

Lorand, Ruth. *Aesthetic Order: A Philosophy of Order, Beauty and Art*. London: Routledge, 336 pp., \$75 cloth. The thought that beauty is sort of order is an old one in the philosophy of art, but its appeal is limited by difficulty in saying in just what the suggestion consists. Ruth Lorand's *Aesthetic Order* is an ambitious attempt to flesh out that simple equation into a comprehensive approach to aesthetic questions. Lorand addresses three broad questions: What is order? What sort of order is peculiarly aesthetic? How does the notion of aesthetic order help answer such questions as, 'What is beauty?' and 'What is art?' Lorand's investigation of these questions is highly imaginative and original. She weaves together an impressive variety of figures and notions, ranging from pre-Socratics notions of chaos and biblical scholarship to Bergson and contemporary information theory, into a unified and distinctive framework for thinking about art. In the process, she draws conceptual connections which are surprising and illuminating and offers thoughtful criticisms of other approaches. But while *Aesthetic Order* is a thought-provoking meditation on an important and unexplored topic, it is not a careful book. The connections it draws are loose and merely suggestive, its arguments are quick and unconvincing, key notions remain obscure, and its reasoning and prose are persistently frustrating.

Lorand's analysis of order starts with an appropriately abstract notion of object, that of a set of elements together with an ordering principle that unifies them; an object may be anything from a symphony to a solar system. The degree of order possessed by an object is a function of two variables, the degree of complexity of its ordering principle and the degree to which the set conforms to its ordering principle. One object can be more ordered than another by conforming more highly to the

same principle or conforming to a more complex principle. Lorand suggests that a principle that draws more distinctions among the elements of its set is the more complex principle, but no systematic account of complexity is forthcoming. An ordering principle is also a source of normativity, or “necessity or lawfulness,” for the principle establishes how the object, in some sense, ought to be. Interestingly, Lorand goes on to offer a distinct account of disorder. She identifies several notions of disorder—randomness, chaos, atomism, and sensitivity to changes in an object’s elements—and suggests there is a core notion, homogeneity in probabilities, which amounts to a sort of indifference on the part of a principle to its elements. Puzzlingly, this leaves Lorand with two, inequivalent notions of order which she deliberately makes no attempt to reconcile.

In shifting to a notion of order germane to aesthetics, Lorand draws a distinction between discursive orders and aesthetic orders. Discursive orders are marked by their generality and their externality to the objects they order. They correspond to general concepts and, as such, may order many different objects or no objects and are the basis of cognitive activity and reasoning. Lorand also ties discursive orders to notions of low information value, high predictability, redundancy, and a priori knowledge, all, in some sense, because discursive principles are prior to the objects they order and indifferent to the individuality of those objects and their elements. These conceptual links are suggestive, but not beyond question. One might well think that an object, say, a letter, could contain new information of a non-redundant, unpredictable, a posteriori nature solely in virtue of its general qualities; another letter could be ordered by just the same principle.

In contrast to discursive orders, aesthetic orders are singular and internal to the objects they order. The idea is that each object possesses, in addition to the way its elements are ordered by general concepts, another sort of order which is unique to it. Each object is measuring up its own principle, a way *it* should be, which way is not analyzable into general notions. While the notion of an unrepeatable order smacks of paradox, Lorand argues that to understand the notion of beauty in terms of order requires such singular orders. This, perhaps, begs the question of whether beauty should be understood in terms of order at all, but given that equation, she argues that an object's beauty emerges in an unpredictable and intuitively apprehended fashion from its individuality and cannot be understood in general terms as a discursive order. Her discussion of aesthetic order draws on earlier notions of 'organic form' and Bergson's notion of 'vital order,' by associating beauty with the individual, intuitive and unpredictable, but goes beyond them. She points out that many attempts to get at the nature of the order which underlies beauty offer only some qualitative distinction, as that between vital and geometric order, whereas beauty is obviously subject to degrees. In contrast, her notion of a object conforming to a principle is purpose-built to allow such quantitative distinctions. She also emphasizes, as others do not, the interdependence of the orders; the cognitive apprehension of an object's discursive organization and the intuitive apprehension of its aesthetic order are to be understood as inseparable processes.

There follows an intriguing discussion of interpretation. She argues against a tendency in aesthetics to treat everything as interpretation by, quite sharply, distinguishing between interpretation proper and such activities as description, explanation, clarification, and decoding. Central discussions about the relative

importance of the author's intentions or the text or the reader are, she argues, the result of confusing these different tasks. Interpretation, in her view, has to do with providing completeness to an object that appears to lack it by re-ordering it, a task which does not aim at getting the one correct interpretation or producing many equally good ones, but is a pragmatic task which may be performed many times with varying results. Lorand distinguishes among varying types of interpretation, strategies for supplying completeness, in order to focus on one, what she calls "complementary interpretation," which plays a central role in placing the discussion of interpretation within her larger project about order. A complementary interpretation is one which interprets materials by ordering them so that the materials come to constitute the interpretation which in turn realizes a potential latent in the materials. A recipe is a mundane but clear example of complementary interpretation, as a cake materializes, in some sense, the potential of egg, flour, and water and in so doing, interprets them by ordering them. Such interpretations give rise to two-stage questions of evaluation. How valuable is the problem which the complementary interpretation tries to solve, and how well does it solve that problem?

The boldest and least clear part of the book is Lorand's marriage of these two notions, order and complementary interpretation. Lorand claims that aesthetic order consists of complementary interpretations. The elements united under an individual aesthetic order are said to interpret one another, and the dynamic of an object's reaching for the potential in its own aesthetic order turns out to be the very same dynamic of providing satisfying order to the potential of disordered elements by constituting an interpretation. When successful, the result gives one the sense of necessity, an internal order which seems natural and inevitable as a good solution to a

problem. It is difficult to make out exactly what Lorand has in mind here. The elements are, on the one hand, literal materials, things like words, chords, and pigments. On the other hand, Lorand thinks of the objects as interpreting, by including, bit of human experience, ideas, and the like. Furthermore, it is clear that the audience's knowledge, culture, and psychology can also enter influence aesthetic orders. As the account grows more complicated and redescribes a plethora of aesthetic phenomena and influences in terms of order-as-interpretation framework, one loses one's grip on what exactly the objects in question are.

Finally, Lorand applies her framework to questions about nature of beauty and the status of artworks as such. The beautiful turns out to be a form of high aesthetic order, the ugly, the insignificant, the boring, and so on, low aesthetic order. What is more interesting is that Lorand argues for a notion of beauty which is considerably more cognitive and abstract than is usual. Since conformity to complex ordering principles can be as much a quality of things like theories or stories as it can of those things which present a visual or auditory aspect, her notion of beauty is correspondingly wider. Her attitude toward the 'what is art' question is more ambivalent. While she has some sympathy with the institutional account of artwork when it comes to classifying objects as art, she levels an interesting criticism: ordinarily, we expect to be able to derive the notion of 'a good F' from the notion of being-an-F, but the institutional theory is silent on this point. It tells us what art is, but settles no questions of evaluation. She offers her own definition, art is the product of an intention to create beauty, i.e. high aesthetic order, which allows her previously developed account of evaluation to come into play. Although Lorand is concerned throughout with providing a quantitative notion which allows for

evaluation, in the end there seems no part of the framework which supports comparisons between works of art. Their beauty is a matter of measuring up to their own potential, and this seems to leave individual aesthetic orders hermetic and incommensurable.

*Aesthetic Order* is a member of that philosophical genre of grand, all-encompassing, self-created architectures lifted up before the reader's eyes. Such edifices are rarer today than in the time of Kant and Spinoza, and it is refreshing to see it done anew. As is perhaps endemic to the style, one has many worries about whether the pieces all fit together as intended, whether the joints are truly sound, and whether the foundation can support the heights it reaches. Sentence by sentence, *Aesthetic Order* moves by quick jumps, flashes of insight, and sweeping generalizations, and there are as many places to dig in one's heels as there are paragraphs. It's not consistently clear and easy to follow, especially towards its climax, but the reader might forgive these flaws in favor of the richness of Lorand's vision. A vast collection of philosophical ideas is woven together here in the service of thinking deeply about beauty and order, and there is much to learn about both. There is also much good along the way, particularly when it comes to small set-pieces against this or that view in aesthetics; her criticisms are often clear and incisive. In the end, *Aesthetic Order* goes a long way toward fleshing out the idea of order as beauty, that and a great deal more,