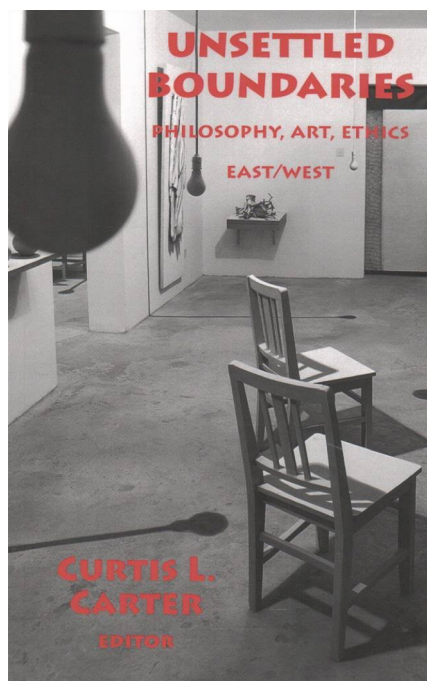


Book received:

Curtis L. Carter. (Ed.). (2017). *Unsettled Boundaries: Philosophy, Art, Ethics East/West*. Milwaukee: Marquette UP

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Not to be confused with Robert E. Ficken’s *Unsettled Boundaries* (2003), this is a selection of papers presented at a conference held at Marquette University in October of 2011. Edited by Curtis L. Carter, the volume seeks to explore how “Chinese and Western authors mutually attempt to integrate ideas from their respective Chinese and Western aesthetic theories and art practices into their respective contemporary theories”. The text is divided into three parts; I: Philosophy and Art; II: Art and Society, and III: Art East and West. Notable among the essays included are those by Jason Wirth and Richard Shusterman which focus on various themes that link western aesthetics to Chinese aesthetics, while Chinese researchers Peng Feng, Liu Yuedi, Cheng Xiangzhan and Wang Chunchen address dominant issues in contemporary Chinese aesthetics with a view to their relationship with Western analogues. “Both sets of essays draw upon the traditional Chinese aesthetics referencing Confucius’s teachings in conjunction with western analytic philosophy and pragmatism”.

In a volume that brings together disparate conference papers, labored ligatures are usually conceived to articulate sundry essays into a cohesive whole. Having been composed *lato sensu* to explore “common themes running throughout past and contemporary views on philosophy, art and ethics” and ascertain “developing connections emerging between eastern and western philosophical and artistic cultures”, the volume reflects the tensions and the difficulty involved in focusing dispersed energies and piloting them into coincidence. Yet in spite of this, the editor has managed to put together a relatively consistent text with essays that address the general outcomes expressed in both title and introduction.

This volume raises an issue of methodology. Quantifying “the aesthetic” in diverse cultures in order to “find common ground between western and eastern aesthetics and art practices”

can be an unenviable task, one where the researcher discusses communities of aesthetic judgment (eastern; western) and then fetches authors and material to offer as archetypes (Confucius; Marx; Wittgenstein) in order to make a case. There are two inherent drawbacks to this method: 1 – In Kant, for example, aesthetic judgment is subjective and in no manner linked to an absolute concept; aesthetic judgments are articulated with the belief that others *should* agree with them. The community of universal agreement with regard to aesthetic judgment (*sensus communis*), then, remains entirely virtual because empirical aesthetic communities are, at the very least, problematic, and 2 – Mazhar Hussain and Robert Wilkinson, when editing *The Pursuit of Comparative Aesthetics: An Interface Between the East and West* (Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2006) warn us that “In general, claims to have identified *the* Indian or Chinese (and so forth) attitude to or way of conceptualizing phenomenon *x* are to be viewed with the greatest circumspection”. Perhaps this is their acknowledgement of the fact that, in the broad-spectrum critical approach that is inherent to texts – especially composite ones like this – that deal with comparative aesthetics, writers must rely on a typology of cultural archetypes in order to formulate interpretive criteria. My trouble with this analytic approach is not just that I am not an enthusiast of purposive prototypes, but that I am distrustful of paradigms used to decipher and compare millenary cultures such as the Chinese over long periods of time. There is a methodological supposition behind this approach, that in some way archetypes hover over creative activity and even regulate the reading and meaning of distinct cultures and their artifacts.

Having said this, I should add that these essays, wisely curated by Professor of Aesthetics Curtis L. Carter, generate the type of dialogical environment that is – or at any rate should be – the salient characteristic of Aesthetics analysis. The essays’ discrete character yields a productive tension that encourages intense debate and a more comprehensive reflection regarding the nature of comparative aesthetics and, more broadly, comparative philosophy. In his essay, Jason Wirth summarizes the importance of this deliberation when he asks: “After all is said and done, what is comparative philosophy? Is it merely the art of lining up our philosophical apples and oranges? (p. 16).

Recommended.

Dr. Alfonso J. García Osuna
Editor