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**STUDYING MEDIA
FROM THE MIDDLE OF THINGS**

REVIEW

Maja Bak Herrie

Aarhus University

Department of Art History, Aesthetics and Culture, and Museology, Denmark

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Jacob Lund and Ulrik Schmidt (eds.) (2020): *Medieæstetik - en introduktion*.

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Opening Jacob Lund and Ulrik Schmidt's *Medieæstetik*, one is immediately placed in the thick of things after a short introduction gives way to a catalogue of 15 entries each describing their own facet of contemporary media aesthetics. The book starts *in medias res*, so to speak, as the reader is presented with a dialogue between various positions, connections, and negotiations between Scandinavian researchers in the field of aesthetics and media: images are no more important than sound, space no more important than time; dating apps, search engines, and algorithms are taken just seriously as canonised superstars as Marcel Duchamp or Guillaume Apollinaire. Could a unison, steadily progressing text with clear-cut distinctions have been an easier inauguration to the compound and versatile concept of *media aesthetics* for the uninitiated reader? Perhaps. But the open-ended and non-hierarchical form of the book never distracts from its purpose as an introduction, due to the role *aesthetics* plays throughout the book, that is, as both a central, critical approach and a recurring point of orientation. Furthermore, the dialogical format emphasises and communicates that media aesthetics is both too heterogeneous and young to be completely contained: as a new field, it cannot be delimited to a particular academic discipline, but is rather a set of perspectives that relates to "forms of perception, relations, and senses of reality,"¹ (p.12) that technological and mediatic phenomena contribute to.

Studying media through sense perception

So how do media mean and make sense in a particularly *aesthetic* way, or, put differently, how do notions of *media* and *aesthetics* interrelate and strengthen one another when combined? While the introduction is short, it does present some key definitions that provide the reader with

important guidance, before she plunges into the recesses of contemporary studies of cultural expressions and technologically mediated experiences.

First and foremost, a crucial demarcation is made in the positioning of the central term *medium*. While *media studies* as a particular academic discipline typically deals with the “history, structures, and economy of mass media” and “draws on communication studies, sociology, and journalism,” (p. 12), *media aesthetics* is concerned with the ways in which media mean, that is, in questions of sensation and perception related to processes of mediation. Or, to quote the editors, “media aesthetics is less interested in the ways in which something – e. g. the newest iPhone – appears as an isolated product of design and more interested in the various relations of effects, which media take part in and give rise to.” (p. 12). ‘Medium’ literally means ‘intermediate’ or ‘middle’, to draw on the Latin denotations, and the studies of aesthetic mediation take this middle ground seriously. “Vision is caught or is made in the middle of things,” as Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it,² and in order to understand this becoming of vision (or touching, hearing, tasting, or smelling), one has to start from the middle ground, that is, from the very process of mediation. “A media aesthetic perspective,” the editors stress,

place particular emphasis on the materiality of media and on dissolving a clear division between subject and object and between humans, environment and machine. It breaks with an understanding of media as representation and as conveyors of content that exists independently of the media making it available, in favour of a notion of media as world-constituting, that is, as active co-creators of our world views and behaviour. (p. 11)

This focus on *mediation* (rather than “medium” in the singular) is primarily expressed in the structuring of the book’s entries in four parts: ‘Positions’ presents broader interdisciplinary approaches such as “media genealogy,” (Knut Ove Eliassen) “media archaeology,” (Anders Skare Malvik), “posthumanism,” (Jacob Wamberg) and a particular “media-critical optics’ offered by Ina Blom. This first part emphasizes that the media aesthetician approaches *mediation* as a complex perspective for understanding, potentially making use of a wide range of inspirations, including, e.g., media philosophy, medium theory, and critical theory. ‘Framings’ points to media modalities such as “space,” (Ulrik Schmidt) “time,” (Jacob Lund) “image,” (A. S. Aurora Hoel) and “sound” (Rune Søchting). This second part emphasizes a broad, perceptual engagement with the objects of study in media aesthetics. Finally, ‘Connections’ and ‘Exchanges’ mark the many links between different matters of concern related to contemporary media and technology. These last two parts emphasize that media aesthetics is to be understood as a “fundamental discipline of cultural studies in the 21st century,” reopening aesthetic thinking “as a *critical science*” (p. 13). These two parts of the book include topics as different as “infrastructure,” (Eivind

Røssaak) “data and archives,” (Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho and Kristin Veel) “software and interface,” (Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Bro Pold) “design,” (Rosita Satell and Anders V. Munch) “experience,” (Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen) “body, gender, and identity,” (Louise Yung Nielsen) and “subjectivity” (Torsten Andreassen).

Broad conceptions of aesthetics

By indicating this important shift in perspective from an understanding of “medium” as an object of study and “media” as collections of specific artefacts or technologies, to medium and media as ideas or concepts to understanding certain practices and experiences, the editors position the book in connection with other important media aesthetic publications, including *Thinking Media Aesthetics* (2013) and *Medieestetikk* (2009), edited and authored by Liv Hausken, *Teknologi, medier, estetikk* (2015/2016) (a special issue of *Agora*) edited by Knut Ove Eliassen, *Medienästhetik* (2013) (a special issue of *ZfM (Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft)*) edited by Erich Hörl and Mark B. N. Hansen, and the updated and expanded second edition of *New Media, Old Media* (2016) edited by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Anna Watkins Fisher, and Thomas Keenan. While the encounter between *mediation* and *aesthetics* seems to be both very productive for and central to the rationale of the book, it is unfortunate that it is not further elaborated in the introduction. The editors occasionally point to more traditional understandings and disciplinary approaches to aesthetics, but do not elaborate on these connections in further detail.

An example of this is the implicit yet important role played by a broad conception of aesthetics throughout the book. Whether it is in investigations of *post-industrial machines* that exploit “thinking, attention, memory, language, emotions, and sense perception” (Ina Blom, p. 26), in media aesthetic conceptions of *big data* and the archival uncertainties connected to it (Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho and Kristin Veel), or in studies of feminist activism and pro-ana networks (Louise Yung Nielsen), a broad, non-hierarchical approach to aesthetics is required. “All areas of cultural life and society that concern the context for sensing” (p. 12) should in principle be covered, the introduction states. But how does one grasp – and even navigate – such a broad field of study? An exhaustive survey of different notions and uses of “aesthetics” throughout the history of the concept would have been excessive, but the text would have benefitted from some select references to earlier, historical conceptions of aesthetics, that emphasize the discipline as broader than the more specialized subject matters of the “traditional arts as specialized aesthetic subdomains” (p. 12). The Aristotelian idea of “media” (or at least the etymologically related terms *to metaxy* and *perièchon* (p. 111)) has found its way into the introduction as well as the entry on “space”. Why not also mention A. G. Baumgarten’s idea of aesthetics³ or point to pre-Hegelian ideas of a broad aesthetics not pertaining solely to the arts?⁴ Although they belong to a different

time (in the 1700s, philosophical aesthetics and art as an independent field was only incipient, leaving room for broader discussions of the relation between sensory perception and knowledge relevant beyond the art forms alone),⁵ such connections could have helped further clarifying and situating the meaning of the compound term *media aesthetics*.

(Digital) aesthetics today

In 15 thematic chapters, *Medieæstetik* depicts the present fields of “aesthetically oriented media research” and “media-oriented aesthetic research” (p. 15) by providing the reader with theoretical introductions to a range of fundamental problems related to modern media and their cultural influence in a philosophical, aesthetic, and historical optics. While this reviewer could have wished for even more theoretical connections between the complex notions of mediation and aesthetics, especially in light of the history of aesthetics, the book is a highly recommended introduction to the field of media aesthetics. It represents a good opportunity to discuss not just the meaning of *aesthetics* today – that is, its status as a nerve centre of recent and historical theories and analytics in its own right – but also how aesthetic insights can contribute to ongoing discussions of the cultural, social, and political meaning of mediation.

The book presents a multi-faceted, thorough, and critical introduction to media aesthetics as a specific field. This shows not least in the ambitious objective of the project: to introduce to “leading approaches, perspectives, and theoretical positions” in a media aesthetic perspective, (p. 15) to “central aspects of the ways in which different media frame sensory perception by focusing attention on space, time, image, and sound respectively,” (p. 17) to “different aspects of collecting, organising, distributing, and presenting information in today’s digital media culture,” (p. 18) and to discuss “experience, subjectivity, embodiment, and identity” in the light of media aesthetics (p. 20). As a whole, it is an ambitious introduction, which not only contributes by outlining and introducing to the field, but also by going into depth with new and diverse problems related to contemporary digital media culture. In this way, the book has obvious relevance for researchers and students as well as professionals from different fields of study, e. g. media- and information studies, art history and visual culture, comparative literature, and more broadly, aesthetic communication, experience-, interaction-, and digital design.

¹ All translations from Norwegian and Danish are made by the author.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ted Toadvine, and Leonard Lawlor, eds., *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 354.

³ Alexander G. Baumgarten, *Ästhetik I–II*, trans. Dagmar Mirbach (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2007).

⁴ Oiva Kuisma, Sanna Lehtinen, and Harri Mäcklin, “Introduction: From Baumgarten to Contemporary Aesthetics,” in *Paths from the Philosophy of Art to Contemporary Aesthetics*, eds. Oiva Kuisma, Sanna Lehtinen, and Harri Mäcklin (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Aesthetics, 2019), 11.

⁵ Jørn Erslev Andersen, *Sansning og erkendelse* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2012), 237.

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