

## FORUM

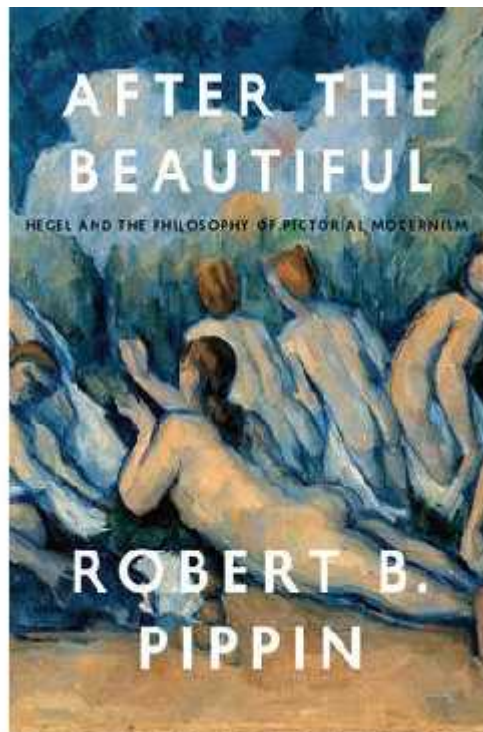
**ROBERT B. PIPPIN**

*After the beautiful. Hegel and the philosophy of pictorial modernism*  
Chicago, The university of Chicago press, 2015

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**AFTERWORD**  
**SOME OPEN QUESTIONS**

«The art of painting is an art of thinking». This quote, although from Magritte, serves well (taken with a different spirit) as a starting point to understand the Hegelian views presented in Pippin's book, *After the beautiful*.

In the book, Pippin distinctly shows what it means, for a Hegelian philosopher, to say that figurative art is a way of, if not properly ‘thinking’, at least making certain features of ourselves intelligibly available to us. But the book offers the reader much more: Pippin not only provides an interesting reconstruction of the Hegelian approach to aesthetic intelligibility – both in its connection with Kant and in relation to other competing approaches.<sup>67</sup> He also makes clear why we should still care about such a Hegelian approach: it helps us to understand much of the fate of visual art after Hegel, firstly *modernist* figurative art but also more contemporary forms of visual art<sup>68</sup>. In an interesting philosophical «back to the future» attempt, Pippin projects Hegel’s account forward about half a century, in order to look at *modernism* painting *sub specie Hegelii*. In order to do so, he draws on the views of M. Fried and J. Clark, fleshing out a possible Hegelian view of what happened in pictorial art after 1860.

In this book, Pippin puts to work many of the conceptual and interpretative Hegelian tools he has been developing over the course of his career. This makes the book extremely rich and inspiring, and it would be desperate to attempt to do justice to all its details here<sup>69</sup>. I will therefore focus on just the question of aesthetic intelligibility, and, more particularly, the distinctive *historical* turn that Hegel gives to the possibility of aesthetic intelligibility itself. Stressing this point requires a small *tour the force* of the basic elements of Pippin’s reading<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> Schiller, for instance, as well as Heidegger, to which Pippin devotes the last chapter of the book.

<sup>68</sup> See R.B. Pippin, *What was abstract art? (From the point of view of Hegel)*, «Critical Inquiry» 29 (2002), for a sketch of a Hegelian take on abstract art.

<sup>69</sup> One could even see the book as fulfilling part a ‘Hegelian’ project Pippin sketches at the end of his 2008 book *Hegel’s practical philosophy*, where he looks with favor to an possible Hegelian retrospective philosophical consideration of modernity, taking into account «the nineteenth-century and modernist novel, modernism in the visual arts, the emergence of powerful new technologies and growing technological dependence in social and political life, the development of unimaginably influential new media, especially film and television» (R.B. Pippin, *Hegel’s practical philosophy: rational agency as ethical life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 280).

<sup>70</sup> In order to get a grip on Hegel’s views, as Pippin himself writes, «we need some big picture [...] of the Hegelian project» (R.B. Pippin, *After the beautiful* cit., p. 19).

Hegel's overarching notion of *Geist* is, no surprise, Pippin's starting point. For Pippin, «*Geist* is understood as a collective subject, a communal or common like-mindedness inheriting the aspirations of a distinct artistic, religious, and philosophical tradition»<sup>71</sup>. Visual art, for Hegel, is a peculiar kind of *practice* belonging to a *Geist's* activities. As any norm governed practice, it confers a certain significance to the elements involved in it. Norms concerning figurative art are numerous and various in kind<sup>72</sup>: they regard both the production, fruition, and assessment of artworks<sup>73</sup>. Art, however, is a particular kind of practice, in that it is a *reflective* practice: there is something about art that makes *Geist* reflective of itself, bringing to light features of a particular society *at a certain time*. We learn from art something about what it means to be member of a particular community.

Although very controversial, these are not difficult to recognize as basic Hegelian claims, and are at the core of Pippin's approach.

The idea is to follow Hegel in seeing artworks as elements in such a collective attempt at self-knowledge across historical time, and to see such self-knowledge as essential element in the struggle for the realization of freedom.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> In order to appreciate fine arts, we still go to museums, pay a ticket we are entitled to have a stroll among artworks and look at Manets, Courbets or Magrittes. As beholders, we have certain expectations, depending on many factors: the tradition we have been educated in, past pictorial norms in that tradition, etc., including some basic overarching features of the social context we live in. That makes us able to recognize and understand certain features of the object, for instance, as certain actions (represented on a canvas) or as a particular style, or finally, the object itself as an artwork.

<sup>73</sup> Pippin has something distinctive to say about the peculiar kind of «intelligibility» proper to artworks. To explain it, he puts in play his previous reflection on Hegel's theory of action and rational agency, that we have no space to follow here in detail. The basic structure of aesthetic intelligibility is for him «parasitic» to the structure of the intelligibility of intentional content (R.B. Pippin, *After the beautiful* cit., p. 137). Under some relevant points of view, artworks are like deeds: deeds are not only human bodily movements, but are acts with a meaning, which is dependent on the larger social and historical normative context in which acts are performed. That very context plays a relevant role in making the deed the *kind* of deed it is. In a very similar way, artworks are not simply *material objects*, but have a distinct kind of intelligibility, *aesthetic intelligibility* - a non-discursive yet conceptual (or better, conceptualizable) mode of sense-making - largely dependent on features regarding communal *Geist*. Art is «embodied meaning», reflecting what Hegel would call the dialectic between inner and outer (R.B. Pippin, *After the beautiful* cit., p. 20). For Pippin's ideas about Hegel's expressive theory of rational agency, see R.B. Pippin, *Hegel's practical philosophy* cit.

<sup>74</sup> *Id.*, *After the beautiful* cit., p. 25, see also p. 7.

However, linking the conditions of aesthetic intelligibility to a bigger social and normative context evolving in time, broadens the scope of one's considerations. In order to fully appreciate the significance of art (and certain artworks), one has to look into shifts and breakdowns in normative contexts or self-conceptions of a community. In a word: one has essentially to look at *history*. This, for Pippin, is among the «most important innovation[s] in his [Hegel's] treatment of art». According to Hegel

The meaning and the normative status of any of the fine arts [...] were necessarily historical, [...] no aspect of whatever it was that fine arts rendered intelligible could be made out properly without a correct appreciation of that aspect *then*, both in the course of art history itself and, even more ambitiously, within some proper understanding of the long historical struggle of *Geist* to understand itself.<sup>75</sup>

The possibility of a historical take on aesthetic significance is linked with the possibility of having a «narrative» available, and Pippin's discourse seems to acknowledge it: «we need some narrative or another»<sup>76</sup>. The question, then, becomes: *what kind* of historical narrative do we need and *why* should we prefer it to others? Pippin takes some effort to specify what a Hegelian kind of narrative is *not*: it is not a purely vulgar Marxist narrative that makes artworks just epiphenomenal nor a merely sociological, psychological or simply descriptive narrative. An authentic Hegelian view must *not* take into account art as the expression of some *contingent* needs – for instance, as the response to the emergence of new competitors, like photography or motion-picture, or to the discovery of new, non-figurative art, like the Japanese print<sup>77</sup>.

There is another notion of «historical narrative» that Pippin seems to have in mind, which defines a *distinctive* Hegelian approach. We need a broad, historically sensitive, inclusive story that pays attention not only to the material conditions underlying the life of a certain community but is also capable of focusing on social roles *and* how these roles are lived in that community. We need to pay atten-

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, see also pp. 70-71, 79 ss., 134-135.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

tion to the ways people *both* materially organize their lives and make sense of themselves.

All this is very demanding, but Pippin – by carefully relying on Fried’s and Clark’s approach – works to show the concrete possibility of such an account, at least for the emergence of *modernist painting*.

The idea of a narrative that is not «causal» or does not appeal to any «contingent» fact, however, as Pippin describes it, seems *per se* not to exclude the possibility of having other narratives available that are similar in *kind*. The reader might then be tempted to ask: how many narratives *of this kind* can we have? Not causal-sociological narratives, but rather alternative attempts to take into account self-conceptions and basic beliefs, as well as social organization of labor, etc. (some «philosophical art history», we can imagine, making use of elements, for instance, both from the history of economics and *histoire des mentalités*).

In his book, Pippin often seems to reduce the problem to a two-fold choice: either we have a *descriptive* narrative, which sends us back to a *contingent* or *chance* approach to art history (as a consequence, «all changes in art practice might ultimately have to look like shifts in fashion, of no more significance of hemline or tie widths»<sup>78</sup>), or we try to develop a Hegelian narrative, which will put us on track for understanding necessary breakdowns and tensions in our conception of ourselves, the way we organize our collective life, and finally, our art-practices.

The importance of having just *one correct* narrative concerning the realization of freedom is certainly essential for Hegel, and it is part of his project. It is not clear, however, how important this aspect is for Pippin’s Hegelian approach, and *whether* Pippin’s explanation would allow for multiple narratives concerning the realization of freedom (and *a fortiori* the status of modernist art). Pippin sometimes gives the impression that there is only *one narrative explanation* open to us, which is a continuation of the Hegelian one. Sometimes he writes as he accepts «the common Hegelian narrative», except for the «prematurely optimistic» conclusion that Hegel draws

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133.

from it<sup>79</sup>. Hegel simply made a «bad bet»<sup>80</sup>, or drew the wrong conclusion from a good historical argument<sup>81</sup>.

On the other hand, however, Pippin tends to underscore that any Hegelian story about how we came to be us -- and to develop such artistic forms as *modernist painting* -- is not only «retrospective» but also «provisional» and «highly controversial». This might be understood to open up the possibility for *different* narratives to be told as *alternatives* to Hegel's. This is something Hegel certainly would have some difficulty accepting. The simple possibility of *multiple narratives* – not the concurrence of other *causal, descriptive, sociological* or vulgar Marxist approaches – might be a potential threat for the explanatory potential of our Hegelian story (one could say «it's just a narrative among the others, after all»). And this might open up a further question: what would then be the grounds for accepting Pippin's Hegelian narrative instead of another? What makes one narrative more «compelling» than another?<sup>82</sup> An Hegelian approach, Pippin tells us, is «more fruitful than competing accounts of the philosophical significance of pictorial art»<sup>83</sup>, but its fruitfulness depends largely on how we understand the *status* of the narrative upon which the Hegelian account is based.

That being said, Pippin's attempt to demonstrate that the Hegelian approach is still provocative and helpful for us today remains successful, despite the 'weak' reading of the historical argument he is proposing. Though Hegel's opinion about non-figurative art would have been closer to Magritte's (according to whom «*l'art dit non figuratif n'a pas plus de sens que l'école non enseignante, que la cuisine non alimentaire*») than Pippin's account allows, Pippin's Hegel give us the

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132, and p. 61.

<sup>80</sup> *Id.*, *What was abstract art?* cit., p. 15.

<sup>81</sup> In this case, I am not sure again to what extent, according to Pippin, we have to agree with Hegel's analysis of figurative art, and in particular whether we have to follow him in his appreciation of his contemporaries. For instance, do we have to agree when he says - in his notes - that a good «modern portrait» should be worked out in detail, so that the face of the subject must look as reflecting, i.e. carry the sign of a «thinking, active, differentiated life»? (G.W.F. Hegel, *Schriften und Entwürfe I*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 15, hrsg. v. F. Hogemann - C. Jamme, Hamburg, Meiner, 1990, pp. 204-205).

<sup>82</sup> Pippin's story that has Manet playing the role of the protagonist, and Cezanne the role of deuteragonist, as some reviewers have underlines, would have to be defended against *alternative* stories of the same *kind*, locating the appearance of modernism somewhere else.

<sup>83</sup> R.B. Pippin, *After the beautiful* cit., p. 26.

resources for rendering more complex phenomena, like abstract and contemporary art, intelligible. In this way, his is a reading that extends beyond the expectations of the historical Hegel, bringing what Pippin elsewhere calls “the eternal Hegel” to bear on the complex and rich body of things and practices that the modern world knows as “art”.