

Review

Aesthetics of Presence: Philosophical and Practical Reconsiderations

Willmar Sauter

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The core idea of Willmar Sauter's book is that we might be able to get a better idea of what constitutes profound experiences of presence and beauty if we take our starting point from the early theories on philosophical aesthetics from the last half of the eighteenth century. In particular, Sauter offers perspectives from Baumgarten, Rousseau, Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Schiller as relevant for his aesthetic reconsiderations. The proposition is that these early theories of aesthetics have a greater understanding and sensibility to the part of the *beholder* in the aesthetic experience, than the established canon from the turn of the nineteenth century from German idealism and early romanticism and forwards. Kant and Hegel are mentioned as the main culprits who turn aesthetics away from the beholder and towards the aesthetic object, and with Hegel towards art in particular. Therefore, Sauter argues, the earlier theories (including Schiller who was greatly inspired by Kant) retain a broader contemporary relevance because they had not yet restricted the field of aesthetics to the experience of art. In that regard, they are arguably more adequate to capture the aesthetics of a broad range of cultural phenomena – from hiking in the Sápmi area, to participating in a city festival, to discovering the beauty of an archaeological finding, to attending a theatre performance or pondering complex media phenomena. Sauter demonstrates a connection between the eighteenth-century connoisseurship of great spirits such as Mendelssohn and Goethe and the contemporary broad pursuit for memorable experiences of presence and beauty by the educated middle class.

The book is well structured, starting with the introduction of two examples in a short prologue before moving on to a rich and interesting account of the favoured eighteenth-century aesthetic

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thinkers in part 1. In part 2, Sauter provides a useful theoretical model that extends and combines some of his earlier, well-known models of analysis, and he offers some methodological advice, especially on how to take the audience into account in empirical studies. In part 3, Sauter applies his perspective on four very different cases that have already been introduced as a frame of reference in the earlier chapters. The epilogue reflects on the relevance of concepts such as beauty and the sublime for contemporary aesthetic analysis.

The book is also well written. You find yourself in the company of a well-read scholar and a very experienced educator and connoisseur, who shares his detailed insights into a number of different fields. He communicates complicated theoretical issues in a useful and clear way, and most notably, he is able to make the situations and people he describes – from Mendelsohn to the clouds over Padjelanta – present to the reader. As a well-established and now retired professor, Sauter can also let go of some of the most impeding forms of academic rigour and allow himself to state what is on his mind without needing to constantly prove his knowledge or indulge in esoteric and short-sighted theoretical polemics.

At some points though, I find that he goes too far in relaxing his academic rigour, as when he states: “Concerning definitions: I am against any of those attempts! Without exception, it turns out that definitions cover too little – necessary phenomena that will not be included – or they cover too much so that everything fits in and nothing is distinguished. At least this is the case in the humanities, according to my scholarly experience” (p. 155). If Sauter’s core discussions about the difference between a reception-oriented and a production-oriented aesthetics or the difference between performing and pretending are not questions of definition, I do not know what is? Most definitions fall short one way or another, especially outside their context, but without definitions, academic discourse would be unintelligible. I think Sauter knows that very well, so not only is the premise of the argument cheap (“according to my scholarly experience”), the proposition also seems to be insincere.

Furthermore, the case studies in part three would have been much more interesting, if Sauter had applied his analytical parameters from part two more rigorously. Especially in the very complex Anna Odell case, Sauter keeps circling around the moral failure of the by-passers on the bridge on which Anna Odell re-enacted her suicide attempt and his disappointment with the judge who sentenced Odell for fraudulent behaviour. Instead, Sauter could have made clear distinctions between the events at the bridge, the media scandal, the art installation, and the legal “drama”, and shown how these different placements of the event creates different situations for the beholder, different constellations of performing, and different types of play. It is again too cheap when he excuses the analytical trouble he is in with stating that he hosted an international symposium in 2009 with the presence of very senior profiles (who did not experience the installation), and sums up the conclusion that “no theoretical model was able to fully describe what happened on the bridge” (p. 152). Theoretical models never provide exhaustive accounts of anything, but Sauter’s model does have the potential of explaining much more than it does in his book had he used it more rigorously. The Professor should demonstrate his scholarly authority through his analytical rigour instead of bolstering it with these kinds of anecdotes. The charitable reader and colleague will be lenient towards Sauter using his well-earned freedom, but it does affect the academic integrity of the book, and this in turn compromises its usefulness as a textbook to read with students.

On another level, I have some discussion points that go more to the content of the general argument. First of all, I find that even though skipping the canon of early nineteenth-century aesthetics does provide a fresh point of view, I think the contention that aesthetics from Kant and forward are primarily object centred “production aesthetics” is a little too bold. Sauter provides a lengthy quote from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (orig. 1790) in order to show us how Kant’s philosophy according to Sauter leads to an idea of aesthetics where “the object contains beauty and the beholder is encouraged to learn how to appreciate it” (p. 50). In the accounts of Kant that I am familiar with, the point is exactly that the aesthetic judgment remains suspended in the play between the object and the subject, and that the aesthetic judgment only gains its ‘objectivity’ by recourse to an idea of an intersubjective common taste (*sensus communis*). Through this antinomy between objective and subjective judgment, the aesthetic experience establishes relations, not only between the subject and the object, but also between the subject and other subjects. The important lesson from Kant is not that the aesthetic experience is bound

to the object, but that the subjective aesthetic judgment transcends the individual experience towards what we today would describe as a social field. When Sauter describes his sudden and strong feeling of connection to Ötzi, a man who has been dead for 5000 years, through the experience of the beauty of Ötzi's coat, this is exactly what is at stake in the same passage in the *Critique of Judgment* that Sauter uses to dismiss Kantian aesthetics.

This leads me to my second more principal reservation: I find that the consequence of Sauter's choice here is that the social dimension of aesthetics is downplayed. It is not that he totally disregards it, he mentions the importance of his companionship with friends and his partner in almost all the examples he provides, he also gives advice about empirical audience research, and he mentions Bourdieu's ideas of social distinction in relation to his discussion of the Bloomsday festival in Dublin. He shows concern about antisemitism, solidarity with the Sámi people, and awareness of gender representation. He even makes a few nods in the direction of post-humanist thinking. But then again, the theoretical framework and the case discussions are almost exclusively centred on questions about the individual appreciation of moments of presence in rather privileged situations. No matter if he takes us to the South Bank of the Thames in the 1970s together with his then new partner to experience an exceptional moment in a production of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, or he takes us to the mountains of Padjelenta with his wife and friends to experience the wonders of "nature", or we encounter the more than 5000-year-old coat of Ötzi in a museum in Bolzano, there is a kind of *tourist gaze* running through all the examples in the book: The hunt for the exceptional and memorable moment of presence by the restless, privileged, educated middle class person. I also recognise my own position in this "tourist gaze", I am in fact more than familiar with it, and my point is not that the employment of this makes Sauter's perspective less relevant. Perhaps quite the contrary: this could be exactly what the current generation of workers and consumers in the experience economy need. Or for that matter, the educated middle-class person who like to think of Goethe and Mendelsohn as their spiritual contemporaries. The question is, however, whether the limits of this particular privileged situation should be stated, challenged, and if possible transcended? Simply embracing it makes the book oddly out of tune with the social and political commitments in much contemporary aesthetic theory, for example by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Jacques Rancière, or Juliane Rebentisch.

Sauter has chosen not to recount or discuss his position in relation to such contemporary theoretical developments in this book, neither within aesthetic theory in general nor within theatre studies. At some points, I wish he had, as when he describes how the performance *Antigones Diary* (2011) suddenly made him realize that theatrical presence could be mediated – something that has been a heated discussion of theatre studies at least since the 1990s with Philip Auslander as one of the most notable proponents of exactly that point of view and Peggy Phelan and Erika Fischer-Lichte as notable proponents of the opposite. I am sure Sauter knows these discussions very well, but his own realization is presented as something that just immediately jumped out of the experience in 2011. At other points, I am just curious to know how he envisages his own theoretical position in relation to similar or alternative contemporary positions like the ones I have mentioned.

Had he chosen to do so, it would have become another book, but perhaps not a better book? It would have risked digressing into polemics or definitions instead of providing a fresh connection between eighteenth-century thinking and twenty-first-century aesthetic experience. All reservations aside, he actually manages to do this in a compelling, present, and thought-provoking way. The book lends itself both to the development of methodologies of analysis of contemporary aesthetic experiences in contexts of experience economy, general education, and participatory cultures, and to renewed readings and discussions of the rich heritage of thinking from the eighteenth century.