

BOOK REVIEW

The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience.
By James I. PORTER. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,
2010. Pp. x + 607. £85.00/\$149.00. ISBN 978-0-521-84180-1.

This is the first installment of an ambitious tripartite project on the origins and evolution of aesthetic thought in antiquity. It aims at studying the origins of aesthetic inquiry in various art forms from the very beginnings of Greek culture down to the fourth century and then into late antiquity. The other two volumes will explore the evolution of aesthetic inquiry in the post-Aristotelian era with an emphasis on literary criticism, theory, and aesthetics, and the idea of the sublime in antiquity.

In the first part of the book (*Foundations: Aesthetics, Formalism, and Materialism*, 1–176), Porter lays the necessary groundwork for his project. He meticulously examines the concepts (and traditions) of formalism and materialism that constitute the two driving forces in the history of the study of Greek art. In Chapter 1, he argues that sensation and experience are of key importance to the evolution of aesthetics, and that a comprehensive study of aesthetic terms is still to be written. In Chapter 2, Porter examines the various forms and theories of formalism with particular emphasis on Russian Formalism and Victor Shklovsky's famous doctrine of "defamiliarization," and Plato's and Aristotle's theory of beauty. In Chapter 3, the focus is on matter and appearances. The author argues that the Presocratics were the conceptual innovators with respect to the emphasis they led to the phenomenal world: "for what is most significant to the Presocratics' contribution to aesthetic thinking is not only that they, as it were, dub matter or materiality categories of thought and occasionally find beauty in this realm, but also that they construct these categories as existing in infinite expanses, farther than the eye can see or the mind can grasp" (158).

Part Two (*The Nascent Aesthetic Languages of the Sixth to Fourth Centuries BCE*, 179–450) deals with the emergence of aesthetic reflection in ancient Greece from the sixth to the fourth century across the arts (verbal, visual, and musical). In Chapter 4, which is dedicated to the Sophistic movement, Porter shows how empirical experience of the material and phenomenal world really

took off with the Sophists whose investigations on language should be placed against the backdrop of a wider inquiry on music, rhythm, painting, and architecture that marked the rise of Greek culture in the fifth century. The author rightly places the development of a critical and descriptive language within this context, the more so since the vocabulary of *summetria*, *rhythmos*, and *phantasia* is admirably cross-generic. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the examination of the evolving discourses on aesthetics in fifth-century Greece through the work of Aristophanes and Gorgias. Porter builds on Rosemary Harriott's work (*Poetry and Criticism Before Plato*, 1969), who has drawn attention to the fact that pre-Platonic criticism of poetry tends to "express ideas and abstractions in visual, concrete terms" (97). He then examines the use of "craft-metaphors" in Aristophanes' *Frogs* and *Thesmophoriazousae*, which he interprets within the framework of the emergence of interest in aesthetic materialism. The author is right to argue that Aristophanes represents only the best known example of this tendency and that there was an entire comic tradition on poetic criticism that had also made use of such "craft-metaphors" (Cratinus, Pherecrates). Porter interprets this tendency to materialize metaphors as evidence for the development of aesthetic materialism. Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to the music of the voice and the voice of music. In the former the role of voice in ancient sources is thoroughly discussed, mainly in the light of the reflection on poetics that it provoked. In the latter, given the close association between music and performance contexts, especially but not solely of poetry, special emphasis is put on Pindar's teacher, Lasus of Hermione and the new poetics of the sound. Chapter 8 concludes Part Two with an assessment of the viewing practices and different visual languages used in painting, sculpture, architecture, and visual imagery in literature.

Part Three (*Broader Perspectives*, 453–523), which in sharp contrast to Parts One and Two contains a single chapter, deals with what Porter calls "the material sublime," a "distinctive form of monumentality: produced by the intersection of three basic themes in ancient aesthetics: verbal artistry, architecture, and the sublime."

Before I briefly engage with some criticism, let me make it clear that this is a well argued and thorough contribution to the study of aesthetic criticism in ancient Greek thought. Porter is well informed with respect to secondary literature, meticulous in the presentation of his case, and careful with methodological issues that are (understandably) quite crucial in an endeavor of gigantic proportions. My main criticism concerns the questionable predominance of aesthetic materialism. I would have personally opted, if ancient Greek culture as a whole is kept in

mind, for a more blurred picture. A second point to be made concerns the absence of what I would (also)¹ consider the natural product of an engagement with materialism, experience, and sensation, i.e. the senses themselves. Next to the hearing (aural) and seeing (visual), there is touching, smelling, and tasting. In fact, such an approach would unavoidably lead to an entire reconsideration of the limits and limitations of the notion of “art” and the “beautiful” employed by Porter as the framework within which aesthetic materialism operates.

As far as technical issues are concerned, I think that the book is over-analytical and that most chapters could have been reduced by 30%. This would have made them more straightforward and easy to read. Part Four (*Aesthetic Futures*), for some reason that I cannot explain, contains only the epilogue. The book is nicely produced and basically free from typos. I list only a couple of mistakes in the Greek: τῶν αἰσθητῶν for τῶν αἰσθητῶν, ποιότητος for ποιότητος (292); παρέργον for πάρεργον (337).

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¹ See the review by Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi in *BMCR* 2012.01.11.