

The New Key to the Modern Aesthetics?

Review of Ian W. King's *The Aesthetics of Dress* (Berlin: Springer 2017), 78 pages.

This book by Ian W. King has been published in Springer's "Briefs" series with the purpose summarizing the current state of research in a given field, and to be a guide to a given topic. The range of topics that the series covers is quite impressive; in the field of philosophy, it deals with Philosophy of Science, Logic, Non-Western Thinking and Western Philosophy. The books included in the series are meant to be short: from 50 to 125 pages. In all of this, *The Aesthetics of Dress* fulfills the aims of series perfectly.

Ian W. King is a Professor at London College of Fashion and at University of the Arts of London, and he is an extraordinary academic figure. Beginning his career as an actor – a choice that was eventually unsuccessful – he went on to become a theatre and concert manager. Before starting his academic career at University of Essex, he worked with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Tina Turner, Elton John and Michael Jackson. Such multi-dimensionality is one factor behind the originality of his thinking, and he believes that his approach to the question of clothing can bring new light to our understanding of aesthetics.

The main thesis of King's introductory book is that "dress is more a persuasive means of uncovering the aesthetics in contemporary life than traditional examinations employing fine art."¹ This is a completely new and unprecedented approach to aesthetics, traditionally understood through the description of the aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience, in turn, is best conceived by the description of the emotions that overwhelm people standing in front of the work of art. That is one reason why aesthetics traditionally focuses on the fine arts.

King's proposition consists of re-evaluation of human body and its sensual capabilities, conceived not only as vehicles for the mind, but as a pivotal part of our being in the world. According to him, traditional aesthetics ignored the human body. I have the impression that King overgeneralizes here, as he identifies the

1) Ian W. King, *The Aesthetics of Dress* (Berlin: Springer 2017), xiii.

approach of aesthetics to the body with the philosophical ambivalence towards the body that we can find for example in Plato or Descartes.

The dress is what we wear and how we decorate our bodies – and it is not neutral, but it sends a message; it is a form of communication. What is more, and that is the issue stressed by King, dress is closer to our everyday life and everyday experience than the fine art, and it better expresses the tendencies of contemporary world. It releases aesthetics from the formal, normative discussion and opens it to the new fields of investigations, which include empirical studies. It seems that the idea is not completely new. In his book *Undoing Aesthetics* (1996) Wolfgang Iser has already written about extending aesthetics beyond the analyses of art as such.

The important thing that we have to keep in mind if we want to understand King's book properly is the distinction between dress and fashion that he stresses from the beginning. Fashion operates on the macro-scale – it is the gigantic industry employing over 50 million people worldwide, and generating enormous profits. It influences the dreams, desires of millions of people around the world, and shapes their consumer decisions. As such, fashion is a kind of mirror that reflects the dreams of contemporary society. Dress, on the other hand, operates on the micro-scale: it is based on an individual, personal choice about the clothes she chooses from a practically endless selection of possibilities. It is her individual struggle with cultural, political, sociological and religious influences. According to King, it is dress, which operates on the plane of ordinary, on the plane of everyday decisions, which gives us understanding of that, what constitutes the aesthetics. Aesthetics for him should be focused on what resonates with our sensibility in everyday life, not on the extraordinary and rare experiences that the art gives us. This approach, and the choice of dress instead of fashion, determines the King's choice of literature and the philosophical tradition he is connected with. That is why we would not find any references to such famous examples of what we might call "philosophy of fashion" as Georg Simmel's *Fashion* or Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System* in King's book. Instead, he evokes authors such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Marc Johnson.

King begins with an attempt to define aesthetics, looking briefly at its history. He refers particularly to Richard Shusterman who, *nota bene*, emphasized the role of the body and the emotions in aesthetics. Shusterman also developed the idea of *somaesthetics* and introduced the term itself, remarking that aesthetics is "conventionally identified in academia with the philosophy of art and beauty. But despite the considerable consensus on such a definition, the concept of the aesthetic remains deeply ambiguous, complex and essentially contested."²

Before introducing his own ideas, King gives a brief historical sketch of prominent aesthetic theories from the past: he reminds us that for Plato art needed to be kept away from the citizens of ideal state. Plato wanted to banish imitative poets from the republic, because they evoked dangerous passions in people and misled them on their way to truth by presenting third-rate copies of reality. He evokes Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten who developed a general science of sensory perception that, according to Baumgarten, explained the reception and production of beauty. The next author of great importance in the history of aesthetics was Immanuel Kant. Kant wanted to explain, how the judgments of taste can have both subjective and of objective validity. The important inheritance of Kant even in contemporary aesthetics is his claim that the experience of beauty requires "disinterested" judgment – judgment that suspends our practical, ethical and political engagements. Also influential was Kant's distinction between "beautiful" and "sublime". King then introduces figures important for his approach to the aesthetics: French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and American Mark Johnson who

2) Richard Shusterman, "The Aesthetic", *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 23, issue 2–3 (May 2006), 237, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406062680>.

is known for his theory of metaphor co-created with George Lakoff, and combining American pragmatism with French phenomenology in his description of the body. King especially appreciates Johnson's understanding of aesthetics, which is similar to his own view. According to Johnson: "aesthetics is not just art theory, but rather should be regarded broadly as the study of how humans make and experience meaning."³

After introducing his approach to the aesthetics King discusses the pivotal concept in what he calls "the aesthetics of everyday" – namely the body. His point is that traditionally, both in aesthetics and in philosophy in general, the body was underestimated in favor of the mind. The body was usually conceived as the vehicle for the mind. According to King, the mobility and sensual capabilities of the body provide important means of understanding aesthetics of everyday life; this is the point that he takes from Merleau-Ponty, who introduced modern philosophy to terms such as the kinetics of the body. He presents five strictly interconnected dimensions of human embodiment, a classification that he borrows from Mark Johnson. They are: 1) the body as biological organism that can perceive and move within its environment. Our world is originated in this material body. 2) The ecological body – In this sense body is inseparable from its environment – they are different aspects of one continuous process. 3) The phenomenological body – in this sense the most important thing is how we experience our body and we perceive it as an "I". In this sense body is a form of our "being-in-the-world". This aspect is difficult to describe – in order to understand it we must try to explore pre-reflective and non-conscious structures of bodily awareness. 4) The social body – this sense emphasizes the fact that the body does not appear fully formed prior to social interactions with others, but is shaped through those relations. 5) The cultural body – in this sense the body is constituted by cultural artifacts, practices, institutions, rituals. The way we stand, walk, talk, behave, and the way we dress, are shaped by those cultural circumstances and vary across cultures and subcultures. This last dimension is strictly connected to dress and is, of course, most important for King. The cultural body allows us to communicate various messages by means such as the way we dress, the kind of language that we use or the places we inhabit.

We should also notice that people can use dress, not only to enhance their beauty or attractiveness, but also to shock, offend, protest against something. Dress is very important for our identity, mainly the cultural one – for our own sense of identity, but also as a source of information about us for other people – about our social status, our cultural inheritance, our taste etc.

In the last chapter, King draws some final conclusions and summarizes his investigations. He emphasizes that for him aesthetics is an everyday people-based activity, and that it plays an important role in said activity. Dress is not something merely physical, but refers to something beyond appearance. King says that it has, "in-the-visible" potential, borrowing the term from Merleau-Ponty.

Given its introductory, handbook-like character, King's book is not easy to estimate. It definitely shows some new topics in contemporary aesthetics and traces possible paths that the reader might follow in order to explore the subject further in other works. The ideas that King presents are not very thorough or elaborate, but the direction he takes is new and refreshing. However, he is not the first scholar who marks this direction. As it was mentioned above, Welsh and Shusterman had already pointed to such things as the importance of the body and the aesthetization of everyday life. Nevertheless, the book contains rich references that might make a useful guide for further reading in aesthetics. What is more, the topics of dress and fashion are underestimated in philosophy, and have been regrettably handed over to sociology and history of art. These topics need to be reenvisioned and rethought, and King's book might be a good starting point for this undertaking.

3) Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 209.