Review:

_The Genealogy of Aesthetics_, Ekhert Faas

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From the beginning of his book, Faas poses the problem of the potential opposition between two conceptions of art. On one side, it is possible to see a rejection of art based on the idea that the material life has a minimal value compared to spiritual and ideal considerations. On the other side, we can understand art as a celebration of the senses and of the material life. Faas presents Plato and Homer as archetypal images of this basic opposition. The introduction puts forward notions related to this opposition. Faas uses the Nietzschean perspective to present the possible idea that art should come from the instinctual self, from the animal present in every man and woman. In fact, it is important to note that to expose his understanding of ‘The Genealogy of Aesthetics’, the author mentions the influence of the Nietzschean perspective, an important point that must be kept in mind during the exploration of this book. Obviously, the opposition is clear: we can see the antagonism between the ideas of Nietzsche, and the ones of Plato, the philosopher that based his ideas on the notion of transcendence, and the pursuit of the intelligible world. The book builds on this basic opposition, a duality that can be seen as a guideline though this book.

Plato is the first theorist to be presented by Faas. As a general idea, Plato describes art as being purely imitative (*mimesis*), and therefore, possesses almost no intrinsic value of its own. We have to know that, according to Plato, the source of truth and the value of life rest in the intelligible world, ideal world containing the perfect ideas of everything that we can experience. By comparison, the material reality that we experience possesses a lower degree of truth and perfection. The consequence for the arts, particularly imitative, is clear: removed from this ideal world, their value is limited. More specifically, Plato starkly condemns poetry as the worst form of art. According to
him, poetry must be accused of inspiring useless passion, appealing to people for pleasure rather than justice, and for giving a false account of reality. Literature must be banned from the ideal city; it must not corrupt the individual. This vision will be clearly presented in ‘The Republic’, Plato showing the opposition between art and truth. Not only is literature unable to represent truth, but also poetry is in opposition with it. Furthermore, concerning beauty, Plato believes that the true nature of beauty will be present if a material form is partly reflecting the idea of beauty coming from the intelligible world. We can also look at Plato’s perspective on art coming from the opposition between body and soul. The body exits in the material world, and therefore possesses less value than the soul, attribute of the ideal world. Faas then begins ‘The Genealogy of Aesthetics’ by studying a thinker who is mainly opposed to art.

Very interestingly, Faas uses characters of Plato’s dialogues, and presents their vision of art and beauty. For example, Xenophon in a dialogue comes to talk about beauty and painting as an emotional process. Obviously, Plato’s Socrates is opposed to that understanding and presents the idealistic vision that we already saw. The example that Faas brings helps to present various aesthetic theories and put them in the general context of the Platonic theory. Also, Socrates mentions that the body and the sexual feelings related to it are trivial, and far from the intelligible world. Actually, this negation of the body will be a part of Plato’s legacy.

Faas then presents Plato’s successors, from Plotinus to Augustine. Plotinus’ position on beauty is simple. Beauty is present when sight and hearing are pleased, ugliness producing the opposite effect on our senses. Physical pleasure, other than these two senses, is not present in this general idea. Concerning art, Plotinus follows Plato, seeing art as mere reproduction, and not possessing much value. Augustine is the next philosopher presented. His conception of aesthetics can be closely associated with Plato’s vision. Augustine mentions that the true beauty comes from God, and all the single manifestations of beauty that we can experience are originating from this perfect source. True beauty is spiritual. In consequence, only the mind can experience real beauty. Beauty accessible through the senses is only a pale reflection of true beauty. Following Plato, Augustine warns against the attraction of beauty, and reminds us that
the beautiful comes from God, and must not distract humans from the search for wisdom. Faas also notes the fact that, due to his hierarchical position, Augustine was able to propagate his ideas about beauty and art. Part of Plato’s Republic was then concretely put to life.

Faas then turns to the middle ages, and tries to analyse the progression of aesthetics. He begins on a historic note, underlying the fact that the roman Catholic church and the Carolingians united at one point in that period, thus extending the power of the church in secularized fields, and imposing guidelines for aesthetics. One consequence was that the propagation of art was restricted. The only appropriate form of art became music. This disembodied form of art, oriented by mathematical principles, was the only artistic production giving pleasure to the soul. Consequently, music became an important part of catholic life. Toward the end of the middle ages, Faas mentions that two important facts will slowly modify the understanding of aesthetics. The discovery of Aristotle’s ‘Poetics’ gave a new path to reflect about aesthetics. According to Aristotle, any concrete form can embody beauty in our world. This discovery gave an alternative to Plato’s strict condemnation of art. The other important difference came progressively from a change to an understanding of the beautiful based on an objective perspective, to a subjectivisation of the notion of beauty. Beauty became directly related to the subject; from now on, it is the one choosing what is beautiful.

Aquinas also played a role in the development of aesthetic theories in the middle ages. Faas presents his distinction between pleasure coming from the instinct, and delight coming from observation of harmony. Also important in Aquinas is the fact that beauty and good are related; both sharing the same subject. However, beauty addresses the senses while the good deals with the intellect. A few pages were sufficient for Faas to cover the centuries that composed the middle ages.

The Renaissance period brought new ideas on aesthetic theories. Faas puts forward numerous influences that changed our conception of art and beauty. He briefly studies Dürer’s consideration about the nature of beauty, and his questioning concerning the growing rift between the practice of art and the theory related to it. Faas’
presentation of that period contains numerous interesting details about art in the renaissance. Also present is a short presentation of the growing importance of the body in Renaissance painting. The author notes the connection between the body in art, and the sensual reactions that it causes. This relation opens the door to a Nietzschean interpretation of art.

In the next chapter, Faas presents another side of aesthetics during Renaissance: the Academy. According to Faas, aesthetic codes that previously served as norms and guides began to be used to condemn and restrain artistic expression. Once and for all, aesthetics, led by the academy, would be a fixed discipline evaluating beauty and art. This model would apply independently of the variety in culture and geographical considerations. This sticker model also follows the anti-sensualist paradigm inherited originally from Plato. True beauty cannot be a corporal attribute. Mind and body must be dissociated, the artistic essence obviously closer to the mind. This vision of the academy is in opposition to the one defended by Bacon and Montaigne. Both of them associated art with a form of hedonism, Montaigne even mentioned the importance of the body in art. Both of them also shared the vision that art cannot be reduced to mathematical principles. Art must embody a transmittable experience between the artist and the spectator. Body and sensual experiences must be part of art. Thus, Renaissance saw the flourishing of the heterodox conception of art and beauty.

Faat introduces a reflection on art related to basic consideration about human nature. He opposes Hobbes and Shaftesbury in their way of understanding the human condition. According to Hobbes, men are characterized by a will of power. Without the control of the state, they could even be dangerous to themselves in their interactions. Shaftesbury rather believes that humans are benevolent. His understanding of aesthetics will follow this vision, and preserve the benevolent nature of men. Indeed, Shaftesbury believes that the true nature of beauty comes from the soul of individuals, and not from the body. The soul guides the person in a disinterested way, but also incites him to follow a moral sense. Such an individual will be at the centre of art appreciation, and Shaftesbury calls him the ‘connoisseur gentleman’ (p.118). He is the enlightened subject appreciating art for its moral connotation. Thus, art becomes an
elitist activity, mainly experienced by a particular group, and inaccessible to the common man.

Faas notes that the expanding vocabulary about aesthetics characterized various notions, giving them an intellectual character rather than a sensual orientation. According to Faat, vocabulary conceptualized aesthetics. After briefly presenting Manderville’s comments on Shaftesbury, Faas introduces Hutcheson’s position. His stance follows Shaftesbury’s understanding of limiting the beautiful to the spiritual realm. Once again, beauty appeals to superior senses, and excludes any understanding based on physical reactions. Faas then presents Hume as representing the intellectualization of art. More precisely, Hume talks about a disinterested contemplation coming from the subject. Even if subjectivized, the appreciation of art must follow guidelines, recognized by all subjects. Burke’s vision is in contrast to this last understanding. According to him, the beautiful is derived from the social, and incidentally from the sexual life. He believes that beauty is a derivative of the pleasure experienced in society, including sexual pleasure. Burke believes that a Platonist vision leads to an abstract understanding of beauty, and therefore confounds our understanding of the beautiful. We can therefore see the basic opposition between the understanding of beauty based on the mind, and the one oriented toward the senses.

Faas then studies the vision proposed by Kant. He first introduces the basis of Kant’s moral theory. At the moral level, the individual must make choices according to the categorical imperative, or in other words, he has to decide on morality from his subjective perspective. However, this principle has to be possibly applicable for the whole society. According to Kant, these moral principles must be selected in a disinterested way. At the aesthetic level, Faas first presents Kant’s understanding of the sublime. In Kant’s view, the sublime appears when men are confronted with the infinite. Such contemplation will lead to emotions coming from the practical judgment. Indeed, these feelings coming from the sublime take their origins, like moral principles, in the practical reason. Kant therefore suggests an important connection between morality and the sublime. Kant also considers the nature of beauty. According to him, beauty at its highest level is present in nature. Furthermore, the beautiful is responsible
for the feelings of pleasure that we experience. This enjoyment has its origin in an intellectual movement, guiding the disinterested individual toward beauty. This judgment concerning aesthetics will start from the disinterested subject experimenting pleasure in the discovery of the beautiful. Once again, the mind has a complete priority over the body. Once again, the body is devaluated.

Next Faas reviews the conception of Hegel. As we saw, Kant believes that beauty is present in nature, and that humans cannot create such beauty. Hegel’s position is in opposition to that understanding. Indeed, according to Hegel, art is the product of the mind, and this expression of beauty surpasses the beauty coming from nature. Hegel believes that the production of the spirit possesses more value that natural production. The artistic creation must reflect an ideal concept, the artwork being a sensorial reflection of that idea. Even if this vision rehabilitates the value of art, it is still opposed to any sensorial oriented production. Hegel even mentions that some senses like smell, taste and feelings belong to a lower form of senses, while sight and hearing represent the higher senses. Art must be appreciated in its spiritual form. Faas contrasts the Hegelian vision with the one of Feuerbach. Feuerbach is presented as a thinker opposed to the traditional Christian values giving more importance to the soul than to the body. That last understanding, and the one that Hegel defended, has to be reversed. According to Feuerbach, the body represents the true nature of the self. Art should then follow this premise and turn itself to the senses and emotions. Sensuality must be a central part of artistic production.

Marx’s reflection of aesthetics is presented next by Faas. According to Marx, the individual is characterized by the fact that he works and produces. The homo faber uses his five senses to create. From this homo faber comes the homo aestheticus, his aesthetics capabilities being developed in contact to the beautiful. In this Marxian vision, the beautiful can even possess a proper value, becoming an important point in some production. Faas presents Marx’s opposition to idealistic values that have lead art to look for ideal foundations. According to Marx, this dialectic vision has to be turned around. Idealistic principles should not be the foundation of art. Concerning art production Marx follows his general theory and mentions that production of art reflects
the socio-economic context of where it comes from. Marx criticizes the capitalist system of his time, and the art production coming from this period. He believes that only a communist system will give freedom to society, and will allow individuals to freely use their aesthetics capabilities. Only this free and desalinated individual will be able to express freely his aesthetic opinions.

In presenting Heidegger’s position, Faas will introduce the theme of the bond between art and truth. According to Heidegger, art has tried for too long to represent truth rather that exposing the artist’s experience. Heidegger’s reflection on art begins by noticing the ‘thingly’ character of any artwork. Civilized population produce things, including art. However, art cannot only be a material production. For a long time, mimesis or imitation was the guiding principle of art, trying to join truth by perfect representation. According to Heidegger, this vision must be overcome. Rather than copying truth, Heidegger would be more inclined to say that art reveals truth. The artist reveals to the general population what lies beyond the mere appearances. The artist will be the one penetrating Being, and bringing it to the people.

Faas then presents a position clearly based on the senses rather that the spirit: the Nietzscheen one. Starting from a genealogical approach, Nietzsche unites beauty with biological necessities. Indeed, he believes that beauty has been present in the society, and associated with values of usefulness. Beauty then has a social function. Nietzsche then proceeds to criticize Plato’s position. Principally, he mentions that art and beauty have to be revaluated, and accepted as important assets in the social world. Specifically concerning art, Nietzsche gives three characteristics that must characterize this activity: ‘sexuality, intoxication, and cruelty’ (p.223). Following Dionysus, the Greek god, art must reflect these fundamental aspects of life. However, Nietzsche does not reject the spiritual or the formal character of art. He rather thinks that they must be present, and that they do not exclude a possible enjoyment related to the body. Spirituality and sensuality can unite in art. In fact, we can illustrate this duality with the Nietzscheen image of Apollo and Dionysus. On one side, Apollo is the image of beauty and creation, on the other, Dionysus represents destruction and the instinctual part of life. Art will be the union of these two characters, uniting their oppositions.
Faas then presents Derrida. According to Derrida, in every attempt to grasp an object, the notions of sameness and difference must be present. Actually, the concept of difference is central to Derrida’s position. Derrida argues that everything that can be conceptualized presupposes an opposite form, the difference. According to him, difference precedes everything, and even possesses the priority over the notion of being. Faas also exposes Artaud’s position on art. From the beginning, Artaud sympathizes with Nietzsche’s position about the traditional opposition between body and soul. He believes that metaphysics is responsible for this opposition. In his theatre, Artaud wants to surpass the traditional metaphysical understanding that always gives priority to the spiritual. To reach this objective, Artaud tried to suppress all forms of representation in theatre. It is the senses, like cruelty, that must be put on stage. Artaud is then opposed to conceptions based on repetition or *mimesis*. Faas returns to Derrida, and exposes the fact that *mimesis* has always been related to truth, and often with a pejorative connotation. But while Plato used to see *mimesis* as a worthless copy, Derrida sees it as a production that possesses its own value, Derrida even giving the copy an equal value to the original. Artaud and Derrida therefore present two visions clearly in opposition with traditional ways of understanding aesthetics.

Faas studies part of the post-modern period presenting Lyotard’s consideration on the notion of the sublime. According to him, modern art takes its inspiration in the notion of the sublime. As presented by Kant, the sublime is not a form of *mimesis*, but an emotional and internal reaction by the subject confronting the infinity of the world. However, Faas mentions that Lyotard’s interpretation of Kant is mistaken. Derrida and de Man also experience similar problems. According to Faas, the three authors in reading Kant misinterpreted the key concept of ‘representation’. Then, if we follow the author, their presentation of Kant must be partly mistaken.

In his last chapter, Faas presents Ross’ position, and classifies it in the post-modern revival of aesthetics. According to Ross, beauty comes from nature as a gift. Beauty then possesses its supreme value in the expression of nature. Following Derrida’s reflection on difference, Ross then develops a vision of the negative. In his view, the
negative transcends all oppositions that exist; it is prior to everything that we can know. This will allow Ross to perform a deconstruction of metaphysics, this negative being inaccessible to the logos. According to Ross, aesthetic theories have found a new contemporary expression.

In his afterward, Faas considers the aesthetic theories from the vision of the cognitive sciences. Indeed, science has recently made attempts to explain aesthetic concepts like beauty and art. As a conclusion, we can say that this book appears to present an interesting view concerning the development of aesthetics. The basic opposition between materialism and idealism is well presented, and guides the reader all through the book. Furthermore, the author uses numerous examples coming from the art scene, and these examples help to contrast theory with the actual artistic productions. ‘The Genealogy of Aesthetics’ presents many diverse reflections about art and beauty.