

Preface

The force of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* was in their provocative question: what is art, really? This question succeeded only too much: for decades, many philosophers were obsessed over abstruse questions of ontology of art and neglected the phenomenology of aesthetic experience. But in recent years, the tide has changed. Books like Dominic McIver Lopes' *Beyond Art* (2014) claim that it is time for philosophers to set aside the search for the essence of "art" and to linger on the way an individual artwork offers us a unique microworld of aesthetic properties. Quite significantly, Lopes' book ends with a quick look at Vermeer's enchanted interiors and Sugimoto's *Seascapes* series. He rightly claims that if we face these artworks armed merely with the "what is art?" (and its related "but is *this* art?") question, we have already made impossible a philosophical reflection attuned to media specificity and to the type of appreciation that a given medium calls for. Jean-Marie Schaeffer's *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger* (2000), Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (2001), and Paolo D'Angelo's *Estetica* (2011) offer further compelling arguments for freeing aesthetics from the stranglehold of the "what is art" question. There is no doubt about it, the tide has turned: even the late philosopher Arthur Danto, who rejected aesthetics for theory of art his whole career, had some kind things to say about aesthetics in his last book, *What Art Is* (2013). This paradigm shift to a "from below" approach is also visible in the (very) diverse offerings to be had in aesthetic conferences (the following is a representative sample of topics from the "Upcoming Meetings" section of the *American Society for Aesthetics* website: aesthetics and mathematics, the philosophy of computer games, the aesthetics of football, the aesthetics of rhythm, varieties of aesthetic politics).

But, if this is the prevailing theoretical tide, and if I see it (as I do) as a positive turn of events, why did I write a book on German Romantic-Idealist aesthetics of figurative art? After all, this tradition has been charged with initiating (or at least giving a seminal theoretical foundation to) that pernicious obsession with "art," at the expense of an attention to the idiosyncratic beauty of specific artworks. It is undeniable that the respective ontologies of art we find in Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Schelling, Friedrich Schlegel,

and G. W. F. Hegel seem, in hindsight, to have aged not altogether well. To pick a particularly problematic example, consider these lines by Schelling: “Nothing of that which a baser sensibility calls art can concern the philosopher. For him it is a necessary phenomenon emanating directly from the absolute, and only to the extent it can be presented and proved as such does it possess reality for the philosopher” (PA 4). Can one even *imagine* an academic today expressing these views as his or her own with a perfectly straight face? Where should one even begin pointing an accusatory finger? The implied elitist distinction between a noble and “a baser sensitivity”? The dogmatic certainty that art emanates directly from the “absolute”? Or the requirement that the divinely infused artwork subject itself to the certifying procedures of the philosopher? That the artwork is not a gift-like event, but a “necessary phenomenon”? Or, finally, Schelling’s talk of “art” as a universal cutting across various media?

However, this universal, abstract perspective, which Jean-Marie Schaeffer damns by the label of “Speculative Theory of Art,” is only *half* of the story concerning these German authors. The other neglected half is their highly nuanced attention to the phenomena of aesthetic experience. Take, for instance, aesthetic pleasure. Jean-Marie Schaeffer is wrong when he claims that “The notion of (aesthetic) pleasure, which is still central in Kant, is almost wholly absent from the various versions of the tradition of the speculative theory of Art” (Schaeffer 298). Consider Friedrich Schlegel and G. W. F. Hegel, two of Schaeffer’s targets. Now, it is true that in his *Gemäldebeschreibungen* Schlegel moves from the essentialist idea that painting is essentially *Gottensdienst*, i.e., divine service. But when it comes to encountering individual paintings, he abandons himself without reserve to the sensuous grace of Raphael’s *Jardinière*; he is enchanted by the volcanic, playful energy of Altdörfer’s *Battle at Issus*; he is fascinated by the animal heroism of Giulio Romano’s *Bestioni*. Or take Hegel’s obvious pleasure in Correggio: “There is nothing more attractive than the naïvetè, in Correggio, of a grace not natural but religious and spiritual, nothing sweeter than his smiling unselfconscious beauty and innocence” (LFA II, 882). Schaeffer can speak of an unduly ascetic “Speculative Theory of Art” also because he arbitrarily selects the characters of his narrative. Had he included in his story Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Gottfried Herder, and Wilhelm Friedrich Wackenroder, he would have discovered—along with the speculative side—also incredibly rich phenomenologies of aesthetic pleasure.

Now, the purpose of my book is to recover for present discussion the second, untold half of the story: Romantic Idealism as a constellation of aesthetics “from below,” i.e., an aesthetic discourse attuned to media specificity and to the correlative types of appreciation at play. My aim is not simply philological. I think that the current resurgence of aesthetics can benefit from a reassessment of the legacy of what I call “Figurative Theo-humanism.” As I see it, the current renaissance of aesthetics is so bent on recovering an experience of the unique specificity of the artwork (be it a painting, a videogame, a flash mob) that it pushes into the background the way in which the aesthetic object can be a source of epiphany, in which it can shake up the way we see the world and our place in it. As we will see, this is where Figurative Theo-humanism comes onto its own.

I should also note that this tradition's emphasis on beauty might make it seem hopelessly dated. I would begin by noticing that we should distinguish between artists and spectators. To be sure, most painters and sculptors today consider the representation of the human figure to be hopelessly dated, even more so if we speak of beautiful representation of humans. But the fact remains that the untutored spectator still loves the Old Masters—every year, big museums register record-breaking numbers of crowds. At least for these spectators, the insights of Figurative Theo-humanism might be of living relevance: why does the beauty of Raphael, Leonardo, or Matisse still speak to us, today? And does it say something relevant for our lives?

But my main point is not a recovery of descriptive beauty. Again, my main point is the recovery of a broad conception of aesthetic experience, where I do not rule out of hand the possibility that the aesthetic object is also addressing me individually, on the very sense and direction of my life. In this respect, the insights of Figurative Theo-humanism should be fruitful also when we approach the ugly, jarring work of Francis Bacon, the Dionysian brushwork of Cy Twombly.

* * *

I would like to thank Allen Speight, the series chief editor, for his unstinting help and encouragement. Without him, this book would never have seen the light of day. I also blame his wonderful seminars on aesthetics, which I attended through the years, for providing me with an important source of intellectual stimulation. I also would like to thank my mentor Alfredo Ferrarin for reading the manuscript with great care and for his always dead-on, felicitous tips, *Grazie Maestro*. My gratitude goes also to Larry Shiner: my work has improved a lot because of his intelligent suggestions. Thanks also to Casey Haskins, my undergraduate teacher, for reading the final draft. I would like to thank Sarah Lippert: her *Paragone Society* gave me the opportunity to discuss with a wonderfully varied audience many of the ideas that are in this work. I should thank Sarah for her wonderful editorial job in Chap. 3. Thank you also to James Elkins and David Morgan, who have read Chap. 2 and offered precious tips for the overall orchestration of the work. Finally, thanks to my wife Julie Hassel for revising the proofs. I am grateful to Peter Lang for graciously allowing me to use a great deal of material from an article I published with them ("Friedrich Schlegel on Painting and Transcendence", in *Contemplations of the Spiritual*, ed. Rina Arya; Berlin: Peter Lang, 2013).

Last but not least thank you Julie, Francesco, and Lucia for your patience in putting up for so many years with a cranky writer and for the love you never stopped giving him. This book is dedicated to all of you.

Boston, MA, USA

Franco Cirulli

The Age of Figurative Theo-humanism
The Beauty of God and Man in German Aesthetics of
Painting and Sculpture (1754-1828)

Cirulli, F.

2015, XVIII, 191 p. 17 illus., 14 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-09999-6