

REVIEW ARTICLE

Alison Ross, *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy: Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy*

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Alison Ross' *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy* provides a valuable contribution to the philosophical genealogy of aesthetic theory. In a series of careful analyses, she demonstrates the importance of Kant's third *Critique* for Heidegger, but also for French post-Heideggerians Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. Ross' original contribution is to propose the Kantian concept of aesthetic "presentation" [*Darstellung*] as the key to understanding the post-Kantian tradition (or at least the 'French' strand from Heidegger to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy). This tradition can be understood as attempting to find aesthetic ways of "addressing the *problem of presentation* as framed by and inherited from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*" (p. 4). Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy radicalise the Kantian problem of presentation; indeed for these philosophers it becomes "the core problem of philosophical thinking" (p. 8). Ross also aims to demonstrate the significance of aesthetic presentation for contemporary political themes, "including technology, capital, and the problem of social criticism" (p. 12). While Ross succeeds in showing this in the case of French deconstruction, readers not already persuaded by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy might question whether the same can be said of her reading of Heidegger.

The book commences with an impressive reconstruction of Kant's critical philosophy, delineating the central role of *Darstellung* or presentation—the relating of ideal meaning and material forms—in the architectonic of the Kantian system. In the *Critique of Judgment*, aesthetic presentation appears in two distinct perspectives: 1) the "dislocation" or *disconnection of aesthetic judgment* from practical and cognitive fields; and 2) the *relational structure* of analogical presentation, which distinguishes material content from the *relation* to this content. In both cases, aesthetic presentation makes possible a relationship with material things in which ordinarily inaccessible aspects are now sensuously revealed; material things are thus shown to have the capacity to sensuously present meaning and even to "authorise moral feeling" (p. 16). In a comprehensive analysis of aesthetic and teleological judgment, Ross makes clear the significance of aesthetic presentation in Kant's account of the independence of taste, and for the connection drawn in aesthetic experience between teleology and beauty. Nonetheless Kant's account pulls in opposing directions. The *independence* of beauty from the 'interested' claims of the senses and of reason clashes with beauty's other role as an *intermediary* between sensation and reason (pp. 32 ff.). The independence of taste from cognitive and practical interests thereby "collapses into a statement of the purpose of material forms as the bearers of moral significance" (p. 37).

Ross extends her analysis to include a discussion of the role of Kant's pragmatic anthropology in the project of aesthetic presentation. The focus again is on those material elements of human existence that "can be more than their constituent materiality" (p. 39); Kant's moral reading of nature (ethico-teleology) and history

(politics and culture), for example, as providing evidence in material life of our inherent moral disposition (p. 40). Here Ross makes the interesting claim that aesthetic presentation plays a crucial role in Kant's moral philosophy: we apprehend the moral figure, in sensible terms, "as a paragon, that is, an *aesthetic* figure" (p. 42). The problem of *motivation* is met by *aesthetic presentation*: "the moral man is understood ... as an aesthetic image presented as an object of inspiration and emulation" (p. 42).

Ross then turns to Heidegger, foregrounding his famous reading of Kant and his 1936 Schelling lectures. Her provocative thesis is that Heidegger's philosophical trajectory—both pre- and post-*Kehre*—should be understood "from the perspective of his rethinking of the Kantian topic of (aesthetic) presentation" (p. 61). Heidegger's ontological transformation of this Kantian topic names "the relations in which, in a given epoch, things 'are' for human beings" (p. 62). This ontological generalisation derives from Heidegger's own criticisms of Kant: that Kant stabilises the problem of presentation by yoking it the ideas of reason, thereby suppressing the "abyssal structure of presentation" (p. 62)—an idea found in Lacoue-Labarthe (p. 122). Heidegger, by contrast, recasts the Kantian problem of presentation in terms of the *Seinsfrage*. In *Being and Time* this unfolds through an inquiry into the being of the questioner (*Dasein*); in the 1930s it proceeds through an inquiry into how the question of being is answered in the history of metaphysics; and in Heidegger's post-war thought it is elaborated by the question of how language discloses being and allows us to experience being in a sayable manner (pp. 62-63).

Ross tests this thesis in regard to Heidegger's ambivalent thinking on technology and art. Here again presentation is taken to be the matter of Heidegger's thinking: technology and art comprise "relations of presentation", that is, "a specific relation in which things are understood 'to be'" (p. 90). From this broad interpretation, Ross develops a critique of the tendency in recent Heidegger scholarship (Ziarek and de Beistegui) to take art as an unambiguous source of "critique" in respect of the "instrumental thinking of the technological epoch" (p. 92). Ross argues that art cannot be taken as a counterpoint to technology for the simple reason that technological en-framing is what enables being to show up in a sayable manner in the first place. Indeed, Heidegger's difficulties in thinking the relationship between technology and art stem from the Janus-faced character of *Ge-stell*: the tension between the 'totalising' tendency of technological enframing, and the possibility of a non-metaphysical experience of *Ereignis* in our relationship with being and beings. Art and technology are thus more ambivalently intertwined in the modern "technologisation of experience" than most readers of Heidegger will allow.

Ross' bold reading of Heidegger might strike some readers as implausible. While Heidegger does criticise the Nietzschean misunderstanding of Kantian aesthetic disinterest, as Ross points out (p. 61), this does not imply that he therefore embraces the Kantian doctrine of aesthetic presentation. For Heidegger also presents in the *Nietzsche* lectures a sharp critique of Kantian aesthetics as a metaphysical subjectivism that reduces the truth-disclosing capacity of art to the solicitation of feeling in a contemplating subject. As Julian Young argues, Heidegger's version of the Hegelian 'end of art' thesis is that art's power of world-disclosure withers in modernity because of the dominance of subject-metaphysics, that is, of Kantian aesthetics and its legacy in modern art (see Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], esp. Chapter Four.) What Ross identifies as Heidegger's ambivalent contrast between the poetic power of art and the dangerous en-framing of technology could therefore be taken as evidence of his flawed conception of *modern art* (for example, his dismissal of photography and cinema). A more Janus-faced account of Heidegger's relationship with Kantian aesthetics might have been helpful in this respect.

Why Heidegger's path of thinking should be understood in light of Kantian aesthetic presentation becomes clearer in the last two chapters. The book concludes with exemplary readings of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, showing the importance of Kantian presentation for their deconstructive engagements with the history of metaphysics, above all, with Heidegger. Ross deftly articulates Lacoue-Labarthe's complex project of confronting the Heideggerian *Seinsfrage* with the logic of *mimesis*. Contra Heidegger, it is this *mimetology*—the “operation of the machinery of mimetic identification” (p. 111)—that provides the conceptual matrix for Western metaphysics as a logic of identity and its conception of the political [*le politique*]. Lacoue-Labarthe's rethinking of *mimesis* attempts to articulate the conceptual presuppositions that “underpin the aporetic structure of identity,” whether construed as personal identity or national identity (p. 114-115).

Here the relationship between the formative role of ideas and materiality becomes crucial: philosophy and politics are both based upon the shaping of meaning according to an originary figure (Plato's Socrates but also Marx's “proletariat”) (p. 120). Modern politics is explicable as a form of art or *techné* that attempts to *aestheticise* politics in the sense of applying a mimetic logic to the formative power of ideas (forming the people or state according to an ideal figure). Kantian aesthetic presentation is important because it marks the point of breakdown in the founding metaphysical dichotomy between the sensible and the intelligible. Heidegger, however, fails to grasp the significance of this breakdown because he displaces truth to the “field of sensuous presentation” (p. 122). This move, however, puts truth “behind the staging of appearances in figures,” presenting it as an ‘alethic’ withdrawal of a “pure and unfigured giving” (p. 122-123). Because of this unacknowledged *mimetology*, Heidegger falls prey to the “aestheticisation of politics,” taking Nazism as capable of reshaping the *Volk* in light of the historico-metaphysical confrontation with technology. Lacoue-Labarthe thus combines the deconstruction of metaphysics with a questioning of the political, taking Heidegger's “national aestheticism” to exemplify the political consequences of an unacknowledged *mimetological* thinking (pp. 123-128).

It is Jean-Luc Nancy, however, who provides the guiding figure for Ross' account of the aesthetic paths of philosophy. Like Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy also emphasises the privileged place of literature and the arts for posing the question of presentation (p. 134). Nancy's central philosophical problem—and guiding thread of Ross' study—is the “question of presentation as sense or meaning” (p. 134). His project attempts to move away from the presumption of any originary meaning, deconstructing ontology in order to show “how sense emerges from the exteriority of the senses” (p. 135). Sense emerges from the active involvement of the senses in the world, a presentation that is thematised in the work of art, understood as a “presentation of presentation” (p. 135-136).

Nancy's ontology of sense is also directed towards a confrontation with modern capital; from an ontological perspective, this becomes the problem of “what is the experience of meaning in a context of social relations in which meaning withdraws” (p. 144). Nancy's ontology thus has two aspects: a deconstruction of metaphysics for its dualism deriving from the positing of an originary point of meaning; and a critique of post-Marxist critical theories that subscribe to the “mimetic presuppositions of classical philosophy” (p. 146). The latter claim, however, is left rather underdeveloped. According to Ross, Nancy argues that post-Marxist “critical theory” posits an idealised “non-alienated community” (p. 148). Such a move, Nancy claims, presupposes a dualism between an originary community and its inauthentic manifestation. This “essentialising” claim, however, ignores the relation of “co-appearing” that undermines any dichotomy between authenticity and inauthenticity; moreover it “overlooks the insight of capital that there is any ‘other’ mode of social unity that could claim to be in tune with human nature” (p. 148). This “insight of capital” that ‘human nature’ is always historically and socially mediated is, of course, also the insight of the critique of capitalism from Marx to Adorno. Be that as it may, Nancy proffers the disappointing conclusion that all we can do is understand ourselves as moderns (p. 148); that is, inquire into the sensuous experience of the emergence of meaning in relations of exteriority (p. 149 ff.). Here Ross assumes the validity of Nancy's critique of Heidegger and

of critical theory, without explaining why these suffice as an account of the destruction of experience under conditions of modern capitalism. One could well imagine, though, a productive engagement with other critical theorists ignored in this critique (Benjamin and Adorno) or with readers of Heidegger who appropriate but also question his thinking of technology (Bernard Stiegler).

The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy provides an impressive reading of Kant and Heidegger from the perspective of Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's foregrounding of aesthetic presentation as the fundamental problem of (social) ontology. Perhaps reading the book in reverse—starting with Lacoue-Labarthe's mimetological critique of metaphysics and Nancy's ontology of sense—casts its argument in a sharper light: that the appropriation of Kantian presentation accounts for the “aesthetic steering” of modern philosophy, with all the ambivalent relations to art, technology, and politics that this appropriation entails. As Ross shows with admirable clarity, the aesthetic paths of French deconstruction, for all their detours and digressions, seem inevitably to return, albeit differently, to Kant. The question is whether these are the only paths that define the aesthetic adventures of post-Kantian thought.

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