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Introduction. Aesthetics' eyes on antiquity

Abstract

The contributions to this issue of "Studi di Estetica" display different ways in which ancient aesthetic ideas can enter modern arts and aesthetics. Ancient authors may show how to revise our accounts of art-appreciation, as Phillip Mitsis argues by appeal to Plutarch, and as Nadezhda Zubova and Gao Jing both argue, from different perspectives, about Aristotle. Or the ancient ideas speak to characteristics of modern art; this is Ignacio Garay's reading of Pythagorean music theory and classic rock. Giulia Cervato likewise addresses the ancient ideas in modern practice, with reference to Plato and painting, although she questions the traditional narrative of modern reception. Kristin Boyce and Cynthia Freeland, writing about dance, show both how to enlarge a Platonic mimetic theory, and how Plato's Laws finds its ideas staged in Balanchine's ballet.

Keywords

Aesthetics, Antiquity, Reception

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1. Introduction

It was early in 2024, now a few years ago, that Giovanni Matteucci and Gioia Laura Iannilli wrote kindly inviting me to guest-edit an issue of *Studi di Estetica*. By every measure the project got off to a good start. I saw from previous issues of the journal what a worthy publication the editors were producing. Then, as we conferred about the call for papers we planned to post, we came up with a plan that we could all look forward to implementing.

The editors and I agreed immediately about looking into the ancient inheritance of aesthetics. But given how many meanings “ancient inheritance” already carried, we wanted to provoke submissions that diverged in their interpretations of the theme. The call for papers suggested directions that an article in this issue might take. How could modern aesthetics reactivate old philosophical treatments of the visual, literary, performative, or musical arts? What could the discipline still take from ancient theories of beauty or artistic value? A particular ancient philosopher might illuminate some debate or some line of inquiry. An ancient account of *mimêsis*, *technê*, or other concept could re-energize contemporary claims about representation and craft. Arts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries might communicate old ideas; or fit new versions of old categories; or open up to view under the pressure of ancient theories.

With these prompts in place for an issue, the editors and I invited Kristin Boyce (Vanderbilt University) and Cynthia Freeland (University of Houston), writing together, and Phillip Mitsis (New York University), to contribute articles on the theme; and we disseminated a call for submissions. The result is this rich issue of *Studi di Estetica*, which I feel honored to have helped bring to its present form.

In the way that the call for papers suggested interpretations that one might give to the topic, it posed my favorite kind of question in philosophy: a question for which it is not clear in advance what an answer must look like. What might constitute an ancient inheritance? We see such a range of possibilities. Arrivals from antiquity dot the landscape, often irregularly, like the Greek temple columns and Roman domes that turn up in today's cities, sometimes combined into a single impossible hybrid. Chariots have disappeared from the road, but someone who travels a mile in a modern vehicle still rides for about the distance of a Roman mile (*mille passus*). Well-meaning resuscitations like the Olympics and opera seek to offer an experience adapted to a new world while still recalling their old meanings.

And there are those inheritances that exist in such distorted form today you might think they are dream images from antiquity: the caduceus, confused with the rod of Asclepius and now denoting medical science and pharmaceuticals, when it had been a symbol of commerce; the Greek word for fennel, *marathon*, routinely applied to a race of punishing length and metaphorically to any activity that calls for endurance, as if we thought of fennel as uniquely hardy, or medical science as a moneymaking enterprise.

Aesthetics surely comes from somewhere, but not along any single or simple path. The subject tends to be spoken of as belonging exclusively within philosophy's modern period. Certainly the name does, despite its own antique beginnings. The word "aesthetics" ferries a Greek word for perception to an intellectual territory whose borders keep shifting, even if perceptible properties like beauty or some other aesthetic attribute tends to belong within those boundaries, typically also art (whatever "art" may be thought to apply to, or however many things). Still, although nothing like the name "aesthetics" applied in Greek or Roman writings to anything like the same collection of subjects, modern aesthetics has ancient precursors. We customarily put Plato somewhere near the beginning of aesthetics' history, perhaps despite the ambivalence recorded in his dialogues toward poetry and drama and much visual art, and partly in light of the central place that beauty occupies in his metaphysics, and in some of his claims about philosophical pedagogy. Depending on how one finally resolves the dialogues' claims about poetry – very recently we find Elaine Scarry's argument for Plato the admirer of poetry and willing participant in its culture (Scarry 2025) – he might even deserve to be ensconced as a founder of aesthetics.

Anyway Aristotle's *Poetics* belongs in aesthetics if any ancient work does, and expands on such terms as the ever-present if also ever elusive Platonic word *mimêsis* "imitation, representation, emulation".

We would seem to have a straightforward pedigree for aesthetics and a line of inheritance, with Plato and Aristotle, in the company of Gorgias and Xenophon, acquiring such Greek and Roman descendants as Plotinus, Longinus, and Proclus, with appearances by Cicero and Philostratus¹. And yet even this story is open to reassessment. Scholars may emphasize the

¹ See e.g. the invaluable inclusive collection edited by Oleg V. Bychkov and Anne Sheppard (2012), which contains all those figures.

discussions of poetry that can be found at work in authors before Plato². Or they challenge the promise of legitimacy in an aesthetics properly inherited, by evoking a larger intellectual world in which Plato and Aristotle themselves represent the derailment or misdirection of another type of aesthetic thinking. What came down from the ancients might have turned out as something entirely different if not for their interference. Narratives in which the dialogues of Plato interrupt a tradition that we can see as valuable, even as more valuable than the Socratic train of thoughts, go back at least to *Birth of tragedy*, which significantly calls itself a work in and about the field of aesthetics³.

And now James Porter's ongoing project of reappraising ancient aesthetics pursues a goal comparable to Nietzsche's, in which a rival narrative about the ancient understanding of art comes to light. One volume in Porter's new history seeks to return attention to such pre-Socratic philosophers as Xenophanes and Democritus, who pave the way for the phenomenalist aesthetics in a later figure like pseudo-Longinus (Porter 2010⁴).

It is no rebuttal to Porter's alternative story about ancient aesthetics, rather if anything a point in favor of the *need* for alternatives, to note that "Longinus" himself upsets the fantasy of a univocal genealogy for aesthetics. The lone codex containing this work *On the sublime*, cryptically attributed to either someone named Longinus or someone named Dionysius, became widely available to modern European readers only in the seventeenth century. (Scholars first ruled out Dionysius of Halicarnassus as the author, which implied that Cassius Longinus must have written the work. The author was referred to as Longinus although that attribution does not hold up either⁵). *On the sublime* offered its audience fresh takes on ancient verse and rhetoric, not to mention a cheeky image of Plato wanting to joust with Homer, but to obscure ends.

² See for instance Ledbetter 2003. Ledbetter reads Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar to find not some cultural norms we might call archaic poetics, but distinct ideas of poetry, and of its composition and its value.

³ The first sentence of the first section of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* begins: "Wir werden viel für die ästhetische Wissenschaft gewonnen haben ..." "We will have accomplished much for the study of aesthetics ..." (my translation).

⁴ On Porter's quest to establish a counter-narrative for ancient aesthetics see my 2012 review.

⁵ For a new translation and commentary see Stephen Halliwell, *Pseudo-Longinus: On the sublime* (2022). The most recent argument for calling the work's author Longinus appears in Heath 1999.

Specifically, the eponymous quality called *hupsos* “elevation, sublimity” that “Longinus” praises needed to be accommodated with the treatments of beauty and poetry that came out of other ancient texts, or that had been elaborated from those texts. A sample response to that need for accommodation appears in Kant’s *Critique of judgment*. That book labors to fit judgments of taste regarding beauty into a coherent whole that also contains species of the sublime. Judgments of the sublime significantly resemble judgments of beauty and yet differ from such judgments significantly, and the complexity of this argument that the first half of the third *Critique* constructs hints at the surprise that *On the sublime* constituted in seventeenth-century aesthetics.

The arrival of “Longinus” supplies one early modern correction to the schoolbook story about the reception of ancient thought, according to which the modern surprise always occurs in the form of rebellion. The moderns refuse their ancient inheritance. Aristotle prescribes three unities for tragedy, and Shakespeare and his contemporaries toss those rules aside. The dynamic of modern rebellion applies best to the new sciences of physics, biology, and the rest, even allowing for all the exceptions that crop up there as well, like ancient heliocentric proposals or Galen’s surgical procedures. Even where the arts and art theories follow the script of old rules newly broken, as in the commonplace about Aristotle and Shakespeare, that story runs alongside histories in which subversion and interruption occur not in the refusal of antique precedents but in the very effort to receive them: whether because something goes awry in the reception, or because some insight or a slyly different look at the arts was found among the archives and brought into modern aesthetics. The modern readers and revivalists have their own concerns, after all. They do not wait for ancient thoughts to fall on them like rain (as the word “reception” might suggest to the unsuspecting), but take some trouble to find them.

Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff made this point, speaking at Oxford in 1908, when he famously imagined modern philologists in the place of Odysseus among the shades. “The tradition is dead: our task is to revivify life that has passed away”. Modern readers who want those ancient voices to enter the conversation need to sacrifice as even Odysseus did not do. “We know that ghosts cannot speak until they have drunk blood; and the spirits which we evoke demand the blood of our hearts” (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1908: 25). Overwrought as it is, the imagery does attest to the work demanded of modern interpreters. They put in the work because, like Odysseus pressing to learn how he might make his way to Ithaca, they have brought an agenda to the conversation.

I said that it was not clear in advance, from the way the journal's editors and I had posed our question, what types of answers might come in. Modern readers choose different shades to revivify. They hear or mishear different counsels and promises. The variety of papers that their authors submitted left me with a gratifying sense of how many entries ancient thought has made into art and art theorizing, maybe how many points of entry still remain for its future arrivals. I trust that this issue's readers will find the variety gratifying too.

In one of the two essays that we solicited for this issue, "Plutarch and everyday aesthetics of living", Phillip Mitsis turns to Plutarch, in historical terms already a fresh surprise. To be sure, modern readers knew Plutarch for centuries. His biographies transmitted many of the most familiar anecdotes that still circulate about Greek and Roman figures. But even as those anecdotes passed into received knowledge, their source Plutarch began to disappear from home libraries. For his article Mitsis consults lesser-known essays from Plutarch's corpus: *On listening to lectures*, *On the control of anger*, *On tranquility of mind*, and *Whether an old man should engage in public affairs*. In these treatises, he finds an orientation that Plutarch shares with Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle, who all attend to the arc of a human life and the changes that take place along that arc.

The arc of a life includes both ethical and aesthetic matters. Mitsis examines the careful audience-attention that Plutarch urges his reader to exercise, which turns out to diverge from the laser focus normally emphasized in aesthetic theories of attention. Energetic and vigorous acts of attending may well strike the young as a universal feature of human cognition, but such perceiving is not the experience that Plutarch advocates, which reveals his view of a whole life from youth to elder age. Despite playing the role in our fantasy-histories of civilization's children, it is old age that the thinkers in Mitsis's article bring into our idea of the complete human life: advanced age moreover seen not as a falling away from the perfection of youth, but as its own thoughtful and effective achievement.

So Plutarch enjoins his reader to listen with the improved capacities that belong to the old. Mitsis observes that the treatises in question "disclose an alternative metric of aesthetic life". Philosophical listening, and really all varieties of experience in an audience, may profit from emulating one's elders.

In his reading of Plutarch, Mitsis displays one strategy by which antiquity may intervene in modern theories and practices of art. On that strategy, a philosopher from the deep past offers remarks unnoticed before now that illuminate and may guide what we do with art. Whereas Mitsis

finds advice in Plutarch about the good audience behavior that comes with age, Nadezhda Zubova, "Rethinking surprise in music through Aristotle's *Poetics*", seeks to inform a specific event within audiences' experiences, with help from Aristotelian terminology. The specific event occurs when listening to music, which develops with large or small surprises as it goes. But the phrase "surprise-experience", understood as a report on subjective reception, locates this property of music within the mental life of the one hearing it. Surprise has a diminished existence then, given its quick evanescence, like the flash of a good joke's punch line. And yet even with a joke you can distinguish between the surprise that its finish brings to an audience and the surprise in the punchline. One audience, after hearing the joke, might not feel surprised by the punchline the second or third time around. Still it remains a surprise, if only one that no longer *comes as a surprise*.

Zubova seeks to deepen the concept of musical surprise so that it can denote a characteristic of the music, not only of that music's being heard. A listener who lacks expertise about the music history of some era might feel no surprise at all when listening to a composition from that time, that nevertheless (considered in its context) surprises. The modern lexicon for art, inasmuch as it encourages the subjective reading of surprise, desensitizes theorists to a distinction that a more variegated ancient lexicon might return them to – in this case the lexicon of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and the difference there (which is easy to overlook) between the *thaumasion* and the *thaumaston*, wonderment and the wondrous. Roughly as the *eu-daimonia* in Aristotle's ethics seeks to register both the experience of happiness in a human being and the admirable real condition of happiness that accompanies virtue, so too the divergent words containing *thauma* "wonder" point to different things about an art form like music. Your wonderment looks less like a report about yourself alone when it responds to something inherently wondrous.

Something like Zubova's turn to Aristotle for aesthetic terms that one may return to modernity also takes place in Gao Jing's "Art as *energeia*. From Aristotle to today". As the title of that article promises, it begins with the *energeia* that Aristotle's readers find at work in his metaphysics, theory of nature, and philosophy of the soul. Heidegger and Gadamer, and in recent years Walter Brogan and others, have tried to show how *energeia* – a noun that we might translate "actualizing, being-at-work" – could apply to aesthetics. What exists in an object as *dunamis* "potential, power" is found emerging and becoming itself. Plato conceived the *mimesis* in art as passive picturing, to the extent that the *Republic* compares

artistic imitation to a mirror that the artist hauls around. Now, understood as *energeia*, that same process captures the far from passive working that a tragedy or drawing does.

Aristotle's *Poetics* does not use the word *energeia*. Gao reads tragedy's achievement of its *telos* as that actualizing work. Thus *energeia* names a phenomenon illustrated in the *Poetics* without being present itself. And as a tragedy achieves its potential, it can please audience members who find their own capacity to understand tragic phenomena being actualized within them. This too is *energeia*.

Despite her article's inclusion of the audience in art's *energeia*, Gao finds particular promise for the *energeia* in aesthetics as a critical term. That is to say that *energeia* may enter into evaluations of art works. Understanding the specific potentialities in an art form and how they enter actuality opens up a productive field for assessing art forms that Aristotelian vocabulary might otherwise seem not to apply to – AI art, for instance, to which old standards of mimetic accuracy or artistic intention do not fit, but in which (as Gao explains) the *energeia* analysis may still witness actualization of a potential.

Ignacio Garay joins the authors already mentioned in asking ancient philosophers questions drawn from the modern arts. In his article, "*Harmonia* in time. Pythagorean number, embodied rhythm, and the aesthetics of classic rock", as its title makes clear, the ancient author in question is Pythagoras (using that name, as seems to be standard today, to identify a school of thought and vocabulary for philosophizing even if the alleged founder of that movement did not exist).

But in another respect Garay approaches the guiding topic of this issue of *Studi di Estetica* along a trajectory not seen in the articles before his. The contents of the issue take a pivot with this contribution. Instead of the audience, the audience's experience, and its judgments about works of art, Garay asks about properties of an art form – not even what we might call the intrinsic properties available for experience (as in Zubova's "Surprise"), but properties that may be assessed independent of their presence to experience.

Garay begins by expanding the definition of how a Pythagorean analysis treats music. Beyond the longstanding parallel between pitch and number, Garay enlarges Pythagorean music theory to include "proportion and bodily experience". These characteristics of music find their way into the genre now known as classic rock music.

Classic rock mainly belongs to a decade of innovative records and performances, from the Beatles' first US hits until the fragmentation of the

popular-music market in the mid 1970s, and subsequent rise of disco, punk, and rap. Theodore Gracyk has established productive terms of evaluation for this genre, and Garay uses Gracyk's theories and others'. Classic rock music comes in for the considerable theoretical attention it receives because it has long symbolized a cultural transformation and the abandonment of old musical standards.

On Garay's argument, though, even here what is new can be heard as a reinsertion of the superannuated. While conceding the difficulty of reconstructing what is Pythagorean from the available much later reports, Garay suggests attention to the bodily reception of pitch and rhythm. As a less developed musical form, rock music as it newly appeared in the 1960s and 1970s felt at liberty to proclaim what music had learned to repress. Classic rock participated in social practices that returned to the spectrum of uses for music that ancient theories found it necessary to describe. The embodiment of order appears in one way in the Who's *Baba O'Riley*, another way in the Black Sabbath song *Iron man*, and so on. With such examples Garay brings ancient theory into present-day practice, as if ancient music still played its notes (after a fashion) for living ears.

Giulia Cervato too addresses modern art practices, this time in a manner that interrogates what counts as community or continuity between ancient and modern. The Greek poet and 1979 Nobel Prize winner Odysseas Elytis anchors Cervato's article, "'Ap-eikonizo'. Odysseas Elytis, painting, and the Platonic reconfiguration of Greek aesthetic continuity". But despite the obvious relevance of Elytis's being a practicing poet himself, he figures in this discussion as essayist and critic, specifically in his discussion of Theophilos Chatzimichaïl, a Greek painter of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Theophilos and his art bring the account of receptions of antiquity home to one of its points of origin.

In Cervato's hands, Elytis manages to illustrate this journal issue's theme at the same time that he challenges the usual interpretation of that theme. Elytis sees in Theophilos a continuation of the Platonic *eikastikê technê*, which is to say the image-making profession examined in Plato's *Sophist*. To this point we have again a modern art practice harkening to ancient art theories, having given those theories audible voices with the help of modern blood. Thanks to Plato, the methods of depiction at work in Theophilos's paintings (according to Elytis) do not reduce to the work of an unschooled "naïve" artist who for whatever reason failed to learn the Western pictorial tradition. Rather the ancient insight entered modernity from another side and to unfamiliar effect.

I spoke deliberately of a “continuation” of Platonic concepts in Theophilos. Here is where Cervato brings Elytis into the conversation with a challenge to our present theme. Behind a metaphor like Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s lies a particular narrative about antiquity, death, and – in western Europe, for its regional modernity – rebirth. That narrative locates Greece not only far away in Europe’s past but notably alien as well, as if Greece were spatially removed from the continent. Elytis speaks for the position that interventions and re-entries are beside the point when the popular culture is understood in its continuity. The present art of Theophilos appears within an ongoing set of practices to which Plato (having never departed) does not need to return. Only a small step away from the legend of a renaissance, it becomes possible to think about ancient possibilities for artmaking as available – if not exactly without effort, certainly without requiring images of a séance or other irruption into the modern.

Our collection closes with the other essay that the editors and I invited for this occasion: “*Sôphrosynê* in the city. Plato’s *Laws* and modern ballet”, written by Kristin Boyce and Cynthia Freeland. Boyce and Freeland’s contribution combines the interpretive approaches found among the other articles. On the one hand they find a fresh thought about the experience of art in an ancient author, as Mitsis, Gao, and Zubova do. On the other hand, like Cervato and Garay, they bring the ancient author toward modern art practices. In general it makes a nice organizational practice to bookend a collection like this issue with its two invited contributions. But this way that Boyce and Freeland serendipitously represent both sides of the ancient voice that finds modern breath only enhances their article’s value as a last word about our theme.

“*Sôphrosynê* in the city” delves into a less-considered corner of ancient aesthetics and uses it to illuminate examples from a distinctly modern art form. Boyce and Freeland read Plato’s *Laws*, the longest work ascribed to him and said to be his last. As it does with respect to many topics, so too in its thoughts about *mimêsis* the *Laws* gives the impression of looking back at Plato’s *Republic* to correct what the *Republic* had argued for. The *Republic* highlighted the ill effects of mimetic poetry, and of the mimetic painting that analogously copied part of the appearance of a thing. Plato’s *Laws* turns from those genres to address dance, in which it discovers the power of *mimêsis* to display the health and virtue in human character, in particular the virtue known in Greek as *sôphrosynê*, in English “self-control” or “temperance”.

From a new way to apply Plato to an art form (somewhat as Zubova imagines our applying Aristotle’s references to wonder to the surprises in

music), Boyce and Freeland turn to art practice, examining modern ballet's interactions with antiquity. Very broadly speaking as Cervato tells of Theophilos and his Platonic imagism, Boyce and Freeland revisit the choreography of George Balanchine. Of his dance *Agon* they write: "*Agon* looked to ancient Greece not for its setting, characters, and narrative structure, but for its philosophy". The representation this dance engages with becomes an abstract variety of *mimêsis*, yet succeeds at referring back to human health and well-being. And so we end up with both a reading of the Platonic corpus that adds an unexpected promise to modern art theory, and a balletic experiment that delivers that promise to modern stages.

I began this introduction by recalling how Gioia Laura Iannilli and Giovanni Matteucci started the process that led to this issue of *Studi di Estetica*. This look over the contents of the issue that they have made possible leaves me feeling freshly grateful. By editing this journal, they have been producing an invaluable contribution to aesthetics and making it widely available. And so I close with another thanks: for thinking of me to serve as a guest editor, for working with me to shape the call for papers, and then again in the process of selecting submissions for publication and guiding them toward the form they now take. This issue ought to interest students of both ancient and modern arts and art theories, and I trust that a large audience will join me in thanking *Studi di Estetica* and its editors.

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