

REVIEW

Kunst und Erfahrung: Beiträge zu einer philosophischen Kontroverse, edited by Stefan Deines, Jasper Liptow and Martin Seel. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013. 364 pp. ISBN 978-3-518-29645-5

Hans-Georg Gadamer claims in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) that the concept of experience seems “zu den unaufgeklärtesten Begriffen zu gehören, die wir besitzen.” This discouraging insight has not prevented philosophers, not even Gadamer himself, to continue to use the concept in question quite excessively. It no doubt constitutes one of the basic concepts of philosophy, ostensibly uniting analytic, continental, and pragmatist traditions. Depending on which tradition you look at, *experience* takes on different or even opposing meanings.

Adding the qualifier *aesthetic* to the main word *experience* does not help out the situation. On the contrary, being as notoriously elusive as the word *experience*, *aesthetic* increases the number of possible meanings almost exponentially, leaving readers of philosophy almost completely in the dark about the issues at stake. This confusion and the controversies that it leads to is the topic of the anthology *Kunst und Erfahrung: Beiträge zu einer philosophischen Kontroverse*, a 360-page volume edited by Stefan Deines, Jasper Liptow and Martin Seel. The three editors all belong to the Department of Philosophy at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, and they are all highly experienced in the field, with numerous publications behind them. At their side they have some of the most influential philosophers in both the German- and the English-speaking world – Noël Carroll, Jerrold Levinson, and Elisabeth Schellekens being probably the most well-known and influential contributors.

The goal of the anthology, the editors sum up in the introductory “theoretische Landkarte,” is “die aktuelle philosophische Debatte um ästhetische Erfahrung in ihrer ganzen Komplexität zugänglich zu machen” (p. 9–10). It is an ambitious task, to say the least, which is performed in fourteen essays, including a comprehensive introduction. Of these, four (by Carroll, Schellekens, James Shelley, and Nick Zangwill) consist of previously published essays which have been translated into German. A few of them are fairly old, and one, Zangwill’s, was originally published as early as 1999. Furthermore, none of the previously published contributions, except for Carroll’s essay, which has been given the revealing title

“Neuere Theorien ästhetischer Erfahrung,” originally published in 2012 in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, addresses the theme of the book more than just briefly. Also, Carroll’s text is hardly the survey it claims to be, seeing as it is mainly preoccupied with one or two contributions to the field. Zangwill’s “Kunst und Publikum,” the last of the fourteen essays, is an unfortunate addition to this otherwise excellent collection of interpretations. Zangwill sees sketches and plans of future works as well as private poetry as evidences of a non-audience-based theory of art. Neither the examples nor the counter-examples he uses to promote this theory are convincing: drafts are not taken as art until they are set in an aesthetic context (for instance, published posthumously in a critical edition) to which an audience has access, and even private poetry has an audience, though often extremely exclusive (the writer him- or herself or an ideal reader). Ultimately Zangwill reduces artistic creativity to “die Absicht, die für wertvoll gehaltenen Eigenschaften zu realisieren,” a conclusion that, according to the author, “die Handlung des Künstlers sowohl erklärt als auch gerechtfertigt” (p. 332). Zangwill’s reductive argument is blatantly at odds with the variety of means and ends that in reality inspire an individual to express him- or herself aesthetically.

For the rest of this review I will concentrate on the contributions written exclusively for the anthology, which, as it turns out, are the most rewarding texts in the entire book. Deines, Liptow, and Seel’s 30-page introduction gives a comprehensive overview of the theme of the book. They single out three different concepts of experience: a phenomenological (in the analytic tradition) one, which pertains to perception or more precisely, to “*Episoden phänomenalen Bewusstseins*” (p. 12), an epistemic one, which defines experiences as “bestimmte Akte des Wissenserwerbs” (p. 13), and an existential one, which refers to the use of the concept in the continental tradition (pp. 14–15). Also, the question of when an experience is aesthetic is given three answers. An aesthetic experience, the editors summarize, may refer to the aesthetic quality (*Qualität*), the aesthetic content (*Inhalt*) or the aesthetic form (*Form*) of the experience (pp. 17–18). Finally, before summarizing the content of the individual essays, the editors address the question of the relation between art and experience. In short, the introduction lays the groundwork for the discussions that follow.

Levinson’s essay, “Unterwegs zu einer nichtminimalistischen Konzeption ästhetischer Erfahrung” (pp. 38–60), is a response to Carroll’s influential claim – one which Carroll repeats in his own contribution – that aesthetic experience is determined by the formal qualities of the object

being observed, for instance, the rhyme scheme of a poem. Levinson, on the other hand, aims at articulating a non-minimalistic definition of aesthetic experience. To discover these formal qualities of a work of art, he argues, does not automatically mean that one has an aesthetic experience. Accordingly, he revitalizes the old idea of aesthetic attitude (*ästhetische Einstellung*), which he construes, not as some sort of mental activity, but as a disposition: “Eine ästhetische Einstellung zu haben bedeutet, *disponiert* zu sein, auf eine bestimmte Art und Weise aufmerksam zu sein, wahrzunehmen, zu reagieren oder Erfahrungen zu haben” (p. 41).

Also Matthias Vogel’s contribution, “Ästhetische Erfahrung – ein Phantom?” (pp. 91–119), constitutes a response to an influential idea, namely George Dickie’s critique of Beardsley in “Beardsley’s Phantom Aesthetic Experience” (1965). Vogel emphatically defends the notion of aesthetic experience, which “schließ[t] Akte eines Verstehens ein, die nicht im Erfassen der Bedeutung des Gegenstands der Erfahrung bestehen, sondern im Strukturieren sinnlicher Wahrnehmungen” (p. 105).

Catrin Misselhorn, in “Gibt es eine ästhetische Emotion” (pp. 120–41), focuses on aesthetic emotions. The essay is a close reading of Clive Bell’s famous book *Art* (1914), a book that has often been criticized by professional philosophers and aestheticians. Misselhorn’s reading is a heroic rehabilitation of Bell’s emotionalistic approach to art, an approach that presupposes the existence of specifically aesthetic emotions, which in turn account for the nature of art.

Also Christiane Voss, in “Der affektive Motor des Ästhetischen” (pp. 195–217), is primarily interested in the emotional aspects of experience. The experience of the cinematic medium, Voss argues, consists of a “Wechsel von affektiver Distanz und Nähe,” which constitutes “die eigentliche affektive Signatur des Kinos, die nur in der re- und dezentrierenden Wahrnehmungsteilnahme zugänglich ist” (p. 215). In that sense, the spectator’s oscillating affections are the meta-medium of cinema, as they correspond to the “bewegt-bewegenden Affekt” of the silver screen itself (p. 216).

In Jasper Liptow’s contribution, “Die Erfahrung ästhetischer Eigenschaft” (pp. 142–59), the attention shifts from the subject to the object. What defines aesthetic experiences, Liptow argues, is that they are “ausschließlich *Erfahrungen* ästhetischer *Eigenschaften*” (p. 143). Martin Seel, on the other hand, views these qualities from the point of view of the interpretative subject. His contribution, “Was geschieht hier?” (pp. 181–94), presents a condensed reading of two short scenes, together less than seven minutes long, in Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *Zabriskie Point* (1970). He

argues convincingly that what happens in these scenes is “untrennbar damit verbunden, was *uns* geschieht, wenn wir diese Sequenz[en] sehend und hörend verfolgen” (p.187). Thus, experience constitutes a necessary condition of art.

An attempt to resolve the various controversies among scholars is made by Stefan Deines, whose pluralistic perspective in “Kunstphilosophie und Kunsterfahrung” (pp.218–49) problematizes the idea that aesthetic experience is a homogeneous phenomenon, an idea that tends to overlook and reduce varieties and differences. Accordingly, acknowledging pluralism in experience – the fact that different forms of experience, even such experience that we normally would not classify as aesthetic – means that one is much more in sync with the pluralism of art.

Within the overall context of the book, Georg W. Bertram’s contribution, entitled “Ästhetische Erfahrung und die Modernität der Kunst” (pp.250–69), provides a radically different approach to the issues under consideration. Taking the point of departure in Hegel and Danto, Bertram argues that modernity is constitutive of art. Whereas Hegel and Danto construe modern art as excess spiritualization (Hegel) or excess self-reference (Danto), Bertram argues that spiritualization and self-reference, that is, modernity, is constitutive of art. Aesthetic experiences, he concludes, are determined by this modern predicament, which means that they are “so als Erfahrungen der Unselbständigkeit in der Selbständigkeit zu begreifen” (p. 264).

Eva Schürmann’s essay “Stil als Artikulation einer Haltung” (pp.296–315) introduces the concept of style, which she identifies with “die Überformung einer Darstellung durch Vorstellungen, Grundhaltungen und Sichtweisen” (p.297). Aesthetic experiences, correspondingly, constitute the process of perceiving and realizing styles of representation (*Darstellungsstile*), in which according to Schürmann “Wahrnehmungsstile zur Anschauung kommen” (p.315). As nothing can be without style, there is both a productive and a receptive side to it.

To be sure, one cannot in any way exhaust a subject as complex as aesthetic experience in merely 360 pages. Still, according to the introduction, which was quoted earlier, it was the ambition of the editors to present the philosophical debate in all its complexity. The diversity of the individual contributions, as the rudimentary summary has shown, is indeed great, and the reader is given a highly nuanced and varied picture of the theme of the book. I am especially impressed by Levinson’s critique of Carroll, by Deines’s pluralistic approach, and by Bertram’s historico-philosophical interpretation. Nevertheless, the claim of completeness

makes the absence of a number of important issues even more obvious. Here today I will only address two important subjects missing in the discussion.

As I mentioned, the introduction gives a broad picture of the number of ways one may approach the subject in question: observational, epistemic, and existential. Despite this initial acknowledgement of, for instance, pragmatist and phenomenological approaches, the contributions are all distinctly analytic. The authors refer from time to time to Dewey and Gadamer, but these references are, with only one or two exceptions (see, for instance, Voss' reading of Dewey, pp. 205–8), fairly superficial and they never affect, at least not in any significant way, the authors' perspective on the issues at stake. Thus, we cannot find the presence of either phenomenological or pragmatist analyses of the concept of experience, aesthetic or otherwise, which is unfortunate, seeing as these kinds of aesthetic analyses tend to broaden the horizon by making aesthetic experience a key to larger issues. Both in phenomenology and in pragmatism aesthetic experience signifies the nature of experience as such. Whereas the analytic approach, at least in this collection of essays, tends to reduce the scope by focusing merely on that small segment that is under consideration, phenomenology and pragmatism enable the philosopher to look at the whole range of problems that are associated with experience and that become perfectly visible in the reflections on aesthetic experience.

Furthermore, all of the contributions are almost without exception preoccupied with the receptive side of experience, excluding the productive side. Thus, the concept of experience is reduced to a passive, non-creative faculty. The artist's experience, on the other hand, has to do with the production of the work of art. The absence of this particular perspective is most unfortunate, seeing as it would most likely contribute positively to the understanding of receptive experience. Several of the contributions deal with what is called aesthetic qualities (*ästhetische Eigenschaften*), which, despite the endeavor put into the attempt to describe the essence of these qualities, remain elusive. Thinking about how the artist's aesthetic experience permeates and defines the work of art would help philosophers understand how aesthetic qualities arise and thus determine our reception of them. At first Eva Schürmann's essay on style seems to be an exception, since style is a concept that primarily pertains to the work of the artist rather than to the spectator's perception. Still, Schürmann associates experience not with the work of art but with the "Realisationsmodus für das Werk [...] im Erfahrungsvollzug

eines Rezipienten verwirklicht sich etwas, indem eine dargetellt Sicht zur Auffassung gelangt" (p. 309). In other words, as soon as the question of experience arises, the artist's labor is forgotten.

Thus, despite the variety that signifies the individual contributions and that proves to be highly satisfying, the analytic tenor that epitomizes the compilation as a whole sadly limits the scope. Each and every essay, with the exception of Zangwill's flawed contribution, provides convincing interpretations of important aesthetic issues, though not everyone, especially not the previously published texts, discusses the concept of experience. Yet, put together the vessel tips to one side, due to the lack of radically different views and convictions. Thus, I can highly recommend the book but at the same time strongly urge readers to turn elsewhere for supplementary interpretations of this vital issue of philosophy.

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