Review of “The Pursuit of Comparative Aesthetics: An Interface Between East and West”

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This book is a collection of thirteen essays that focus on the analysis and comparison of philosophical aesthetic issues and themes of China, Japan, and India with those of the West. The geographical emphases of the essays is evenly split with four of them predominantly relating western aesthetics with Indian, four with Chinese, and four with Japanese (and the remaining essay more broadly Asian). Many of the essays highlight aesthetic concerns that are historically centered, accentuating the themes and issues of Aristotle, Schopenhauer, Kant, etc.

Besides dividing the essays in terms of geographical emphases, the volume is organized around three other foci. The first four essays (by Chantal Maillard, Moon-hwan Kim, Keijo Virtanen, and Ramendra Kumar Sen) all center around the broad notion of the nature of the aesthetic experience, including aesthetic appreciation, aesthetic pleasure, and purification (the latter being related to, but not identical with, Aristotelian catharsis).

The middle group of essays (by Wang Keping, Karl-Heinz Pohl, Herbert Mainusch, and Hsin Kwan-chue) focuses on the nature and level of influence between Chinese and Western aesthetics. The final group of essays (by Mara Miller, Yuriko Saito, Allen Casebier, Peter Leech, and Mark Meli) zeroes in on the social and moral meaning of images (for example, by investigating the meaning of landscapes).

In addition to a geographical emphasis and an emphasis on the three broad concerns just noted, the essays contained here collectively wrestle with some very general philosophical issues (though in the form of aesthetics), such as the nature and understanding of difference(s) and similarity, of (in)commensurability, as well as the very notion of cultural traditions and how they are manifested (in this case, in art and aesthetics). So, this volume is very rich for a number of reasons and it is certainly to be recommended for the aesthetics scholar or for someone teaching comparative philosophy.

Because of the understandably limited focus of the book (there is only so much comparison that even thirteen essays can accomplish!), it would be difficult for this volume to be a primary text in, say, a course in the philosophy of art. The nature of the essays is also such that the book does not directly address many of the kinds of issues that western philosophers of art focus on. For example, although (as noted above) there are several essays that highlight matters of the nature of aesthetic experience, they do not really address this issue in ways that western philosophers of art often or usually do: by asking how an aesthetic experience is like or unlike other experience, or by asking if an aesthetic experience can have a truth value (could we be wrong about the object of our aesthetic experience?), or by asking if an
aesthetic experience is the result of cognitive understanding (e.g., would an aesthetic experience of a work of art differ because the agent had certain information and knowledge about the artist’s intentions vs. if the agent didn’t have such knowledge), etc. It is not a fault of this volume that it does not focus on these sorts of questions and issues, but these are the types of concerns of much of contemporary philosophy of art, at least in the west.

Likewise, the overwhelming emphasis of the essays in this volume is on visual arts. Again, only so much can possibly be covered in a single volume, but what readers will not get is much (or none at all) discussion of film, dance, architecture, theater, photography, drama, etc. This is too bad (though, again, understandable), as there could be very fruitful elaboration and elucidation of the book’s topics by an analysis and appreciation of these other art forms. For example, with the focus on the social and moral meaning of images, clearly images can be, and are, generated not merely in the visual arts, but via movement (e.g., dance), words (e.g., drama), etc. Even landscapes can be portrayed artistically in the mediums of sounds (e.g., Grieg’s “Morning Song” from the Peer Gynt suite) or landscape architecture, and not “simply” via paintings. Even more obviously, the nature of aesthetic experience will, at least in some respects, be cashed out quite differently in terms of listening to music vs. watching a film, or actively participating in a production vs. “merely” passively observing one, etc.

Finally, there seems to be less comparative analysis of contemporary philosophy of art than of “classical” aesthetics. For instance, though several essays discuss Kant or Aristotle, and several essays discuss “classical” aesthetic issues of, say, beauty or pleasure, there is very little discussion of contemporary philosophers of art or of what contemporary philosophers of art have to say even about beauty or pleasure, not to mention what they have to say about other aesthetic topics.

While these remarks no doubt sound harshly critical, they are not intended as so. The book is a very fine collection of fecund and often provocative work. Individually, each essay provides a useful analysis and explanation of connections between Western and Eastern aesthetics. Collectively, the book has structure and form that makes the essays that much more fruitful and valuable, especially for those readers who are unfamiliar with the nonwestern traditions that are covered here. The book is a fine intellectual feast, but it leaves the reader wishing for more, along the lines of the various concerns mentioned above.

There are almost no similar books available, but there are some that are tangential. For instance, Robert Wilkinson (one of this book’s editors) has his own New Essays in Comparative Aesthetics (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007). Two authors, from earlier generations, who did produce work in this area are Eliot Deutsch and George Lansing Raymond. A relatively recent work on Deutsch is Roger Ames’ The Aesthetic Turn: Reading Eliot Deutsch on Comparative Philosophy (Open Court, 1999). There is also Steve Odin’s Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West (University of Hawaii Press, 2001). None of these works, however, are direct “competitors” to this present volume of essays.

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