Introduction

Aesthetics is becoming a powerful force in philosophy. Traditionally, the subject has always occupied the margins of philosophy, for the simple reason that it deals with those aspects of experience which are the least amenable to categorization, i.e. art, beauty, emotion, and the ever-changing delights of the senses. However, the divisions imposed on reality by modern reason and changes brought about by the industrialization of experience have necessitated a rethinking of the relationship between the individual and reality. Gone are notions of a distinct self in receipt of a mind-independent world and, in their place, are theses to the effect that human subjectivity and reality are interconnected at a fundamental level. One consequence of this shift is that aesthetic experience is redefined. Far from being a mere adjunct to everyday perception, it is shown to be vital to an understanding of the relationship between human being and the world. The aesthetic, formerly exiled from mainstream attention, assumes centre-stage as a sensibility that is critical of the divisions exercised by modern thought, and the region to which we can turn for new moral, political and cognitive possibilities.

This is the second, expanded edition of *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. It brings together key texts by forty leading thinkers in modern and contemporary aesthetics. As well as charting the development of ideas from the ‘long’ nineteenth century (extracts are included from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790) and the defining texts of twentieth-century aesthetics, this edition also includes philosophers and themes which have come to prominence since 2000. The newly-prominent figures are: Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, Félix Guattari (writing independently of Gilles
Deleuze), Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Paul Virilio, and Slavoj Žižek. Also new to this edition, but by no means ‘new kids on the block’, are Paul Ricoeur and Mikhail Bakhtin, whose canonical significance within aesthetics has continued to grow in recent decades. The Reader is in seven parts: (1) Nineteenth Century German Aesthetics, (2) Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, (3) Marxism and Critical Theory, (4) Embodiment and Technology, (5) Excess and Affect; (6) Poststructuralism and Postmodernism, and (7) Aesthetic Ontologies. As well as taking isms and schools of thought as the basis for its sections, this edition also groups essays according to themes, such as ‘embodiment and technology’, ‘excess and affect’, and ‘aesthetic ontologies’. The first two are certainly not recent, but have been adopted to acknowledge that much aesthetic philosophy gains its currency from being lifted out of any home territory it might claim for itself and applied to a series of shared concerns. Part 7, ‘Aesthetic Ontologies’, contains some of the most recent writing in the book: approaches to aesthetics which respond to or go beyond poststructuralism and postmodernism. The title of the section reflects the fact that it is either too early or simply inappropriate to suggest a new ism. What can be noted, however, is a renewed commitment to the importance of ontology in expanding the possibilities of aesthetic thought. In nearly all cases, the texts in the Reader are complete and unabridged. Introductions to each part and to each philosopher are provided by the editor. After each essay, there is a bibliography of major works in English by the author and suggested titles for further reading.

The decision to select complete and unabridged essays for the Reader wherever possible comes from my dissatisfaction with anthologies that offer heavily filleted versions of original works. A series of excerpts or selected passages often cannot do justice to the broader argument in which the individual claims are set. In any analysis of a text, certain passages will be highlighted and emphasized at the expense at others, and any process which limits the freedom of the reader to make their own comparisons within the body of an essay is an unwelcome intervention. However, there are some cases where complete works could not be reproduced. The texts from Marx and Adorno are, by their nature, fragmentary and, in a book of this kind, the epoch-defining systems of Kant and Hegel can only be represented in extract form. Where cuts have been made
because of length, for example, with Freud and Derrida, I have excised passages whose removal I felt detracted the least from the overall argument.

While the organization of the chapters into sections acknowledges certain shared interests and methods, it is not meant to signify the existence of separate, uniform lines of enquiry. There are several instances when an author included in one category could have easily been placed in another. Essays and arguments gain their critical edge by being part of a continuous, evolving body of ideas and, in respect of this, The Continental Aesthetics Reader sets out to place its essays in a constellational relationship. Once individual items are placed side-by-side, connections materialize which transform all the participants. Proximities and distances emerge which let the reader see how the various positions speak to one another, where the claims of one are reinforced by the claims of a second, or are subject to re-evaluation by the criticisms of a third. Just how thought is organized and just how categories relate to their subject matter are in fact prominent themes in contemporary aesthetics, and are explored below by, among others, Kant, Nietzsche, Bachelard, Adorno, and Habermas.

With regard to the communication that occurs between essays, aesthetics is in a particularly unique position. As a subject in its own right, its arguments and counter-arguments achieve the level of specialized focus necessary to bring new possibilities into view yet, because of the scope of the subject, these possibilities have implications which reach beyond aesthetics to theoretical enquiry across the full range of the humanities. For example, poststructuralism’s interest in the process of writing makes us consider the contingent, constructed properties of thought, and the work done within hermeneutics and critical theory on art and understanding brings to wider attention the need for an ethics of communication. Thus, focusing on the eddies and currents which make up contemporary aesthetic debate lets us witness the flow of ideas within modern European thought as a whole.

One reason aesthetics can do this, why it holds this unique position, is because, as I say at the start, it occupies the margins of philosophy, dealing with those aspects of experience which are the least amenable to categorization, i.e. art, beauty, emotion, and
the senses. Defining ‘aesthetics’ is not easy. The word has a number of distinct but related meanings: (1) the ancient Greek aisthesis, or perception by means of the senses; (2) the modern (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century) sense of the beautiful and pleasurable in art and nature; and (3) the critical dimension assigned to art, experience and the senses in the continental tradition of philosophy since Kant. I go into more detail on these meanings below. For now, my point is that running through all three meanings are properties of marginality and recalcitrance, which means that the ‘aesthetic’ can never be something whose meaning is taken for granted. Art, beauty, emotion, and the senses will be theorized and defined philosophically, but they will also push back, offering resistance and new possibilities which challenge thought and demand reappraisal. It is in this way that aesthetics requires bifocal vision: a focus on the particularities of art and sensory experience, and simultaneous study of the movements in European thought which engage with the aesthetic or are challenged by it.

I have also considered the different forms of artwork – literature, music, the visual arts – that are discussed in the essays, mindful that too much attention paid to one category might alienate readers from other areas or that by attempting to cover a bit of everything, I end up diluting the whole enterprise. Fortunately, the pattern of debate within mainstream continental aesthetics is such that it seldom manifests itself as the philosophy of any one particular artform, and so there is little opportunity for bias to arise. Instead, themes emerge which draw on relationships between all the arts. ‘Art’ is regularly broached as a category in general: an artefact – be it a painting, a piece of music, or a performance – which, by being the sensuous embodiment of conscious enquiry, invites us to reassess our understanding of the way we interact with other objects and minds. The body and the five senses represent other areas of common interest. Bodily sensation roots us in existence, and the interventions which art and philosophy make in our appreciation of the senses affect how we view our position in the world. Nietzsche, Marx, Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, and Kristeva all show how the textures of sensation are linked to wider debates regarding the structure of thought and the creation of social values.
Another very important development is that, in many respects, art and philosophy have become intimately related. This is primarily a result of the various intersections between the philosophical or the rational, on the one hand, and the artistic, on the other, which have been created within nineteenth-century German philosophy, phenomenology, critical theory, psychoanalysis, structuralism and feminism. These connections are posited because, for example, a philosophical system cannot complete itself without drawing upon the aesthetic, as in the case of Kant, or art is assigned a fundamental structure which, it is claimed, exemplifies the condition of human being in the world, with Heidegger, or the form of philosophical writing becomes performative, becomes a kind of art, in order to reveal, resist or critique dominant modes of thought. Nietzsche, Adorno, Blanchot, Derrida and Cixous, in the texts representing them here, write their philosophy as art, treating language not so much as a linear conveyor of ideas but as a medium which, through transgression and manipulation, can let us witness the creation and construction of thought.

As words with a particular philosophical currency, ‘continental’ and ‘aesthetics’ deserve some explanation. ‘Aesthetic’ has a number of different though related meanings. As I have already indicated, there are three senses of the term. (1) In ancient Greek philosophy, in the texts of the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle, aisthesis refers to lived, felt experience, knowledge as it is obtained through the senses, in contrast to eidos, knowledge derived from reason and intellection, from which we get the word ‘idea’. The distinction remains with us today and underlies much contemporary thought. The seventeenth century rationalist philosopher René Descartes is one figure who can be singled out as reasserting the distinction. He is generally regarded as the founder of modern philosophy on the grounds that he demonstrates the independence of human rationality from God. However, the argument upon which his entire system rests, the cogito – ‘I think, therefore, I am’ – (from the Discourse on Method (1637)) is also an argument for the primacy of thought over sense perception.

(2) Perhaps the most familiar sense of the term is aesthetics as the study of beauty in art and nature. First used in this way by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, interest in beauty in this period accompanies changes
in Western society’s economic structure, and the formation of the modern, Cartesian individual. The transition from feudalism to capitalism initiates the move from the absolute law of the aristocracy to the subjective freedom of the new bourgeoisie, who institute beauty and the fine arts as expressions of their new class identity. Encounters with art and beauty also figure prominently as experiences which test or have to be accommodated by the theories of knowledge being developed to make sense of the new Cartesian self. Aesthetics continues to be active in the formation of romantic theories of beauty reacting against the classical terms inherited by early modern thought. Whereas classicism explains beauty in terms of set relational or mathematical properties, romanticism claims for the artist a unique, holistic relationship with nature, which means that artistic, aesthetic experience transcends rules and prescriptive criteria.

(3) The third, critical meaning of ‘aesthetics’ comes from Immanuel Kant’s philosophy and is elaborated within the philosophical traditions which extend or challenge his thought (and which are represented in this Reader). Kant sees subjective experience and objective knowledge becoming increasingly polarized within modern philosophy and, in response, constructs a system of thought in which subjective experience and the condition of belonging to a world are shown to be interrelated. The aesthetic is traditionally placed beyond words and Kant’s ingenious move is to take its property of being resistant to conceptualization and make it the arena in which the interaction between consciousness and reality is worked out. For the first time, what exists beyond description is not placed beyond understanding or in opposition to everyday experience but argued to be the dynamic state of conceptual reappraisal that is constitutive of our attempts to deal with any new situation. What had been theorized as a narrow and isolated band of experience is seen to arch across all the ‘hard’, world-confronting regions of thought, e.g. epistemology, ethics, ontology. Occasions when we are coming to terms with an artwork or enjoying a moment of heightened sensation become vital to an understanding of our cognitive and moral contact with the world.

Why ‘continental’ aesthetics? In the Western tradition, it is often claimed that there are two styles or ways of doing philosophy: the continental, characterized primarily by the work of French, German and Italian philosophers, and the analytic, dominant in most
American and British philosophy departments. However, the distinction is far from clear. It cannot easily be drawn along geographical lines, since a large amount of analytic philosophy is written in continental Europe, plus two of the originators of the analytic tradition, Gottlob Frege and Rudolf Carnap, were German. Similarly much continental philosophy takes place outside the continent, in the UK, the USA, and Australasia. One factor to which geography does contribute unfortunately is the projection of ‘continental’ philosophy as an idea onto the continent by the Anglo-American academy, an expression of the concern held by English speakers that the non-English-speaking people across the water are ‘different’ or ‘other’. In this sense, ‘continental’ is an Anglo-American invention that would not be recognized by any individual living in continental Europe, a point nicely illustrated by Critchley’s remark that one does not ask for ‘a continental breakfast in Paris’.¹

But the continental–analytic distinction is more than Anglo-American anxiety over Johnny Foreigner; it is possible to identify some grounds for drawing the contrast. As ways or styles of doing philosophy, the distinction is often caricatured in the following terms, in this case, by Stanley Rosen: ‘precision, conceptual clarity and systematic rigour are the property of analytical philosophy, whilst the continentals indulge in speculative metaphysics or cultural hermeneutics, or, alternatively, depending on one’s sympathies, in wool-gathering and bathos’.² But as I said, this is a caricature. Clarity and obscurity (or wool-gathering) are relative terms: speculative metaphysics can be exceptionally clear and precise, while the precision and rigour which supposedly typify analytic writing can generate extremely turgid prose. There is nevertheless something to the notion that the continental–analytic distinction is about style or the way one does philosophy. It is, I suggest, a matter of the attitude with which language and history are approached. The difference is crystallized in the ‘science versus metaphysics’ contest between Carnap and Heidegger in 1929. For Carnap and the Vienna Circle, the true view of the world is the scientific one, because of the visible success with which science continues to access and explain the natural world, and because science produces statements which can be verified by experience. However, science represents a forgetting of metaphysics, Heidegger argues, since, in focussing on what is given and measurable in experience, it fails to address all the aspects of human life which elude classification and the structures
or elements beyond experience which allow experience to come into being in the first place. These though are meanings which, as far as Carnap is concerned, do not correspond to verifiable objects or events in experience and so are dismissed as meaningless.³

This marks the continental–analytic divide over language. Based on the scientific conception of the world as a domain that is open to view and to exact description, the analytic conception of language is that it is an instrument for referring to objects and for enabling the formulation of clear and precise statements which can go on to become the basis for logical analysis. In the case of contemporary analytic aesthetics, for example, in response to the question ‘what is art?’, an analytic philosopher might attempt to devise a checklist of properties that an object must have in order to count as a work of art, and then seek to establish through logical analysis whether or not any can become a necessary or a sufficient condition of something’s being classified a work of art. In Heidegger’s view, this is language stripped of the depth, texture and resonance which it carries as part of human being in the world. Language, for Heidegger, is something in its own right; it accompanies us in our activities, and is to be experienced and lived. This attitude to language finds expression in continental philosophy in a number of ways. (1) As I have already explained, philosophy can be written performatively, where the point to be made is shown or displayed through the writing, rather than being explicitly stated or described by the writing. (2) Writing does not just describe the world but can construct it through the perspectives and concepts that are chosen. Writing is a series of choices, and as such makes an ethical demand upon us. What is written is offered as a view, as a way of rethinking the world. (3) We can write to stretch or create an idea, to extend what is possible. Why devote lots of energy in philosophical writing exclusively to making language fit the world or the world as you see it, when it might be possible to create something transformative or emancipatory? This has been an ambition for, among others, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze and Guattari. (4) A polemical stance is taken, where an extreme or an exaggerated case is made in order to reveal what is possible through excess or the potential consequences of a predicament, and to elicit a reaction.
The linguistic difference informs the contrasting attitudes to history within continental and analytic philosophy. The continentally-favoured idea that thought is intimately tied to the language in which it is expressed means that thought is intimately tied to the concepts and beliefs that are available at any one time. On this view, history is not simply a record of past events but also a horizon for the present and the future – a dimension referred to as ‘historicity’ – in as much as it includes all the sedimented, buried and sometimes-uncovered understandings from the past which may be active in the way we think and speak today. The nature of historical consciousness and the question of how it is possible for perception through the lens of one period to grasp truths from another are prominent questions for continental philosophy, especially for critical theory and hermeneutics. The contrasting scientific, analytic view is that the world is transparently and atemporally open to view, without one’s linguistic or historical standpoint leaving a mark, and changing only because science continues to make discoveries.

Are these observations sufficient to confirm that the continental–analytic distinction refers to a real-world division? Critchley is inclined to think so. Continental philosophy’s historical and material rootedness in the life-world, he suggests, gives it a project which it can clearly call its own, as distinct from anything which might overlap with the analytic tradition. This is a three-fold project of praxis, critique and emancipation: the working with or against or in between current practices to generate criticism and crisis which can lead to new forms of life, socially, politically, technologically and culturally. However, Glendinning is less convinced. He maintains that a distinction can be drawn but it is between analytic philosophy and all the things which analytic philosophy thinks it is not. There isn’t anything peculiar to continental philosophy; there is no style or history or ‘internal glue’ which binds continental philosophy together as a unified project. But both views in this exchange rely on the notion that a word or phrase only has currency if it refers to an item in the world – in this case, the identity of continental philosophy – when one of the things we have learned from twentieth-century philosophy and linguistics is that words can acquire meaning through being acted out, performed, through our living into them. If Glendinning is right and Critchley’s praxis–critique–emancipation project is unfounded, and my portrayal of the Heidegger–Carnap
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exchange as a crystallization is overstated, then the possibility nevertheless remains that the continental–analytic divide is actively prompting us to consider a style of philosophy that is distinctive from an (imagined) other.

The debate will run and run. As a collection of texts which are representative of schools and themes, this Reader both accepts and reinforces the idea that there is a continental tradition. Selection, of course, is not an impartial act: it creates or reinforces canons. The idea of continental aesthetics may be a construction but the selection in this volume is built on the notion that it is possible to identify within French, German, and Italian philosophical literature authors and texts which have transformed our understanding of modern art and experience. Furthermore, their combination of argument, performativity, writing from a perspective, stretching of possibilities, and polemic has done more to expand the significance given to aesthetics by nineteenth-century German philosophy than the definitional and truth-conditional interests of analytic aesthetics. Although Kant and Hegel sit quite happily on both analytic and continental curricula, it is only the latter which has seriously addressed the need to rethink how aesthetic experience and meaning might be formed or configured in the light of their metaphysics, and what the ethical, political and epistemological impact of these configurations might be. Phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, and psychoanalysis are all, at decisive moments, extensions of the premise – running through Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche – that subjectivity and objectivity are abstractions from or epiphenomena emerging from a much more fundamental and complex dynamic. One consequence of the departure from subject–object thought within German aesthetics has been the twentieth century’s linguistification of experience: the suggestion that experience does not come to us pure but is shaped and organized into recognizable units by the language we speak. Again, this thesis has been explored in detail by both traditions. However, its more radical implications for the status of aesthetics, the nature of meaning, and the texture of experience are to be found in continental philosophy, in particular, poststructuralism and feminism. They emphasize the material properties of language and draw attention to the way in which its web-like network of relationships allows unexpected connections to frustrate our attempts at direct or self-evident meaning. With the renewed interest in ontology, for example, in
the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Badiou and Nancy, aesthetic experience becomes a centre of intensity or possibility prior to other ontological divisions (such as subject–object, mental–physical, or language–experience), making it a principal force in the creation of ways of being which can resist those shaped by economic or scientific ideologies.

The continental aesthetic tradition offers some of the most stimulating and innovative thinking on art and aesthetic experience in the modern era. Discussions about art and human sensibility are shown to hold valuable insights for the way we apportion meaning and value in our lives. Cartesian thought and capitalism divide fundamental relationships into isolated things, setting subjective experience apart from the objective world and installing a model of truth where the former is subordinate to the latter. Against this, continental aesthetics asks us to consider the phenomenal, historical, and social textures which implicate us in the world, for within them we find the perceptual possibilities and dynamics of interpretation that generate new modes of being and understanding. In the absence of truth, there is only art. The following essays demonstrate this.

Notes

4 Critchley, *Continental Philosophy*, pp. 54-75.
6 Ibid., p. 3.