

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Special Issue – The Birth of the Discipline

Introduction. The Birth of the Discipline

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What can be so interesting about the birth of a discipline? In the beginning, some new quality is coming into the world, which is carrying in its ‘genetic’ heritage diverse elements of the past, but also novelties and inventions of the day and their new combinations, unprecedented constellations, fresh perspectives – and it is full of potentials. Everything is fluid around it; still almost everything could happen to it. Later, during its development via a series of interpretations and applications, different theoretical approaches appear which apply various vocabularies to grasp and explain it, to integrate it into the familiar or received system of knowledge. As the result of these efforts, then, it will be canonised: its shape becomes more or less definite, pure and ‘autonomous’ but, inevitably, many possibilities remain unactualised; many intriguing elements and fruitful interconnections sink into oblivion – the new discipline is born as a system of doctrines. Later, when historiography finds interest in this, historical narrative schemes could simplify its genealogy, distort further its image and reduce its scope for the sake of present or future developments of the discipline.

What we can retrospectively call ‘aesthetic’ in the *modern* sense of the term emerged in the late 17th and the first part of the 18th century. Alexander Baumgarten baptised the discipline as ‘aesthetics’ first in 1735, but the better known origin of the term is in his *Aesthetica* of 1750 and 1758. Joseph Koller wrote the first (very brief) history of modern aesthetics, *Entwurf zur*

Geschichte und Literatur der Aesthetik, already in 1799. By that time, aesthetics, then as a new-born branch of (academic) philosophy, has made a spectacular career, the Tübingen room-mates (Hegel, Schelling, Hölderlin), in a manuscript fragment, claimed that ‘the highest act of reason, which, in that it comprises all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are united like sisters *only in beauty* – The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet. The people without aesthetic sense are our philosophers of the letter. *The philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy*’ (1796–97, *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus*, trans. Bruce Matthews). At the turn of the century, aesthetics was perhaps the most prosperous and promising philosophical approach to the world, due to Kant’s theoretical achievement: the first part of his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) has been widely considered as the real starting point of the discipline. With the exception of Fichte, all the significant representatives of the so-called German Idealism wrote their own aesthetics or philosophy of art (as well as every noteworthy philosopher of the eighteenth century had reflected upon the issue of taste). At the same time, Kant’s enormous influence had a distorting effect, too: his aesthetics overshadowed those enterprises of the whole century (including even Hutcheson’s, Batteux’s, Baumgarten’s, Burke’s and Herder’s) which first tried to find a proper language for a specifically modern experience (of grace, nature and culture) in significantly different contexts than the transcendental philosophy’s. And those histories of modern aesthetics which later have applied Kantian language to present the features of the aesthetic, eventually eliminated the significance of the pre-Kantian century of aesthetics.

Recently, in the scholarship, one can see a growing academic interest in this pre-Kantian period of the discipline, even though some newer great narratives seem to insist on the old teleological scheme of interpretation based mostly on Kant’s aesthetics.¹ Addison, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Baumgarten, Burke and their masters and followers have received increasing interest again, the analyses of their ideas can clearly show the multifarious and multidisciplinary nature of the emerging aesthetic, can point at its anthropological, theological, moral, social-political, economic and medicinal interests.² The current collection of papers offers a contribution to this stream of the scholarship. It aims to re-consider and re-interpret some intriguing aspects of the pre-Kantian history of modern aesthetics and to draw some conclusions for its sometimes biased and oversimplified historiography. From the revision of the history of a discipline, the re-discovery of its genealogy always ensues the opening of old-new perspectives for the contemporary aesthetics as well.

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NOTES

¹E.g. Costelloe 2013. Guyer 2014.
²Here is a very tight selection of the recent and relatively newer publications. As for the British line: Vermeir and Deckard 2011. Müller and Jackson-Holzberg 2014. Axelsson 2019. Norton 2020. As for the

British and German parallelisms: Grote 2017. Axelsson, Flodin, and Pirholt 2021. As for the German line: Beiser 2009. Stöckmann 2009. Buchenau 2013. McQuillan 2021. And some further ones: Russo 2007. Koch 2008. von Mücke 2015. Balogh and Fórizs 2018.

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