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Il piacere delle immagini: Un tema aristotelico nella riflessione moderna sull'arte by Paulo Butti de Lima

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Paulo Butti de Lima. *Il piacere delle immagini: Un tema aristotelico nella riflessione moderna sull'arte.*

Biblioteca dell'“Archivum Romanicum” Serie I: Storia, Letteratura, Paleografia 412. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2012. 200 pp. €23. ISBN: 978-88-222-6229-5.

This is a book for advanced specialists in one field: the history and reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*. *Il piacere delle immagini* focuses on one sentence in that text and on its *Nachleben* in sixteenth-century commentaries and beyond; de Lima's book is also on what, in all probability, is a visualization of that dictum in one of Rubens's paintings, the *Head of the Medusa* (1610–25).

The *Poetics* is famous for the concept of *mimesis*: Aristotle argues that we delight in imitation because it is a natural behavior of human beings and because we learn from looking at imitations. The acquisition of knowledge is thus a pleasurable experience. As confirmation of his argument, Aristotle says (in Bywater's

translation): “though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies” (IV, 1448b 9–12). Aristotle therefore argues that we love to behold representations of things that we would not like to see in real life.

The first part of the book under review (actually a chapter) discusses this idea in the manner of sound classical philology: the textual basis; similar passages in Aristotle and the relationship to the concept of *mimesis*; and the link to Platonism, Horaz, and to Plutach. De Lima also engages in a vivid and succinct discussion of the larger theoretical consequences of Aristotle’s puzzling argument.

Now one would expect that the book continues in this interpretative vein, yet the following part of *Il piacere delle immagini* provides the reader with an interminable list of mostly sixteenth-century authors, the heyday of commentaries on the *Poetics*. All these authors seem to have been more or less puzzled as to what to make of Aristotle’s idea that we enjoy viewing images of repulsive bodies. Moreover, authors like Ludovico Castelvetro, who wrote a voluminous book on the *Poetics*, paid comparatively little attention to that passage. De Lima also meticulously documents the reception of a textual variant — the “lowest” (*atimos*) become “wild [*agrios*] animals” — that enriched the iconography of Aristotle’s dictum from the time of the Arab commentators to the eighteenth century. Some commentators, like Gregorio Comanini, also mention monsters in this context.

The third part of *Il piacere delle immagini* is on the history of Rubens’s *Medusa*, and on repulsive images that seem to have been commissioned from Leonardo’s time on. The *Medusa* becomes a genre painting, which reassembles all the different iconographic ingredients that have been gathered around the passage in the *Poetics*. De Lima concludes that there is no direct evidence that the master painter was familiar with that passage, yet the various iconographic elements that were introduced in the commentary tradition of the *Poetics* must have made up the backdrop. The fourth part (again, actually a chapter) briefly envisages developments in the reception of the passage in question from Lessing to Kant.

What one misses is an exposition of the greater contexts in which these commentaries were written and a broader discussion of how Aristotle’s dictum on repulsive images may have catered, for instance, to Vesalius’s *De humani corporis fabrica* (who is mentioned only once), to mannerist literature, or to broadsheets with monsters. Also, a clearer discussion of the choices of the texts would have been as helpful as a longer general introduction to the topic, scope, and limits of the book, just as this reviewer misses a succinct summary of what has been achieved. The second part of the book turns out to be a list of all the available textual evidence (that makes immensely tedious reading, even for the specialist) without coming to conclusions or attempting a synthesis. Fortunately, the book has an index. It may therefore be used as a mini-encyclopedia of Aristotle’s dictum in the *Poetics* and a (very learned) inquiry into Rubens’s *Medusa*, all of which may certainly be useful to specialists in both fields.

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