Book review


Can metaphor free art from its tie to imitation, to the representation of objects? Art, or at least philosophy’s concept of art, has been limited to imitation ever since Plato defined art as a copy of a copy in the *Republic*. That is the claim made by Miguel de Beistegui in *Aesthetics After Metaphysics: From Mimesis to Metaphor*. Previous attempts to rescue art from imitation have failed, he maintains, because they remain within the terms of Plato’s metaphysics. Hegel’s redefinition of art as the sensuous manifestation of the ideal is merely a precursor to art’s being superseded by philosophy within his dialectic, on account of the higher, ideal nature assigned to philosophy by Plato. Adorno offers an alternative form of dialectic in response. Rather than something to be overcome, the sensuous form of an artwork, in Adorno’s view, is the virtue by which art is able to offer mediated contact with the ideal. But this only results in continual interplay between the sensuous and the ideal, the particular and the universal, and so leaves intact the idea that art must be assessed as something that represents something else. Might metaphor, the description of one thing as something else, evade the governing metaphysical schema of the sensible and the ideal, and ‘broach another space at the limit of metaphysics’, a space of meaning or interpretation or possibility that is “‘proper’ to art” (p. 98)? Answering this question occupies the second part of the book, while accounts of art’s tie to imitation since Plato, and indications of how it might break free
Beistegui’s argument is ‘after metaphysics’ in two senses: (1) it challenges the Platonic schema that determines and unites the discourse on art as representation from ancient Greece and from the modern era, and (2) it works against the metaphysics of binary oppositions, such as the sensuous and the ideal, the particular and the universal, that ensures throughout history that philosophers of art are caught up in the project of trying to privilege one term over the other. Representation and binary thinking are necessarily related, according to Beistegui. They are two aspects of the same, dominant metaphysics in as much as representation entails duplication, and once one thing becomes two things, the question of how to account for the various differences in status between the two versions, e.g. ontological, epistemological, ethical, becomes unavoidable. Hence the introduction of binary distinctions as mechanisms for denoting differences in value, and a history of aesthetics in which attempts to transcend or escape those distinctions only end up reasserting them. The move Beistegui sets out to make ‘from mimesis to metaphor’ (the book’s subtitle) is intended on the grounds that art has always had the demands of Platonic metaphysics imposed onto it, limiting it to representation, and thereby preventing its own properties from shining through. The main idea here is ‘what belongs to art’. Already to approach art as representation, he thinks, is to subject it to Platonic metaphysics. What else, he asks, might art be or become outside the schema?

The answer: metaphor. Not metaphor as it has been understood within philosophy and literary theory, since, Beistegui maintains, this understanding has metaphor represent *one thing as something else*, and so keeps it tied to the metaphysics of representation. In contrast, Beistegui introduces the idea that metaphor is the expression of the hypersensible. The hypersensible, he writes,

is a certain state of matter, and a certain operation on matter, yet one that differs from our ordinary, practical relation to it, and to which science itself remains ultimately bound. At the same time, the hypersensible designates an aesthetic, or, better said perhaps, aesthesiological state of the subject, a
certain affectivity of the body. It could be said to be subjective as well as objective, were ‘subject’ and ‘object’ notions not entirely inadequate to characterize the state of the body and matter at work in the work of art. By envisaging art from the point of view of the hypersensible, philosophy escapes the duality of subject and object, as well as the double pitfall of realism and idealism. (pp. 4-5)

The hypersensible is a difficult concept to grasp. In attempting to depart from a metaphysical framework or a way of thinking, it is hard, if not impossible, to carve out one’s new arrangement without resorting to the categories one is trying to avoid, as Beistegui does here in his first formulation of the hypersensible. Hence the reference to it as a state of matter but not in the way we are used to thinking about it, and to it as a state that is both subjective and objective.

To help with the definition, Beistegui points out that ‘intimations of the hypersensible’ (the subtitle of Chapter 3) are available in Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze. Nietzsche inspires the idea of the hypersensible by rejecting the Platonic concept of mimesis, but he ultimately slides back into binary, representational thinking, according to Beistegui, because he ‘seems to endorse the Aristotelian conception’ of mimesis, which presents imitation as ‘the completion and improvement of nature’ (p. 61). Greater headway is made with Heidegger’s claim that art is a form of truth: true not in the sense that it corresponds to reality as we perceive it, but in that it ‘opens up a world’ (p. 69). Heidegger rejects the ontology of an autonomous subject who confronts a mind-independent world on the basis that our fundamental condition, as he sees it, is one in which we are located and active within ‘worlds’ or realms of shared cares, concerns, and projects, and new or alternative worlds can be ‘opened up’ or ‘brought into being’ through our orientation towards these projects. An artwork can also achieve this, according to Heidegger, because it is an arrangement of materials, e.g. paint, stone, photographic film, etc., that not only opens onto a set of cares and concerns, e.g. the daily dealings in the life of a peasant as revealed in Van Gogh’s depictions of a peasant’s shoes, but does so in a way that makes us aware of the process whereby paint can speak of toil.
For Beistegui, the capacity of materials such as paint, stone, and photographic film to achieve worldliness is a sign that sensibility holds within itself an excess that might be put to new metaphysical work. The idea is an extension of phenomenology’s interest in the conditions that allow a world to come into being, where that world is a structure of which we are a part, as opposed to a domain in which we merely float as isolated subjects. On this account, a sensory experience is not the delivery to us of all that the world can be at that moment, with its content exhausted by what we consciously receive, but a quality or series of qualities that are pregnant with other possible, perceptual meanings and determinations, including the awareness that it might to possible to experience the world otherwise. Beistegui finds the capacity of painting to reveal this excess in Merleau-Ponty’s accounts of Cézanne, Klee and Matisse. This loosening of the joints of the world is taken even further by Deleuze. He provides a metaphysics of ‘unformed, unstable matters’, ‘flows in all directions’, ‘free intensities or nomadic singularities’ underlying the fixed identities that are normally taken to be the occupants of reality (p. 73). Deleuze returns to the philosophies of Spinoza and Leibniz in order to introduce a metaphysics of reality as the ‘expression’ of a more fundamental condition of free-flowing intensities. ‘Expression’ is Deleuze’s term. As Beistegui explains, just as ‘nature, or God, expresses its own essence in attributes and modes… [so] matter expresses itself in forms and individuals’ (p. 74). Matter, Deleuze asserts, has become stratified: otherwise free-floating intensities have become locked into certain structures, yet it is possible through art, philosophy and powerful or affecting experiences to release these intensities so that they might adopt alternative forms and be experienced anew.

Beistegui adopts Deleuze’s ‘expression’ as the ontological mode in terms of which we should think of the hypersensible appearing. The hypersensible is expressed by metaphor, not in the sense that it is the outward display of a previously existing, internal thought, but in that it (metaphor) releases forces from existing forms or arrangements so that they (the forms or arrangements) exceed what they are known to be and are now always on the move perceptually and conceptually, opening onto and becoming other forms and arrangements. A strength of the book is the space it devotes to studies of how
metaphor functions in selected artworks (from Proust, Hölderlin, de Kooning, and Chillida) to reveal the hypersensible. For Beistegui, Proust’s use of metaphor becomes a ‘metamorphosis’ (p. 113): it achieves ‘something like [a] transubstantiation of matter itself’ (p. 113), and ‘opens up of a new space of experience’ (p. 105). He quotes at length the transformation that Albertine undergoes while she is asleep, held captive by her jealous lover, Marcel. Here is a short extract:

Lying at full length on my bed, in a pose so natural that it could never have been adopted deliberately, she seemed to me like a long, flowering stem that had been laid there; and that was what she was: normally I could dream only when she was not there, but at these times the power of dreaming returned as I lay next to her, as if in her sleep she had turned into a plant. (quoted on p. 106)

The claim is that, as metamorphosis, as a transubstantiation of matter, the effect of metaphor is not that matter becomes ‘dematerialized spirit’ or ‘pure Idea’, for this merely conforms to the Platonic schema that gives a nature that is departing the sensible nowhere else to go other than the ideal. Neither is it simply another appearance or form, since this would mean it remains within the domain of the sensible as it is conceived Platonically. Instead, with ‘the excess or the ecstasy of the sensible’, it is as if

another state… initially unperceived… was nonetheless there, latent, or in a virtual state, awaiting its own realization, or its own power of eventuation. This is the extent to which, to use Aristotle’s own vocabulary, metaphor consists of a displacement (epiphora) and a change (phora) from the familiar to the unfamiliar, the habitual to the alien, or the proper to the improper. Metaphor carries out a transition towards the foreign, yet one that we recognize as being of the world itself, for through it the world is revealed differently and as if for the first time. (p. 113; original emphasis)

Metaphor opens onto the hypersensible then through disclosing these other ways of becoming. I could have written ‘other ways of appearing’ or ‘other ways of being’, but this
would have been to revert to the binary metaphysics of appearance versus reality. The idea is not to present Albertine as an essence with a list of perceivable qualities or states. The aim of the metaphysics of becoming is to render problematic the very notion of being as properties inhering in or belonging to substances. The tension between belonging to a substance and not belonging to it, becoming something else, is present in Beistegui’s remark that ‘metaphor carries out a transition towards the foreign, yet one that we recognize as being of the world itself’ (p. 113).

The significance of the hypersensible, Beistegui claims, is that it frees art from Platonic metaphysics so that a new space can be opened up that is “‘proper’ to art” (p. 98). The hypersensible is ‘the realm that is proper to art… because it seems more complete than that of sensation’, where this ‘greater completeness’ (if there can be such a thing) lies in what sensibility offers over and above subjectivity, what might be thought of as the ground of possible forms or becomings, ‘matter in its free state, beyond or, better said perhaps, beneath perception’ (p. 83). But what is ‘proper’ to art? Which or whose concept of art is in play here? Doesn’t the concept of ‘proper’ assume there is an essence of art, or at least an agreed list of properties, that only reinstates the binary thinking – in terms of included and excluded, correspondence and difference – that Beistegui seeks to reject? Since the transition in the twentieth century from the readymade, through happenings and conceptual art, to socially-engaged art practice, there is no longer a set of clearly defined actions or properties which belong exclusively to art practice. Art has become an open concept, appropriating, subverting, challenging or rearticulating any context or discourse with which it comes into contact. One might even go so far as to say it is now a philosophical concept, with a nod to Danto’s assertion (after Hegel) that the work of art is no longer something ‘the eye can descry’ but instead a matter of historical and theoretical formation and context. It would appear that, in questioning the metaphysics of what is essential or proper and what is accidental or an appearance, Beistegui, in the final instance, nevertheless has to resort to its central concept.

This is an exciting thesis on metaphor and metaphysics, but it would have been even more exciting to see it worked out against the history of debate on the relation between
metaphor and metaphysics. Sadly, this doesn’t happen. There is detailed engagement with Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, but not with the philosophers from Nietzsche to the present who have pursued the metaphysics of metaphor, e.g. Black, Ricoeur, Hausman, Kofman, not to mention the place of metaphor within romanticism. As I noted above, Beistegui distances his concept of metaphor from the way metaphor has been understood within philosophy and literary theory, since, he argues, this understanding takes metaphor to represent one thing as something else, meaning it remains tied to the metaphysics of representation. But already published work on the metaphysics of metaphor takes issue with this.

Nietzsche receives short shrift from Beistegui in this regard. Although his rejection of the Platonic concept of mimesis is acknowledged, Beistegui thinks he ultimately reverts to representational thinking because he ‘seems to endorse the Aristotelian conception’ of mimesis, which presents imitation as ‘the completion and improvement of nature’ (p. 61). This is a rushed interpretation of Nietzsche. It is over and done with in just over four pages, and does not do justice to the complexities of his aesthetics. Nietzsche’s aphoristic writing style, and the fact that he adopts a number of contradictory positions on art throughout his writings, make it difficult to state declaratively that ‘Nietzsche asserts this’. But Beistegui seems keen to tie him to a position quickly so that he can offer a response. The idea that he develops from Nietzsche is that there is an excess of the sensible within the sensible’ (p. 61), i.e. there is a force within the sensible that goes beyond itself (lead mistakenly by Nietzsche, so Beistegui maintains, towards completion or improvement). However, Beistegui’s treatment of this is also worrying. He suggests this excess and the direction in which it is headed might be attributable to metaphor, but does not acknowledge that Nietzsche, especially the Nietzsche we find in the 1873 fragment ‘Of Truth and Lie’ and in Sarah Kofman’s Nietzsche and Metaphor, makes a comparable if not similar move (pp. 61-2).

The thesis that a poetic or an artistic metaphor does not just represent an object in an unfamiliar light but actually introduces something new in the world, with the subsequent questions of what this entity is (it is not necessarily a thing) and how it is located in the world, is most often associated with Max Black’s interactionist theory of metaphor,
developed by Paul Ricoeur and Carl Hausman. Ricoeur and Hausman are name-checked by Beistegui, but their extended accounts of the metaphysics of metaphor are not considered. Beistegui admits that the theory of metaphor he will adopt ‘is close to that of Virgil Aldrich and Carl Hausman, as presented by Hagberg’, but engagement with Aldrich, Hausman and Hagberg is kept to a two-sentence observation (p. 101). All three philosophers, he writes, hold the view that the two visual forms in a non-verbal metaphor interact ‘to create “a way of seeing” not previously contained within either visual form and not previously present in the perceptual world’. That is to say, metaphors, to adopt Proust’s term (as Beistegui prefers to do), are ‘a matter of vision’ (p. 101; original emphasis). Because the question of the kind of ontology needed to accommodate the novelty of metaphor is vital for the territory, a chapter or a section on ‘Metaphor as vision in Proust, Aldrich and Hausman’ would have been welcome. As it stands, we have to take the identification of the three positions, and the absence of any complicating differences, on trust.

The book succeeds in taking Heidegger and Deleuze to task for their limited theories of metaphor; ‘limited’ in the sense that they both restrict the figure to movement between the physical and the metaphysical, or the sensible and the ideal, e.g. when we talk about grasping an idea, or seeing what you mean. However, the book is less generous to Ricoeur. The author of La métaphore vive, one of the key studies of metaphor at the intersection of art and philosophy in the twentieth century, receives a mention in a footnote in the Introduction, and even then it is as Derrida’s interlocutor, not as the advocate of a thesis in his own right. This is a serious omission, since Ricoeur in La métaphore vive not only provides a thorough criticism of the line of argument that prompts Heidegger to confine metaphor within the pairings of dualistic metaphysics, but also presents metaphor as a force of life that flexes the joints of the world, moving concepts and perceptions towards transition to realize their capacity for possibility. Sound familiar?

Unfortunately, the lack of engagement with Ricoeur means we do not get an account of the similarities between the two metaphysics of metaphor, and an analysis of the differences between Ricoeur’s Kantianism and an account based upon phenomenology and Deleuze.
As I note above, a strength of the book is the space it devotes to studies of selected artworks, but not all the examples convince. The final chapter is a detailed study of the sculptures of Eduardo Chillida. They use metaphor to express the hypersensible, Beistegui maintains, by ‘turning matter against itself’ (p. 141). This they achieve by defying the weight, mass and gravity of their material so that they can speak of the elements of air, light, fire and water. But some of Beistegui’s descriptions of hypersensitivity in Chillida’s works are quite florid. Take, for example, this appreciation of Chillida’s *A Space for all Men*, a work that involved the hollowing out of part of a sacred mountain in the Canary Islands:

[The excavation] was not just an image of a dwelling place, but the bringing forth of earth as our dwelling place, as the element on which we stand and which we inhabit. It was a question of excavating the earth, of penetrating its depths, not with a view to extracting natural resources and produce energy, but to be one with it, as with the most precious gift that we receive as human beings. (p. 150)

Maybe floridity is appropriate to a metaphysics of art based on excess and the opening of possibilities. This passage, and others like it (for example, pp. 130, 144-5, 153), suggest that the hypersensible might just be a matter of imagination or the ebullience of the critic. The ‘just’ is not meant to diminish ebullience or the imagination but to signal that the book has led us to believe that it is specifically metaphor that is behind art’s capacity to challenge our concept of material reality, but it is not clear where the metaphor is in this example. The two-term structure of a metaphor would have provided conceptual horizons within which to locate the abundant meanings offered by Beistegui. Interestingly, both Ricoeur’s and Hausman’s studies of art and metaphor devote a lot of time to the epistemologies and ontologies needed to tackle the fact that metaphor in art seems to be a paradoxical combination of artistic creation and worldly discovery. There is scope for further discussion on the contrast between ‘reading into’ a work (creation) and ‘finding something within’ a work (discovery), and even whether this contrast applies in a scheme that rejects the neat ascription of a property to one side of a division or the other.
This is an important book on the place of metaphor within aesthetics, where aesthetics has been rethought from the perspective of a new metaphysics, but its contribution to debate on metaphor and metaphysics is limited by its lack of familiarity with recent literature. Beistegui introduces an ontology of excess, an ontology where there is always a fund of possibility that enables one thing to become something else. Metaphor is the force that flexes the joints of this ontology, moving concepts and perceptions towards transition to realize (but never to exhaust) their capacity for possibility. The book would have benefited from a chapter in which previous theories of metaphor as ontology are compared and contrasted, as a way of qualifying the nature of the excess proposed by Beistegui alongside other contender concepts from his predecessors. Broader ontological questions that remain are whether the concept of what is ‘proper’ to art is available to a metaphysics devoid of essences, and how aesthetics in general might be thought or conducted in the absence of binary distinctions. Finally, as a position that Beistegui is contesting, it has to be asked: ‘Who still conceives of art as representation?’.

Isn’t this arguably one of philosophy’s oversimplifications of art, made in the interest of arriving as quickly as possible at a set of distinctions for development or resistance as part of a metaphysical or epistemological thesis? Against this are art historical studies to the effect that any so-called ‘representation’ is in fact a complex visual composition in which elements are arranged according to formal constraints and (often competing) religious, political or institutional values. In Beistegui’s favour, his target is a philosophical conception of art, but given the focus on metaphor, and the fact that so much work on metaphor in aesthetics from Nietzsche onwards has been against representation, more could have been done to acknowledge that the theorization of metaphor beyond representation is already underway.