

Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines: A Review

Lenka Lee

Ryynänen, Max and Zoltán Somhegyi (2023) *Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines*. 1st ed. Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated.



I would like to begin this review with a preface: my forthcoming comments will be open, personal, and somewhat unconventional, mirroring the distinctive and candid nature of the book under examination. Although my task was to write a straightforward review, I found myself deeply inspired by the ideas and styles of the various authors discussing the relationship between aesthetics and other disciplines. As a result, I spent more time on the text than I initially intended. I mention this to explain why I am submitting my review one year after publishing the book *Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines*. This book was released as part of Rowman & Littlefield's *Global Aesthetic Research* series, which highlights innovative research in aesthetics.

When writing any text, it is essential to consider the model audience. In the case of ESPES, this audience includes fellow aestheticians from around the world (though I am unsure how many there might be), individuals interested in culture with some *Vorverständnis*, and perhaps those who have already read the book or casual internet flaneurs. This is the audience I have in mind as I write this review.

Editors Max Rynnänen and Zoltán Somhegyi flatter aestheticians in the opening line of *An Introduction to Aesthetics and Its Companions* with the information that

In Aesthetic Science, Alexander Wragge-Morley shows how the pioneering work of the natural scientists of the seventeenth century Royal Society of London was not just actively visualised but based essentially on aesthetic principles (Rynnänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 1).

After all, the natural sciences have historically been competitors – and often outright adversaries – of the humanities! But, as we can see, according to some scholars, they are influenced by aesthetic principles. Therefore, the Humanities versus Nature Studies score is 1:0. Hooray!

Unfortunately, this is one of the few positive aspects this book offers. It explores the relationship between aesthetics and related fields such as art history, curating, philosophy, etc. The twelve authors of the various essays suggest that the connection among these disciplines is somewhat distant – similar to older siblings who look down on their younger counterparts with a mix of condescension and disdain.

The editors refer to these other disciplines as companions of aesthetics. Latin would probably use the word *socius*, meaning partner or mate. At the same time, Czech has a colloquial term, *kumpán*, which describes a lively companion with whom one enjoys a good time, often shared with others and typically accompanied by alcoholic beverages.¹ However I encountered the English word *wingnut* (a mentally unsound person), which “one scholar of cultural studies said when she heard that an aesthetician was going to join a research project” (Rynnänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 2). Aesthetics is often an underdog in areas where it is needed and is institutionally weak, although it is inherently a part of many scholarly traditions. The editors, therefore, call for interdisciplinary inquiry and collaboration with other disciplines, as aesthetics is a clearly defined discipline (although it’s not generally known): “A higher level of reflection - this is what we call philosophy - meets applied thinking and studies of material(s). (...) Aesthetics bridges, clashes and provokes thinking” (Rynnänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 4).

In our previous discussion, we focused on the audience of a book review. Now, let’s clarify the definition of a book review itself. After conducting thorough research, I returned to Wikipedia, which defines a book review as follows: “A book review (or book report) is a form of criticism in which a book is

¹ The etymology of the word *companion* is as follows: Companion comes from Middle English and Anglo-French, originating from Late Latin *companiono*. The prefix *com-* in companion means *with*, while the latter part derives from the Latin word *panis*, meaning bread or food.

analysed based on content, style, and merit. It is often carried out in periodicals, as school work, or online” (Wikipedia, 2024). Based on this description we can summarize that *Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines* examines aesthetics as a unifying framework across diverse academic fields, advocating for its interdisciplinary value beyond traditional artistic confines. The book highlights aesthetics’ integral role in evolutionary biology, environmental studies, urban planning, and political theory, illustrating its relevance in interpreting scientific and cultural phenomena.

In science, aesthetics is not just a tool for visual representation; it also serves as a framework for understanding scientific inquiry. Early scientists, particularly those influenced by the Royal Society, regarded nature as a divine creation, believing that beauty and order were integral to empirical study. This perspective highlights the role of aesthetics as an interpretive lens in scientific analysis.

Evolutionary aesthetics explores how beauty influences mate selection, proposing that aesthetic preferences play a significant role in species development. This theory connects aesthetics to both biological and cultural evolution, highlighting how our aesthetic choices help shape human identity and societal norms. Additionally, this section discusses the role of female agency in aesthetic choice and its impact on species, particularly through concepts such as ornamentation.

Environmental humanities explore the role of aesthetics in connecting people to the natural world. Concepts like Arnold Berleant’s *aesthetics of engagement* highlight the importance of immersive environmental experiences, promoting active participation instead of passive observation. This approach encourages a continuous relationship between humans and nature, challenging traditional boundaries and fostering greater ecological awareness.

Architecture and urban aesthetics demonstrate the influence of aesthetic considerations on city planning and building design. In urban environments, aesthetics shape sensory experiences and contribute to liveability and community coherence. This work explores the relationship between architecture, utility, and beauty, highlighting their impact on human well-being.

In politics, aesthetics intertwines with ideologies and societal values. Artistic symbolism is frequently employed to either support or challenge political narratives. Historical examples include fascist art in Italy and Nazi Germany, where aesthetics played a crucial role in shaping national identities. Contemporary political aesthetics reflect modern nationalist movements, emphasizing how cultural symbols convey ideological messages.

Philosophical aesthetics and art history examine the role of aesthetics in the evolution of art. They trace its foundations in classical texts and explore how these ideas have been reinterpreted in modern aesthetics. Thinkers like Alexander Baumgarten and Charles Batteux framed aesthetics as a structured field of study, rooted in classical principles, which laid the groundwork for contemporary theories of beauty and taste.

However, I would also like to share ideas from the text that I find provocative, personal, and alarming and that call for active engagement in the spirit of Adrian Kvokačka's slogan, *Make aesthetics great again*, quoted in Ryyänen and Somhegyi (2023, p. 130). Some themes are repeated in several texts. Literature is cited as an important source of aesthetics, the 'disinterested interest' of Kantian beauty is revisited, and interest in the work of art connects the humanities and the natural sciences; aesthetics is somehow everywhere and, at the same time, invisible. It also mentions the polarity of the world influenced by biological, social, cultural and economic worlds, the division into *I* (or *we*) and *they* (without any attempt at dialogue, so *you* is left out).

Wendy Steiner associates aesthetics, beauty, and the idea of freedom and equality with the feminine element. In contrast, the rejection of excessive ornament is associated with male modernists and their misogynistic attitudes. The objectification of women and the violence they face can lead to a decrease in offspring in future generations. Research in ornithology indicates that many female birds have developed (biological) adaptations to avoid rape or forced fertilization. The result is that for species where nearly forty per cent of all copulations are violently coerced, only between two and five per cent of ducklings result from extra-pair matings (Ryyänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 17).

As far as art is concerned, according to Steiner, art stages sexual selection as a virtual event that can be repeated in various forms throughout life. She sees music, dance, visual art and literature as manifestations of courtship out of season, that is, out of biological necessity, thus linking pleasure to culture rather than biological conditioning.

In a text on humanistic environmentalism, among other things, **Mami Aota** talks about rethinking the boundaries of *self* and *other*. *Ecology* here is seen as overcoming the dichotomy between subject and object. The boundaries between self and environment are overcome. When we overcome the dualism that suggests humans are the subject and nature is the object, we change from environmental spectators to ecological agents (Ryyänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 31), something we know from Berleant's aesthetics of engagement.

Tyrus Miller and **Mateusz Salwa** clarify that architecture and urban studies are distinct disciplines, each relating to aesthetics uniquely and confronting different challenges. Architecture's ties to *technē* and the mechanical arts, along with Hegel's characterization of it as dealing with "heavy matter, shapeable only according to the laws of gravity" (Ryyänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 51), have hindered its consistent recognition as a subject of philosophical inquiry. In contrast, urban aestheticians argue that philosophy has focused too much on architecture, neglecting the broader concept of *metrosophy* (Ryyänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 59), encompassing a wide range of cultural, economic, environmental, political, social, and aesthetic issues. Urban aesthetics is also linked to two intertwined sub-disciplines, namely environmental aesthetics and everyday aesthetics, because the perception and experience of the city are through its images, sounds, inhabitants, smells,

visitors, houses, markets and sidewalks, the colour of the sky, history, memories etc.

In his essay on politics, **Karl Axelson** turns to Shaftesbury and his dual conception of pleasure:

The difference between the pleasure we get ('the enjoyment of the prospect') from contemplation of a 'delicious vale' and the pleasure we gain from 'property or possessions of the land' is real and true, and to be 'charmed' with the beauty of a tree and to rest in its shade is not the same as satisfying a strong appetite by consuming its fruits. (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 80)

then he discusses fascism and Nazism, which he refers to as ideological distortions. He shows that both Hitler and Mussolini were aware of the political significance of art and that they perceived the crowd, which is characterized by irrationality, instincts and emotions, as a feminine principle, to which they adapted their performance by working with psychological manipulation.

The chapter on philosophy by **Joseph Tanke** recalls Baumgarten's justification of phenomena that are not *clarae et distinctae* but instead *confusae et obscurae*, and it revisits the ideas of several key authors: Kant, who discusses the concept of disinterest; Schiller, who proposes an aesthetic education that emphasizes a playful impulse and artistic creation; Schopenhauer, who presents a vision of aesthetic experience as a means of liberation; and Nietzsche, who justifies existence through aesthetics. Philosophical aesthetics based on Baumgarten's research and the concept of the fine arts are the main topics of **Oiva Kuisma's** chapter *Aesthetics and the Classical Tradition*.

Max Ryynänen's text, as the subtitle *On the Relationship between a Small Discipline and Her Bully Big Brother* suggests, is very personal and recalls an incident that mirrors certainly not only my personal experience in the academic world: when he contradicted a colleague from cultural studies about the beginning of scholarly interest in rap music and cited multiple sources from the field of aesthetics:

My colleague nodded her head, but she did not comment on what I said – in a way that made me feel uncomfortable and dismissed. What I said did probably not matter, as it came from the wrong source, from one of the marginal ghettos of the academy, called aesthetics. (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 126)

The text critiques the relationship between cultural studies and aesthetics, arguing that cultural studies should abandon its self-victimizing stance and acknowledge its dominance in academia. The author notes that cultural studies often portray aesthetics as detached or elitist, which is misleading. Scholars from Western centres, such as London, can sometimes approach regions like Eastern Europe with a patronizing attitude that overlooks their unique contexts. Ryynänen advocates for a greater appreciation of aesthetics within cultural studies, highlighting that it offers a complex theoretical approach that can deepen analyses. Key figures in cultural studies, like Dick Hebdige, have shown the relevance of aesthetics in understanding popular

culture. The text envisions an integration of cultural studies and aesthetic theory, which could lead to a more holistic understanding of cultural phenomena and encourage recognition of contributions from non-Anglophone scholars and traditions.

Zoltán Somhegyi claims that aesthetics complements art history by offering theoretical insights that deepen our understanding of art's significance. Both disciplines aim to interpret art, though aesthetics focuses more on theory, while art history examines context and development. The author rails against the disrespect for art criticism, which, far from being “as ‘intellectual’ and ‘heavyweight’ as academic art history or aesthetics” (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 150), in fact, brings art closer to a wider audience.

Jacob Lund's chapter *An Exercise in Metamorphosis. Aesthetics of the Curatorial* resonated greatly with my practical interests because it shows how the curatorial work creates experiences that actively engage audiences, prompting reflection on social and political realities. Curatorial aesthetics emphasizes participatory appreciation rather than viewing art purely in a visual context.

Paul Duncum shows that art education throughout the 20th century strived to teach students to appreciate beauty in the fine arts! Only over time did the field become interested in the artistic preferences of its audience, and aesthetics in art education has evolved from this obsolete focus on fine art appreciation to encompass everyday aesthetics, reflecting changes in cultural values and art forms.

Lisa Gombini's final essay on musicology basically summarizes these previously mentioned pains as well as perspectives and recommendations for the future: There is a divide between philosophical aesthetics and practical music studies, with musicologists often sceptical of aesthetic theory. Bridging these perspectives could enhance both disciplines, providing a fuller understanding of music's emotional and cultural impact.

In conclusion, aesthetics plays a vital role across various fields by enhancing our understanding of human experiences through reflective, experiential, and ethical dimensions. This integration across disciplines underscores aesthetics as both a study of beauty and a valuable framework for interdisciplinary inquiry. As the author of this review, I would recommend *Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines* to anyone considering or beginning a deeper study of aesthetics. It shows in an erudite but at the same time frank and open way the problems of this discipline, which, although still often overlooked with disdain or with an exalted gesture of ‘well, well, that aesthetics...’, assists with its conceptual apparatus and elaborate structure many other disciplines in the humanities and natural sciences. New followers of our field need to realize that they are joining a society on the fringes, but one that has the potential to emancipate itself and go from being an overlooked dwarf to a recognized giant.

References:

Ryynänen, M. (2023) *Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines*. 1st ed. Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated.

Wikipedia (2024) 'Review', *Wikipedia*. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Review&oldid=1238412103> (Accessed: 31 December 2024).

Lenka Lee

Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts

Department of Aesthetics

Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno (Czech Republic)

lenka.lee@phil.muni.cz

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14772590