Review of “Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art, An Introduction”

Elmer H. Duncan
Baylor University

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Recommended Citation
This may seem an odd way to start, but permit two observations. First, the back cover of my copy of this book has the claim that …”Stecker introduces readers to the history and evolution of aesthetics…” I do not wish to deny this; the book certainly shows that we have a new generation of aestheticians. I think of the names of the major figures who were studied in my first courses in the field: John Dewey, Van Meter Ames, Max Dessoir, Thomas Munro, S. C. Pepper…none of these names appear in Stecker’s book (at least, I do not recall them, and they are not in his Index or his List of References). Monroe Beardsley’s work is discussed -- though he died in 1985 (but then, there was only one Monroe Beardsley) -- so perhaps the claim is not too far off the mark. But the book is primarily a rather technical discussion of the problems of aesthetics, not a history of them.

Second, I have to confess that I am not as impressed as some people are by the “beauties of nature.” I wish I were; I feel I miss a lot, much as I regret having a poor “ear” for music. But we all have to recognize that sunsets, mountains (even people, sometimes) can be beautiful, just as we say that art works (paintings, sculpture, etc.) are beautiful. Does this make those sunsets works of art? It would seem strange to say that. For this reason, Stecker distinguishes between ‘aesthetics’ which, in his usage, is the study of a certain kind of value (obviously, aesthetic value) and the ‘philosophy of art.’ The latter is thus, for him, a much larger field, taking up such questions as “What is art?” or What is the importance, if any, of the artist’s intention? Does it matter whether or not the art work has an ethical message? (Is Uncle Tom’s Cabin a better novel because it opposes domestic slavery?), etc.

This distinction, between ‘aesthetics’ and ‘the philosophy of art’ dictates the structure of the book. Thus a helpful Introduction is followed by three chapters on “aesthetics,” i. e. chapters on “Natural Beauty,” “Aesthetic Experience,” and “Aesthetic Properties.” As might have been expected, we then have eight (note the larger number) chapters on “The Philosophy of Art.” They cover the usual topics: “What is Art?”, art and ontology (what sort of thing is a work of art, or are art works things at all?, the interpretation of art, art as the expression of emotion, art and ethics, aesthetic value (again). Prof. Strecker adds a chapter on architecture as art, clearly a special interest of the author.

These cannot all be covered in a single review, so permit brief discussions of just two topics. First, note that the question seems to change from “What is Art?” (one of his chapter titles) to “Can ‘art’ be defined?” and then to “What makes something art?” or perhaps even “How does something become a work of art?” The author follows Jerrold Levinson in arguing that art must be understood historically. It is the way a thing is related to certain other things, historically (or the role they play in history) that
makes it art. Stecker differs from Levinson in that, for Levinson, it is the artist’s intention, in the last analysis, which is crucial. Stecker opts, instead, for what he calls “historical functionalism.” That is, he finds crucial the role the work played in history (its function sounds a bit like Aristotle, doesn’t it?), rather than the artist’s intention.

Another topic of interest (to me, at least) is: how is ethical, or moral, value related to aesthetic, or artistic, value? Or is it? Most aestheticians, dating back to Oscar Wilde, and perhaps earlier, say simply that it isn’t. Moral value is one kind of thing, aesthetic value quite another. But as Noel Carroll has demonstrated -- often, and at great length -- critics, especially literary critics, persist in judging art works on moral grounds. How is this practice to be justified, or are these critics, however great their numbers, simply mistaken? Strecker’s answer is that values often interact with other values. Thus the fact that a given novel is smut tends to support the verdict that it is also artistically bad. And sometimes the fact that a work has a high moral value can add to its aesthetic value. Does this happen? This would seem to be a matter each reader could judge empirically on their own.

Finally, if readers find my review less than fully satisfactory, they can read the author’s own discussion of his work in the “Teaching Aesthetics: From the Author’s Perspective section of the Summer, 2007 issue of the American Society for Aesthetics Newsletter. There Stecker suggests that his book can be used as a “stand alone” text, but probably would be better used with an anthology. Perhaps, though I think there are so many of the relevant papers online that there is a certain value in requiring the students to dig them out on their own. At any rate, he suggests the anthologies by Matthew Kieran or Neill and Ridley. If an anthology is to be used, I would prefer Lamarque and Olsen’s Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art, the Analytic Tradition, an Anthology.

In any case, Stecker has produced a useful and provocative book, and I feel honored to have this chance to recommend it.

Elmer H. Duncan
Baylor University