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Iain D. Thomson

## Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity



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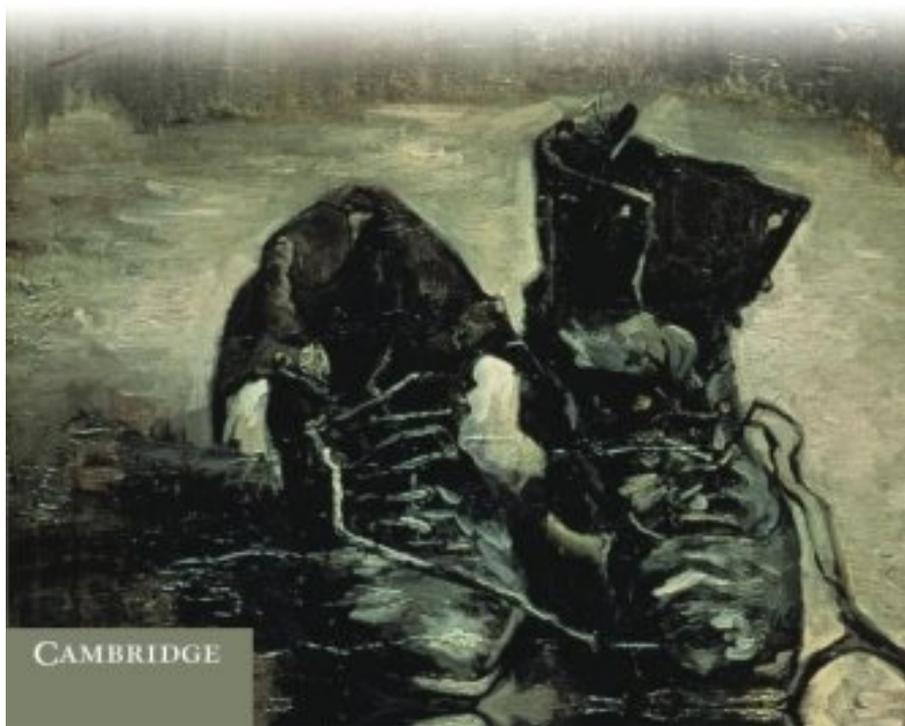
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## Review

"Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity is a fascinating, engaging, and deeply insightful book that will have a revolutionary impact on the understanding of Heidegger's later thought, as well as make important contributions to our understanding of postmodernism, not just in philosophy, but in culture studies more broadly. Thomson's central thesis is that Heidegger's later thought is animated by the development of a distinctively postmodern sensibility. The sense in which his thought is postmodern, however, does not conform to the standard conceptions of postmodernism regnant in current literature. Rather, Heidegger's postmodernism lies in his sense that the late modern technologised epoch in which we live hides within itself the possibility of 'another god', a paradigm shift that takes us beyond the modern into a future we cannot yet envision."

William Blattner, Georgetown University

"Iain Thomson has a real knack for getting Heidegger to speak to contemporary concerns. Against the background of Thomson's pathbreaking interpretation of Heidegger's idea of 'ontotheology', the essays in this volume illuminate a sense of 'postmodernity' that responds to the nihilism of modernity's technological paradigm without falling into nostalgia for a single meaning of being. The resulting pluralism is adroitly explored through examples from high art and popular culture in ways that make Heidegger's difficult late works come alive."

Steven Crowell, Rice University

"I learned a lot from Iain Thomson's book. He has a masterful grasp of the diverse art forms he discusses and he writes about even the most obscure thinkers with verve and clarity. One can trust his critical evaluations, especially his appreciation of the ontological pluralism that stands at the center of Heidegger's hope for a postmodern understanding of being."

Hubert L. Dreyfus, University of California, Berkeley

"Heidegger is the focal point of the history of continental philosophy. He gathers together the movements before him - transcendental idealism, existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics - and profoundly influences those that follow - post-structuralism, the Frankfurt school, postmodernism. It is the last of these that Iain Thomson writes about in his excellent new book, Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity, using the topic of art to mutually illuminate Heidegger's later writings and postmodernity ... I find works like this extremely heartening. Thomson's explanations of Heidegger's difficult later works are unfailingly clear,

carefully laying out the arguments and explaining all technical terms. Furthermore, the book's organization guides the reader so smoothly through the steps of his discussion that it should make knee-jerk objections about Heideggerian obscurantism much harder to make ... After reading his book, I now see some of Heidegger's ideas and writings in a new light ... By inspiring and drawing out new ideas, Iain Thomson's book takes its rightful place along with Julian Young's excellent Heidegger's Philosophy of Art as an important piece of scholarship on this topic. In keeping with its own precepts, it does not definitively settle Heidegger's views on this topic once and for all but, like a work of art, opens up new questions and pathways for thought."

Lee Braver, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews

"As a self-professed philosophical coyote, Iain Thomson resists any attempt to place him on either side of the analytic-continental divide, preferring instead to steal back and forth between these rival camps ... Had [he] been writing books like this thirty years ago, I suspect that we philosophers would all be a bit more coyote-like than we are today. Although Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity is not the first clearly written, accessible study of Heidegger, or even Heidegger's philosophy of art, it is certainly about the best ... Thomson's interests are wide-ranging and infectious, and ... [his] hermeneutical prowess enables him to shuttle back and forth between highbrow philosophy and lowbrow culture (Nietzsche and comic books, for instance) without treating his subject matter with either unwanted reverence or condescension ... It is his discussion of Heidegger's theory of art, the great 'saving power' for our destitute age, which particularly marks [this book] as such a significant contribution to Heidegger scholarship ... Thomson makes a persuasive case that the phenomenological interpretation of van Gogh's 1886 painting, 'A Pair of Shoes', is the more important section of this text precisely because it performs, before our eyes, the immanent transcendence of aesthetic experience ... His interpretation does help resolve some long-standing controversies within Heidegger scholarship (about what Heidegger meant by 'the nothing', for instance), while also deflating the charges leveled against Heidegger himself by Meyer Schapiro ... Whether or not Thomson's reading ultimately convinces others, it will certainly be impossible for future Heidegger scholars to ignore ... This book should rival Young's as the best work yet on Heidegger's philosophy of art, with a few added chapters thrown in to ensure that it resists easy summary, offering greater riches than its title suggests."

Jonathan Salem-Wiseman, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism

"Written in a meticulous and engaging style, this book will prove useful to anybody interested in Heidegger's treatment of art, those working through the notoriously opaque *Beiträge*, or those interested in extending Heidegger's thought into new frontiers ... The author's attempts at artistic analysis show the value of Heidegger's influence for contemporary thought, even while sometimes leaving Heidegger's work itself behind ... This book serves as an excellent follow-up to the author's 2005 book, *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*."

S. Montgomery Ewegen, The Review of Metaphysics

"Iain Thomson's *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* is an exceptional piece of Heidegger scholarship, providing detailed, informative analysis while remaining highly readable ... Thomson shows that Heidegger's analysis of art - particularly Van Gogh's 'A Pair of Shoes' - is aimed at demonstrating how art overflows conceptual boundaries and thereby reveals the plural givenness of meaning. With startling originality, Thomson both explains the use of the three artworks in 'Origin of the Work of Art' in terms of Heidegger's history of being and refutes Schapiro's famous criticism, arguing that Heidegger is not suggesting that the painting simply represents a peasant woman's shoes. Rather, it represents both the shoes and a plurality of other possible meaning gestalts suggested by the umbra of 'nothingness' that surrounds the shoes - the unformed textures and colors of the background - one of which is the figure of a woman ... *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* is filled with compelling insights not only about Heidegger, but also about the nature of art, modernity, and humanity's hopes for the future. Thomson has remarked that when one speaks of

ontotheology or postmodernity philosophers tend to look for the door. This excellent book will surely change that."

Irene McMullin, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*

"... [Thomson] is a teacher, deeply concerned to impart, passionate about the subject, infectiously fascinating ... This book is a circumspect, analytical, often profoundly critical, examination of the key role that art plays in Heidegger's philosophy. [It] convincingly demonstrates, in the most critically efficient terms, that it is not possible for the theoretical discourse of contemporary aesthetics to assimilate Heidegger without disturbing that discourse to its core. Thomson's alternative Heideggerian proposal is that art (more accurately, the 'ontological epiphany' that art elicits) provides one particularly powerful vehicle of awakening for this alternative mode of thinking; for art has the capacity to stimulate the kind of meditative thinking capable of transcending the dominant metaphysical infrastructure of late-modern cognition."

Kieran Cashell, *Journal of Critical Realism*

#### About the Author

Iain D. Thomson is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of New Mexico, where he also serves as Director of Graduate Studies. He is the author of *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), and his articles have appeared in numerous scholarly journals, essay collections and reference works.

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