

Book review

Bert Olivier. 2009. *Philosophy and the Arts: Collected Essays*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
Bert Olivier. 2009. *Philosophy and Communication: Collected Essays*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
Bert Olivier. 2009. *Philosophy and Psychoanalytic Theory: Collected Essays*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

The quality of Bert Olivier's research and the range of his interests is considerable. He is a philosopher with three main interests, as the volumes under discussion prove: the arts, psychoanalytic theory and communication. The synopses of the cited volumes are available on the Peter Lang Publishing websites and will not be repeated here. Instead, the focus will be on the first volume, *Philosophy and the Arts*.

What is art? This is a seemingly unanswerable question, since the debate in which art historians, philosophers and lay people alike incessantly participate leaves all those of us who make a living by practising, teaching or theorising about art more and more bewildered. It is to his credit that Olivier regularly takes stock of the art world and attempts to give us lucid answers to perplexing questions regarding art. He is a man of enormous erudition and has the ability to argue a much discussed subject with an original outcome. It is therefore rewarding to engage with Olivier and that is what I will attempt to do in an appreciation of the essay "Beauty, ugliness, the sublime, and truth in art" (Chapter 10 in *Philosophy and the Arts*).

This essay starts with a quotation from Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in which Sabina, one of the characters who moved from communist Czechoslovakia to the West, discovered that all over the planet music has been transformed into noise and that beauty will likewise disappear from the planet. Olivier then quotes Jean-François Leotard who rejected the question about beauty and, instead, turned the attention to the aesthetic of the sublime. Olivier ponders this by wondering "why this should be the case ... especially if one associates art primarily with the creation of beautiful things or artifacts". The anonymous person ("one") who is stuck with this idea is advised to substitute Leotard's of "de-realization" and the logic of modernity that has been characterised by "destructive creation".

Following Olivier's argument supports the argument that the aesthetic of the sublime "makes us experience (see, hear) the world in a manner that is different from conventionally approved ways of looking and listening". After a self-acknowledged digression "on the recent, tragic history of modernity to illustrate just how difficult it is to speak cogently of 'beauty' a legitimate ideal in art or aesthetics today", Olivier states, after quotes from Richard Kearney, Kant, Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, Andrea Hurst, Lacan and his own work: "With all this in mind, it is not at all surprising that art cannot, today, in a modernist fashion, still be *restricted* to the aesthetic sphere ... as an art of the beautiful." The multi-voiced argument leads Olivier to the insight that "the kind of aesthetic valid for the present era is that of the sublime". This era with its ever-increasing complexity have found "innovative ways of employing form and formlessness, for the sake of alluding to the ineffable...", or, "by invoking as a felicitous phrase used by Andrea Hurst, to wit: 'to bring chaos and cosmos together' in a paradoxical manner".

Near the end of his essay Olivier repeats that "The world of the twenty-first century has become irretrievably complex, and only an aesthetic of the sublime [that unity of paradoxes] ... can adequately account for it". To arrive at that insight that I as reviewer have greatly simplified, Olivier guides the reader through a labyrinth of philosophical and aesthetic views that corrects Sabina's insight of more than two decades ago that "'Beauty by mistake' [is] the final phase in the history of beauty". He sees in art such as that of Goldsworthy "the invocation of an aesthetic of the sublime, predicated, not on the complete abandonment of beauty or its

affirmation in specific contexts (what Sabine calls 'beauty by mistake'), but on the ineluctable truth that instances of beauty, and of ugliness (as characterised in this article) have to be – in fact, cannot *but* be – seen in relation to a history of art and of social as well as political (including military) events on a global scale – events that have ruled out both innocence regarding beauty as well as its artificial and cynical manipulation in the form of kitsch, for the sake of capitalist gain.”

If Sabina would have felt less gloomy about the world which she predicted was heading towards a state of total ugliness if she had read the above quotation remains a question to be pondered.

In conclusion, it is a pleasure to say that the volume on the arts is a thoroughly professional and substantial collection of essays that suggests new lines of investigation to art historians and art theorists. This book is recommended reading for art historians, aestheticians, artists and art students.

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