

BOOK REVIEW

Pre-review copy: *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.76:4, December (1998):
pp.647-649

Colin Lyas, *Aesthetics: Fundamentals of Philosophy* (London: University College London, 1997) pp.xii, 239, A\$75.00 (cloth), A\$26.95 (paper).

The aim of this book is to promote understanding and enjoyment of the arts. With this aim in mind, Lyas introduces the key issues of philosophical aesthetics through examples drawn from high and popular culture, and from a variety of art forms, from music and painting to literature and poetry. The book is pitched as a springboard into undergraduate courses in aesthetics and as an introduction to philosophical aesthetics for the general reader.

It is refreshing to read a book on aesthetics written by someone for whom problems in aesthetics are more than just grist for the academic mill. That this is the case shows not only in his choice of examples but also in the perspective he brings to them. Lyas argues, for example, that one must feel the merit of the work for oneself; rather than simply, as he puts it, assuming 'that certain things are worth studying ("in the canon" as they put it)' and then performing 'various classificatory dances round them' (p.75). The question for appreciation, he reminds us, is why those things in the canon deserve to be there. According to Lyas, teaching aesthetics is not simply a matter of imparting a body of knowledge to the student. Instead, the teacher's role is to develop capacities in the student for an appreciative experiencing (p.131).

While I commend the aims of this book and the spirit in which it is written, I felt uneasy about Lyas' continual slide between the meaning of the terms art and the aesthetic. In particular, his post-modern treatment of the aesthetic as a cultural convention implicitly leads to the understanding, mistaken in my view, that all responses to artworks are aesthetic by definition. Many apparent disagreements in contemporary philosophical aesthetics can be seen to be based on this assumption because in many cases when aestheticians discuss the aesthetic they are not all talking about the same thing. Lyas' only attempt to actually identify the nature of the aesthetic was put in terms of how justifications for aesthetic judgments differ from inductive and deductive proof (chs.4 and 6). While this is a useful distinction, it is not enough to untangle the many possible responses elicited by an artwork; and hence differentiate between aesthetic responses and say, responses of a sensuous nature or responses involving interpretation. For example, Lyas argues that 'the image in a photograph can be contemplated detached from its subject' (p.48). He says that when the photograph is of people we do not know, this allows us to feel nostalgia and/or other associated feelings by way of contemplation; and this is his example of how photographs can stimulate aesthetic ideas and by his implication, be the object of aesthetic judgment. His mistake is to assume

that the meandering of contemplation per se, equates with the experience of aesthetic ideas. According to Kant, the experience of aesthetic ideas involves access to the multiplicity of sensations and nuance that underpin the concept during the course of perception but which are normally lost to consciousness in conceptualization. It is an experience of quite a specific nature: an experience of the fragments of sensations in varying degrees of conceptualization. It occurs when the imagination and the understanding are in a state of free play, set loose from their subservient role to the cognitive powers. The experience of aesthetic ideas is a concomitant of aesthetic judgment, not constitutive of it. Aesthetic judgment is an awareness of the form of the imagination's presentation of the object. The kind of contemplation referred to by Lyas does not constitute an aesthetic response (neither an experience of aesthetic ideas nor an aesthetic judgment), according to Kant's aesthetic theory.

In order to prevent a slide into assuming that all responses elicited by artworks are aesthetic responses, one needs some explanation for what constitutes an aesthetic response. Kant provides this. The irony is that the slide referred to is endemic among aestheticians and so Kant's theory is often dismissed as too narrow; because it does not address the myriad of responses one can have to artworks. Lyas avoids the conclusion regarding the narrowness of Kant's aesthetic theory by giving it a post-modern interpretation (chs.1 and 2). Lyas explains that Kant understood the appearances of the world as constrained by human perceptual mechanisms. Lyas interprets this to mean that we (within cultural constraints) can structure the world as we please. In other words, he makes Kant sound like a precursor to Nelson Goodman. On the contrary, in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant was addressing the question 'What would the mind need to be like in order to explain the features of aesthetic experience?' and these features included the disinterested nature of the pleasure of the aesthetic. As Lyas treats the aesthetic as a cultural convention, he reconstrues this question to be 'how the mind itself must be structured if that kind of aesthetic structuring of the world is to be possible' (p.25) and he continues to divert us away from Kant's true mission with claims that Kant's aim in his third critique is to answer the question 'Why has the aesthetic such power?' (p.31). In fact, the disinterested nature of aesthetic pleasure led Kant to regard aesthetic judgment as universal and subjective. He then reasoned what kind of mental processes would explain this universality and subjectivity. His answer involves two mental faculties, the imagination and the understanding, which during the normal course of perception delivers up to the cognitive powers an array of information which the cognitive powers subsume under a determinate concept. The imagination provides the perceptual form to the array of data entering the perceptual channels. Becoming aware of this form (which is only prompted by certain objects) constitutes aesthetic judgment and involves a suspension of the cognitive powers. Because the form is provided by the mind and operates at a preconceptual level, aesthetic judgment can be said to be universal to the degree that humans

share the same perceptual apparatus. It is subjective in the sense that it is only through our response to the object that we know that it is beautiful: not through reason. Lyas, on the other hand, construes the disinterest of the pleasure afforded by aesthetic judgment as a result of the way we have structured our world (p.28) implying that the way we have structured our world is logically prior to the possibility of aesthetic experience. Whereas for Kant, the disinterestedness of aesthetic pleasure is a corollary of the way the mind works during perception and hence its possibility is logically prior to our structuring of the world. In interpreting Kant's aesthetic theory in a way that is more palatable to the post-modern sensibility, Lyas sabotages the only theory around that effectively distinguishes an aesthetic response from other responses to artworks (from the sensuous, the conceptual and the activities of reason). According to Lyas, the aesthetic response is a cultural convention: for Kant, it is a symptom of a species-specific characteristic of the mind. Perhaps seen within the context of the aims of this book and the pervasiveness of the post-modern enterprise, Lyas' interpretation of Kant's theory is warranted, though I would argue, ultimately unhelpful.

A very useful feature of the book for both teachers and students is the annotated guide to reading that is provided at the end of each chapter. In addition, it is the first book on philosophical aesthetics that I have encountered which I anticipate will engage studio-based visual arts students with their more practical orientation towards the arts. This is an audience that most aestheticians find hard to reach because of the quite extreme differences in orientation and nature of involvement between themselves and artists. However, given that the contemporary artworld is driven by 'theory', there is a need for providing art students with the skills needed to assess and critically reflect upon the 'theory' that now pervades their professional practice. Lyas' book may go some way towards this end. For example, chapters 7 and 8 (the intentional fallacy and the death of the author) will assist art students in putting into perspective and context, the practice now common in art schools, of having to defend each of their assessable visual artworks with either written or verbal justifications (with these justifications being assessed, in effect, as part of the artwork).

I anticipate that the spirit of the book will engage undergraduate students in aesthetics courses and the general reader in the way the author has intended. From the point of view of someone wanting to encourage undergraduate students to enjoy and involve themselves more fully in the arts and to understand their own and/or others' art making and experiences, Lyas' book offers a lively starting point.