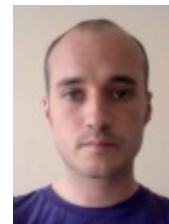


Book Review: Plato on Art and Beauty

by Blog Admin

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This collection of essays presents various aspects of Plato's views on art and beauty, not only in the Republic but in the Ion, Phaedrus, Symposium, Laws and related dialogues. The selection aims to address a representative range of issues including the moral status of music and visual art, the allure of artistic and sensual beauty, censorship, the relations between aesthetic and moral emotions, truth and deception in art, and the contest between philosophy and poetry. Reviewed by Peter Crack.



Plato on Art and Beauty. Alison E. Denham (eds.). Palgrave Macmillan. May 2012.

Find this book:

Ernst Gombrich lamented that Plato's mirror analogy from *Republic X* (a metaphor that seemingly dismisses painting as mere imitation) had 'haunted the philosophy of art ever since' (p.182). Despite Plato's apparent ambivalence towards the arts, his legacy has profoundly impacted artistic theory. *Plato on Art and Beauty* explores this inconsistency.

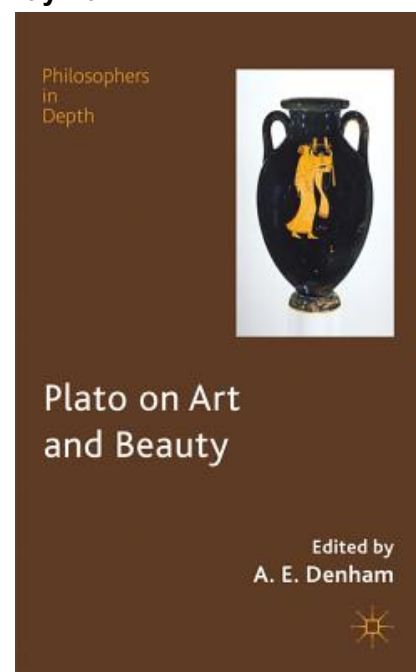
Alison Denham's introduction makes short work of our assumptions, stating that Plato 'cannot, and did not, fail to recognize the beauty of created works of art' (p.xv). Denham, Senior Research Fellow in Philosophy at [St Anne's College Oxford](#), unites ten experts in the field, providing a survey of recent scholarship that will appeal to students of both philosophy and art history alike.

Plato infamously banished poets from the ideal city in *Republic III*. This controversial statement provides the focus for Part I, 'Understanding Plato's Quarrel'. The authors address Plato's proposed censorship of the arts, revealing an ongoing struggle between his defenders and detractors.

Iris Murdoch's essay taken from *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, trawls the cannon to provide an account of the philosopher at his most acerbic, moralising and autocratic. 'Scattered throughout his work...are harsh criticisms and indeed sneers', sates Murdoch, perhaps 'Plato simply did not value art' (p.3). The argument is founded on Plato's denigration of the deception inherent in artifice. We are introduced to Plato's famous Cave metaphor from *Republic VII*; according to Murdoch, art is here compared to mere shadows on a wall – a base illusion undermined by the unflinching 'truth' provided by the light of the sun. At best Plato reduced artists to mere tricksters and at worst, dangerous harbingers of immorality. 'Plato is of course a Puritan', accuses Murdoch, exposing an 'almost vehement rejection of the joys of this world' (p.7).

Murdoch was herself a poet and novelist and the second half of her essay constitutes an impassioned defence of the arts. She argues that 'art remains available and vivid as an experience of how egoism can be purified by intelligent imagination' (p.28).

This is ground well trodden, yet the mud sticks. Do we really need Platonic beauty in the 21st century? Assuming the prescience of classical thought is to be blinded to human fallibility and changing circumstances. Indeed, Plato's criticisms are only potent if we subscribe to his concept of 'truth'. The idea that an image of a vase is less valuable than an 'actual' vase, relies on a hierarchy of the senses. Viewed in these terms, Plato is easily dismissed. However, it should be remembered that in ancient Greece, art was



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not conceived of in the same terms as it is today. Notions of 'high' and 'low' art are a relatively modern invention.

In 'Plato and the Mass Media', Alexander Nehamas asserts that 'Plato's view deserves to be re-examined and that it is directly relevant to many contemporary concerns' (p.36). Nehamas apologises for Plato's advocacy of censorship, providing a refreshing counterpoint to Murdoch's critique. He argues that Plato's 'banishment' related solely to poetry, a medium classified here, as a form of vulgar mass media, roughly equivalent to television. Nehamas exposes modern critics of television, such as Newton Minnow and Jerry Mander, as unwitting Platonists. In this context, Plato's mistrust of popular entertainment reflects our own commonly held beliefs that 'trashy' television can be reductive or even dangerous. Plato, it seems, would not have been a fan of the X Factor.

The basis for this argument is the inherent power of *mimesis* (imitation). We engage with actors, only because the medium allows a suspension of disbelief. As Nehamas asserts, 'popular entertainment, in theory and practice is generally taken to be inherently realistic' (p.43).

Nehamas' essay post-dates the proliferation of the Internet, however the democratisation of mass media serves to strengthen his argument. Despite this, Nehamas overstates the case, claiming that 'almost everyone seems to agree [that television] has no aesthetic value: it is not only harmful but ugly' (p.48). This neglects the diversity and choice in mass media and fails to identify the benefits of the phenomena – namely social bonding, the dissemination of information and the possibility of 'good art' (here meaning educational) being accessed through the medium. Nehamas is concise and his strength lies in helping us to understand Plato's position in the context of the modern world. However, his analysis falls short of persuasion and freedom of speech, in all its sordid and base guises, is a price many are happy to pay for liberty.

Part II, 'Art and Beauty: Before and Beyond *Republic X*', takes a more general approach to Platonic aesthetics. In 'Beyond the Mirror of Nature', Stephen Halliwell challenges the perennial notion that Plato was blind to the expressive or non-literal aspects of art. Instead, we are reminded that in the *Cratylus*, Plato acknowledged symbolism as distinct from mimetic art. Likewise, in the *Laws*, the Athenian stranger praises Egyptian painting – an aesthetic tradition entirely divorced from the pursuit of naturalism.

Halliwell goes on to reinterpret the infamous mirror analogy as a rhetorical challenge to provide 'justification for pictorial representation that will endow it with something other than...merely counterfeiting the look of the real' (p.186). Artists must therefore strive for transcendence and, according to the author, Plato's challenge can be answered by ethical and didactic art. When used for moral edification, the mirror analogy reduces 'bad art' to redundant optical illusions, but praises 'good art' as both interpretive and educational.

The traditional criticisms would appear to be unfounded. Plato's mirror actually encourages us to 'ponder more deeply on the relationship of painting...to reality' (p.192). The author skillfully undermines Gombrich's fears, revealing a more fluid understanding of Platonic art theory. The results are enlightening and persuasive.

Inconsistencies in Plato's works have allowed for conflicting interpretations and *Plato on Art and Beauty* neatly sums up these contradictions. We cannot simply dismiss Plato as a philistine; there are clear defences of the art in his *oeuvre*. However, with the possible exception of *Republic X*, Plato only ever sporadically discussed art. Yet these brief forays, endlessly analysed, have had a profound impact. As Stephen Halliwell makes plain, Plato's ambivalence to art is precisely the reason his philosophy on the subject is so important. Plato could not ignore human attempts to interpret reality, therefore implicitly revealing the expressive power of art. Ultimately, Plato's critique remains relevant because he was himself a master of linguistic images and metaphor. As Iris Murdoch aptly concludes, 'the most obvious paradox in the problem under consideration is that Plato is a great artist' (p.32).

Peter Crack currently works for the [National Gallery Company](#) in London and regularly contributes reviews and articles to the [Apollo Magazine](#) website. Peter has an MA in Art History from the Courtauld Institute in London and a BA in History from the University of Bristol. [Read more reviews by Peter.](#)