

## FORUM

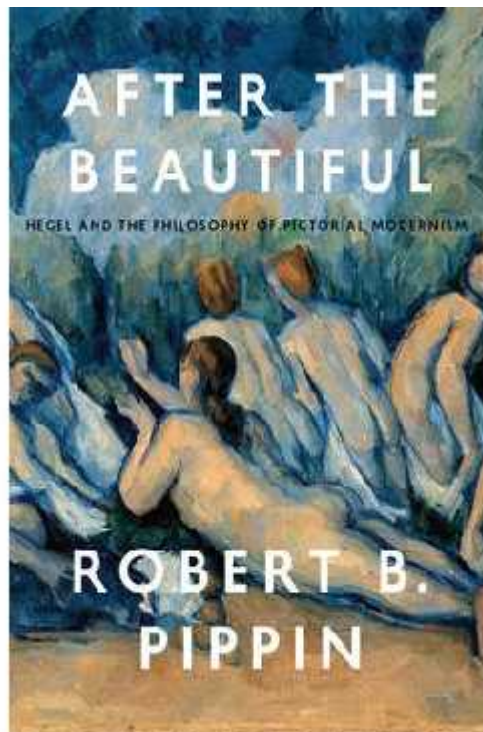
**ROBERT B. PIPPIN**

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

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decrees we have in the meanwhile internalized, despite the fact that the very project of a non-metaphysical Hegel comes originally from the continent, and precisely from the group of Left Hegelians, already in the '40s of the nineteenth century. American philosophers such as Pippin and Pinkard have shown to be eager to open a dialogue with European interpreters, as the numerous quotes from Rüdiger Bubner, Dieter Henrich, Otto Pöggeler and Viellard-Baron in their texts are able to prove. Pippin had a Humboldt scholarship already in 1977/78 and then, twenty years later, for another year. The same applies to Pinkard, who was awarded scholarships by Humboldt and DAAD for several years. Clearly, also a discussion in the reverse direction may indeed yield interesting results.

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In his book *After the beautiful*, Robert Pippin brings to a renewed attention the long debated issue concerning how to understand some events of the history of art after Hegel with a Hegelian perspective. In particular, throughout an interpretation of the *Lectures on fine arts*, he proposes a rereading of the Hegelian philosophy of art. He delineates an approach that aims at explaining the radical turn in the history of European and American Visual Art, commonly recognized under the general label of 'modernism'. Pippin's starting point is an analysis of Hegel's texts on art, especially from the version edited by Hotho in 1835-38 and again in a second edition in 1842. He consequently moves on to the examination of the art world in the second part of the nineteenth-century, looking for elements of the Hegelian thought still relevant for that period.

In his interpretation, the Hegelian achievement regarding the understanding of the historicity of the meaning and normative status of art is central. The historical dimension of the normative aspect appears clear with respect to the relation between the artwork and the audience, the critic or the philosopher. After all, the connection to the historic framework is, of course, one of the core points of the Hegelian philosophy in general and of the constitution of his thought. Pippin often underlines this point, when he recalls that for Hegel, philosophy is 'its own time comprehended in thought'. Moving on from

this point, he identifies some elements – e.g. the image of the amphibian or that of the thousand-eyed Argus – which constitute the general Hegelian approach. This approach is then compared to the contemporary art-historical positions of T.J. Clark and M. Fried and confronted with the later philosophy of art of M. Heidegger.

Nevertheless, in Pippin's interpretation Hegel's diagnosis of the historical, social and political situation seems to be the most important resource of his approach. And it is also the place, where we can run into a «blind spot»<sup>28</sup> of his treatment of modernity, where Hegel would have committed a «cardinal error»<sup>29</sup> in his narrative. The historicity of the normative in Hegel's insight is the core of his approach, but right at this point he seems to fall into a misunderstanding of the conditions of the historical context. He seems to misinterpret his own time, because he anticipates in an optimistic way what represents the leading thread at the heart of his thought: the achievement of human freedom. Indeed, this task would not even be realized during the later development of the capitalistic society. And precisely Hegel's «greatest failure»<sup>30</sup> in comprehending the course of history, makes possible for Pippin's reading to render the Hegelian thought fruitful to explain the uncertainty, the bewilderment and the disorientation of the art of the Impressionists. For this reason, Pippin tries to elaborate an interpretation «all hopefully in a way true to the spirit of Hegel's basic position»<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, he also states that we should «take into account his project as a whole and appreciate the limitations of his diagnosis of the state of modern society»<sup>32</sup>.

In this way, the profile of Hegel as theorist of an artistic event that takes place some decades after him, turns out to be modified and revised or updated in some – even fundamental – features: «He may be – Pippin writes – *the* theorist of modernism, *malgré lui* and *avant la lettre*»<sup>33</sup>.

Pippin seems to be deeply conscious of the problems that such an adaptation of the thought of a philosopher of the past can bring

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<sup>28</sup> Id., *After the beautiful* cit., p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

about. He often highlights this kind of difficulties, particularly when talking about Hegel, a thinker whose commitment to his era is so rooted and for whom philosophy – as one reads in the *Philosophy of history* – can not be conceived as prophecy (Pippin talks about «the admittedly debatable value of such an attempt to time-travel with a philosopher, especially one whose work is self-consciously tied to his own age»<sup>34</sup>).

In Chapter Three, «Politics and Ontology: Clark and Fried», Pippin briefly refers to a contemporary author, Arthur C. Danto. Danto affirms several times with respect to his art theory to have drawn inspiration from Hegel's *Lecture on the fine arts*, even to the point to call himself «a born again Hegelian». Danto was not someone who can be identified as a Hegelian scholar and he never dedicated a long and specific work to Hegel. He took some notions from Hegel – primarily, the so-called 'end of art thesis' – and tried to apply this 'Hegelian' vision to the art phenomena after Hegel's life – in particular, the art after Andy Warhol and the Sixties. Therefore, Danto aims at understanding his present throughout Hegelian arguments. He tries to bring the spirit of the Hegelian thought alive again.

Several critics – among others, Stephen Houlgate in a recent essay entitled *Hegel, Danto and the 'end of art'* – have noticed, with good reasons, the difficulties and the limits of Danto's recall to Hegel. Pippin himself remarks that it is «so hard to understand what he could mean when he calls himself a 'born again Hegelian'» and underlines «how cautious and self-consciously limited is his 'Hegelianism'»<sup>35</sup>.

Admittedly, Pippin's project greatly diverges from Danto's one. The kind of rereading that Pippin conceives is completely different in his formulation: he builds on a careful examination of the Hegelian work and, identifying its internal limitations, states the relevance of a 'Hegelian approach' for a later age, even at the cost of some relevant modifications of the original account. Danto, instead, starts from the observation of his contemporary art situation and finds in Hegel some general attitudes he borrows for his own interpretation of the present. Both of them refer to Hegel and both, in a certain way, have a 'Hegelian approach' to the art of the time after Hegel. Nevertheless, it

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72 and note.

is possible to recognize a radical difference in the orientation of their 'Hegelian' perspectives.

Danto's view provides the occasion to ask which elements should be part of a 'Hegelian approach', in order to be called such. This becomes especially complex with respect to a challenging field of Hegel's thought, such as the philosophy of art. The question of the reference to the textual editions and to the authentic Hegelian dictate, for example, is in and of itself problematic. Moreover, the analysis of the concrete artworks of Hegel's time plays a central role in the general implications of his thought. It is hard to conceive an application of this to a different panorama. How far from Hegel can an interpreter go in reading with Hegel a more recent episode of the art world? In other words, which are the limitations and the boundary lines of the Pippinian expression «*malgré lui* and *avant la lettre*», in order to call our approach still 'Hegelian'?