

a review of

Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art

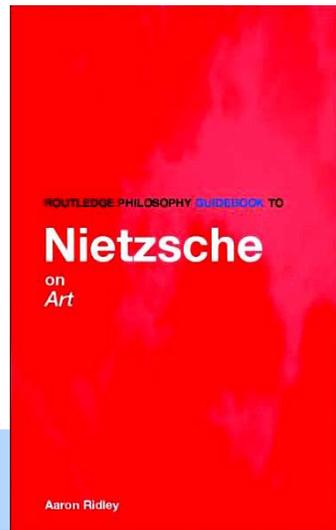
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HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

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Nietzsche on Art

Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art
Aaron Ridley
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by Benjamin Moritz

A philosophy professor of mine once alluded to “the undifferentiated mass of pure personality” that characterized the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. My professor had intended his description to be derogatory, yet many Nietzsche-philes (myself included) embrace this unique quality of Nietzsche’s writings as a refreshing change from the philosophical status quo and as a style uniquely suited to Nietzsche’s philosophical project. Aaron Ridley obviously understands and respects this aspect of Nietzsche’s writings and endeavors to examine Nietzsche’s views on art without losing sight of the inherently dynamic and holistic nature of Nietzsche’s philosophical output. Nietzsche consistently addresses processes over specific results; specifically the methods of critique that allow individuals to see themselves and their surroundings in new ways. Given the variety of starting points and case studies Nietzsche provides in his writings, Ridley here provides a view of this critical process from the perspective of Nietzsche’s writings on art. As Ridley explains:

¹ Aaron Ridley, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 2.

“

Any worthwhile attempt at a reconstruction of his “philosophy of art” must be both developmental and contextual - that it must, in effect, be an attempt to understand Nietzsche’s intellectual biography through the prism of art.¹

When compiling a “guidebook” or other explicitly introductory secondary text on Nietzsche’s work, it is tempting to systematize or dilute Nietzsche’s thinking to present the reader the “gist” of his ideas. Authors who succumb to this temptation either ignore vast tracts of Nietzsche’s output or find themselves avoiding the wonderful paradoxes, changes of perspective, and rhetorical flourish that both characterize Nietzsche’s work, and make possible his delicate yet devastating critiques of culture, philosophy, art and religion. In *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art* Aaron Ridley has, for the most part, pulled off the difficult task of summing up Nietzsche’s views on art without simplifying or falsifying the intricate texts he investigates. Ridley accomplishes this by acknowledging the “undifferentiated mass” that is Nietzsche’s thought, and consistently maintaining a perspective that considers and accepts Nietzsche’s own process of self-critique. Within such a perspective, the inevitable contradictions become the product of a thinker constantly striving to reevaluate his own views as he urges his readers to do likewise.

² See esp. Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumour after Hegel*, or the works of Barnett Newman for more on this.

³ Ridley, 1.

⁴ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I, On Reading and Writing.

⁵ Not to be confused with “evolution.” Ridley is consistent in his avoidance of teleological language.

Many Nietzsche scholars have alluded to the fact that his writings are simultaneously *about art and artworks themselves*.² It is but one instance of a complexity of context that results from a layering of critique with that which is critiqued, and which then provides Nietzsche the leverage of integrity necessary to launch his notoriously effective assaults on his chosen target. There is a profound hypocrisy involved in utilizing the context and meaning granted to us by our received culture and beliefs, to critique and tear down that very culture and belief system—a hypocrisy that Nietzsche’s quasi-post-modern use of layered meanings and rhetoric to create widely varied and occasionally outright contradictory perspectives allows him to avoid. Ridley assents to this perspective from the outset when he describes Nietzsche’s philosophy of art as “multi-dimensional” and explains that, “the style and construction of all of his books is self-consciously artistic.”³

Ridley organizes his work chronologically, grouping Nietzsche’s writings together in accordance with their relative similarity in aesthetic perspective. Although this organizational schema can lead to an evolutionary perspective, Ridley avoids the error of teleology that others have made—a sort of *post hoc* fallacy wherein the earlier books must be laying the groundwork for the later, perfectly realized magnum opus. An excellent example can be found in Ridley’s treatment of Apollo and Dionysus, one of the best descriptions of this troublesome dichotomy I’ve encountered, and sufficient to classify Ridley’s book as a valuable addition to the literature in and of itself. Never implying a finished version of the concepts, Ridley revisits the Apollonian and Dionysian concepts throughout the book within the contexts of *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Gay Science*. He teases out an important distinction between the psychological and metaphysical aspects of Dionysianism that Nietzsche (possibly unwittingly) inherits from the Schopenhauerian context that colors his early writings. By keeping in mind the differences that stem from applying Dionysianism to these two categories, the apparent contradictions between the Dionysianism of *The Birth of Tragedy* and that of *Twilight of the Idols* can be recontextualized as a new view from a different perspective. Nietzsche famously asserts that the shortest way is often from peak to peak, and by acknowledging several of these mountain-top perspectives within his account of the Dionysian, Ridley—in this instance—shows us his own “long legs.”⁴ This is not a philosophical sleight-of-hand by which Ridley explains away all contradiction, but a close reading of Nietzsche’s nuanced use of language which identifies a shift⁵ in rhetorical emphasis from the metaphysical to the psychological.

Importantly, Ridley does not ignore the problems contained within either category: the metaphysical oxymoron of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the Dionysianism of *The Gay Science* that is simultaneously anti-romantic and ultra-romantic. The latter conundrum is described—albeit problematically—through yet another dichotomy—that of *becoming* and *being*. Ridley describes

the two categories as follows:

⁶ Ridley, 125.

⁷ Ibid., 127.

⁸ Ibid., 124.

“ If the Dionysian art of *being* is construed, in other words, as the art of rounding things off so as to bring out what is exemplary in them, then there need be no necessary tension between an art of that sort and the “good will to appearance” (GS §107).⁶

“ The Dionysian art of ‘*becoming*’ . . . represents a travesty of the intellectual conscience . . . in giving absolute priority to ‘the artist’s point of view’, and so to his need to ‘discharge . . . strength’, the requirement of honesty has gone missing without trace.⁷

That there *could* be a tension between an artistic “rounding off” and the “good will to appearance” is a response to Nietzsche’s own attacks on what he describes as Romantic art. Ridley describes Romantic art’s bad intellectual conscience as a falsification of the world by

“ . . . Branding it with one individual’s ‘image, the image of his torture.’ The world is, in this much, potentially to be falsified *without regard* for its real nature, for the truth—since there may be all too much in any given person’s ‘suffering’ that is ‘singular,’ ‘narrow’ and idiosyncratic.”⁸

One might notice a seemingly out of place reference to “real nature,” and “truth,” and wonder how Ridley supports his use of these terms. In fact, upon close reading, Ridley does not provide adequate evidence to support his use of “truth” and “real nature”; the few Nietzschean citations that actually include these terms date back to *The Birth of Tragedy* or occasionally *The Gay Science*, while more contemporaneous writings (the passages relevant to his critique of Romanticism date from his later books) contain a striking lack of such terminology. Another question might be why does Ridley turn to these prejudicial terms to describe a distinction (between Romanticism and Dionysianism) for which Nietzsche himself provides ample explanation? The answer to this second question becomes apparent when examining Ridley’s harsh critique of the so-called “Dionysian art of *becoming*” and the “travesty of intellectual conscience” that it represents. His critique of this aspect of the Dionysian stems from a distinction first made by Julian Young, and from which

⁹ See TI: IX.24, X.5, IX.43.

¹⁰ Ridley, 126.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966): §5.

Ridley's terms "art of *being*" and "art of *becoming*" originate. Ridley, via Young, identifies several passages within *Twilight of the Idols*⁹ that hearken back to the descriptions of Dionysian man found in *The Birth of Tragedy* in which one



escapes becoming by transforming oneself, by becoming 'oneself the eternal joy of becoming.' Dionysian man, in other words, identifies himself with the whole eternal process of becoming and, as such, achieves immunity to the penalties of being *part* of that flux.¹⁰

In short, Ridley distinguishes two different and mutually incompatible versions of the Dionysian within *Twilight of the Idols*, one which focuses on being, and one which avoids the pain and suffering of the present by fleeing to the eternal becoming. Ridley's earlier allusions to "truth" and "real nature" have, therefore, set the stage for a demand for accountability to the present. Again, it seems as though spiking his rhetoric with these terms is as unnecessary here as it was in his distinction between Romanticism and Dionysianism. Both *Twilight of the Idols* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* have numerous anecdotes and stern warnings about the evils of a Christian escapism and its cowardice in the face of the painful present, and none of these retreat to a metaphysical "truth" to establish their validity. Putting aside, for a moment, the misplaced use of "truth" as a justification, Ridley's attack on the Dionysian art of becoming has serious repercussions on all aspects of Nietzsche's later thought (hence the "undifferentiated mass") and constitutes the most controversial aspect of Ridley's book. Although Ridley's stated project limits him to a discussion of Nietzsche's views on art, the significant ramifications this critique has on the concept of the eternal recurrence (of which there is very little mention) would seem to require further discussion. The maintenance of a holistic and multi-perspectival view for which I earlier applauded Ridley here seems to fade away.

Ridley does, however, provide ample discussion of the complex relationship of art and nihilism within Nietzsche's thought. Throughout his writings Nietzsche looks to art as a tool with which the individual can ward off the horrors of nihilism, but the possible ways in which this tool should be used varies from book to book. Ridley acknowledges this variability and provides a close reading of Nietzsche's works, both early and late, to reveal how Nietzsche accumulated these perspectives. A lightning rod for this discussion is the famous quote from *The Birth of Tragedy*: "It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified."¹¹ That last phrase, "eternally justified" carries with it a problematic association with a metaphysical argument that Nietzsche's middle and later writings explicitly

reject. Justification assumes an alignment with some absolute that stands outside that which is being justified. Since we are discussing “existence and the world,” any justification seems to imply another realm from which existence and the world can be judged and measured; i.e., a metaphysical distinction between reality and existence. Ridley replaces this apparent disconnect between Nietzsche’s early aesthetic views (as characterized by *The Birth of Tragedy*) and his later works with a careful reading that presents a gradual evolution of ideas. Ridley sums up this evolution thus:

¹² Ridley, 80.



In *The Birth of Tragedy* it was “only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*: (BT 5); in *The Gay Science*, by contrast, it is only “As an aesthetic phenomenon” that “existence is still *bearable* for us” (GS 107). Eternal justification requires, at the very least, that what does the justifying be true, and in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche thought that he had a candidate for that. But in *The Gay Science* it is precisely the truth that is the problem, and so art, which is enlisted in order to falsify, in order to *evade* the truth, can no longer, even potentially, offer justifications of existence (eternal or otherwise). It can, at most, offer to make life liveable.¹²

While Ridley’s account of this evolution (or perspectival accumulation, to avoid the implication of an ultimate goal) is helpful, his superficial engagement with the issue of truth (again) can be seen as a weakness. The role of truth in Nietzsche’s writings has always been controversial and, as in his discussion of the Dionysian art of becoming, Ridley’s use of this delicate term is not always applied with adequate subtlety. Truth is a problem in *The Gay Science* and beyond, yet Ridley reuses the terminology in ways lacking the conceptual sophistication to which he alludes above. Despite this drawback, Ridley is still largely successful in presenting a clear and insightful presentation of Nietzsche’s views on art. The subtle (and sometimes not so subtle!) shifts in tone that are so characteristic of Nietzsche are given succinct and coherent treatment, and it is an important addition to the literature. The *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art*, despite its overly lengthy title, is a surprisingly slim volume, weighing in at just over 150 pages, plus invaluable endnotes (yet another argument, in my opinion, for footnotes). Within the relatively short book then, it is surprising to see such important distinctions that not only do not obscure Nietzsche’s nuanced thought, they actually provide new ways of understanding it. Ridley should also be applauded for his use of extensive quotations. The prodigious secondary literature on

Nietzsche's writings is rife with short, selective clippings used to support this or that supposition. Given Nietzsche's penchant for hyperbole, rhetoric and sarcasm, this is a dangerous path to tread, and I have often consulted the indicated passage only to see that the overall context points in an entirely different direction from the one the author has implied. Ridley's quotations are adequately thorough and clearly cited.

Although Ridley maintains a consistent goal throughout the book, his means of achieving it vary in a mildly distracting manner. The majority of the book interacts directly with Nietzsche's own texts, but on occasion Ridley engages with secondary authors, most notably Julian Young, the previously mentioned author of *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*. When this first occurs, in Chapter 2 on *Human, All Too Human*, it is somewhat jarring given the style and pace of the previous chapter. After Ridley examines and contradicts some of Young's interpretations, one might expect him to continue the pattern of textual analysis followed by digressions into secondary literature, but no such relationship emerges. Ridley's analyses of Young's works are valuable and well reasoned, but seem somewhat out-of-place in this introductory volume. Furthermore, although Ridley does take Young to task on several issues, his overall approach to Nietzsche is similar to Young's. Within the context of a guidebook, one would hope for a more balanced engagement with secondary sources than Ridley here provides.

The beauty, excitement, enthusiasm, and emotion that inhabit Nietzsche's writings are part and parcel with the philosophical arguments they surround, and cumulatively create that "undifferentiated mass" that so irritated my professor. For Nietzsche enthusiasts, that undifferentiated mass contains the power of Nietzsche's thought, and any attempt to strip away the style from the substance leaves the reader with neither. Aaron Ridley understands this aspect of Nietzsche's writing, and has written a guidebook that provides a clear and concise introduction to the nuances of Nietzsche's views on art. This book is hardly exhaustive, but Ridley here faces the challenge that confronts anyone writing an overview, guidebook or introduction: some things must be omitted in the service of succinctness and clarity. The aspects of Nietzsche's aesthetic views that Ridley *does* choose to address are effective, while his omissions (particularly in regard to the eternal recurrence and Nietzsche's more critical views towards art) are frustrating. The quality of the material that *is* present, however, outweighs the drawbacks resulting from that which is lacking.

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