concerned with a special class of objects, a special set of properties, or a certain kind of experience. McQuillan, arguing for a pluralist approach, suggests:

Instead of seeing the list of subjects with which aesthetics is supposed to be concerned as an attempt to determine its identity or its essence, perhaps it would be better to understand this list as a variety of topics that have been discussed in the context of aesthetics in its relatively short history. A pluralist would be happy to grant that all of these subjects can be included within aesthetics, whether or not there is anything natural or necessary that binds them together. (p. 124)

Against the background of this pluralist and historically sensitive view, McQuillan touches upon the problems of artistic modernism, twentieth-century proposals to revisit Lessing's *Laocoön* and the boundaries of artistic media, and the historicist and naturalist approaches to judgements of taste. But the chapter

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 31.

turns out to be a rhapsodic enumeration of various authors and theoretical positions, ranging from Clement Greenberg and T. S. Eliot to the recent discoveries of neuroaesthetics, sometimes with vague generalizations ('Studies of modernism in art and literature have much to contribute to debates about modernism in philosophy and the sciences' [p. 137], 'Marxist, and later, postcolonial, critics have shown that art, criticism, and aesthetics almost always reflect the historical and social conditions in which they emerge' [p. 145]), and rather questionable examples and distant parallels. Furthermore, as I pointed out earlier, the detachment of early modern philosophical aesthetics from its prehistory has no impact on the arguments or structure of this chapter.

Finally, I would focus on a statement I find quite problematic, though it does raise interesting questions. McQuillan argues that in order to understand philosophical works 'we have to know where to place them in the history of philosophy and how they relate to other parts of philosophy' (p. 149). He asserts that if we read, for example, certain parts of the *Republic* 'as part of aesthetics, then we are less likely to see them as contributions to what we would now call moral psychology or the philosophy of education [...]; and if we are convinced that Hutcheson's account of the internal sense of beauty really belongs to aesthetics, then we might turn a blind eye to the theological purpose it serves' (p. 149). Even though McQuillan suggested earlier that the rigorous detachment of philosophical aesthetics from other early modern discussions on art, beauty, and taste was only for 'historical reasons' and that it seems to make no difference when he discusses the relationship between the present and past of aesthetics, this is supposed to be an argument for the interpretive value of his distinction. I think this is misguided. Even if the historiography of aesthetics proves McQuillan right, since the retrospective expansion of concepts like aesthetic experience has often blurred the original contexts and stakes of philosophical texts, his argument is highly problematic, for it suggests that with the introduction of the autonomous discipline of philosophical aesthetics the moral, theological, social, and political 'purposes' disappeared. However, these non-aesthetic 'purposes' or agendas pervaded not only eighteenth-century aesthetics but later theories as well: Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic writings 'serve' political and moral purposes, Hegel's lectures 'serve' his grand vision of the philosophy of history, not to mention the political aspects of Marxist or feminist criticism, or the aim of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, the improvement of our somatic awareness and experience. The influence of a pure aesthetics on historical investigations endangers our understanding not only of pre-aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic traditions, but also of aesthetic traditions.

McQuillan's *Early Modern Aesthetics* can be a useful guide to avoid the appropriation of early modern theories and to consider the various contexts and debates that are indispensable for their understanding. It is also important to see that the discipline remained versatile and was formed by different competing aesthetic programmes even after Baumgarten's founding gesture. Yet I do not think that such detachment in itself ensures the proper understanding of the beginning or the prehistory of aesthetics. The flaws of this introductory work, which can nevertheless inspire new debates regarding the methodology of the historiography of aesthetics, may reasonably be attributed to the huge range of historical material it seeks to encompass, and also to the very period under scrutiny. One should not underestimate the difficulty of investigating early modernity, since '[f]rom the point of view of practical methodology, the relation between early modern philosophy and philosophy is the most problematic, and therefore also the most interesting, interface between the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy'.¹³

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¹³ Mogens Lærke, Justin E. H. Smith, and Eric Schliesser, Introduction to *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Mogens Lærke, Justin E. H. Smith, and Eric Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.