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Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education (Book Review)

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Barbara Maria Stafford. *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994. Pp. 350. \$35.

The Artful Science of Barbara Stafford's title names an eighteenth-century practice of an "instructive, cross-disciplinary, and entertaining spectacle, based on a conversational give and take" (279) that, she argues, succumbed to the attacks of a text-oriented theory but that can still provide a model and an inspiration for communication and education in the video era. Stafford's study is archaeological, in both a Foucauldian and a more general sense; she wants to excavate a culture that has been largely obliterated and to demonstrate that there are massive shifts in basic intellectual and perceptual frameworks that are typically obscure to those who are undergoing them but that may be clarified centuries later. This richly illustrated and densely documented study suggests that the eighteenth century can be seen as the hinge between a culture oriented to the image and one dominated by the text. The light of the Enlightenment turns out to have a double sense. Literally conceived, that light was the illumination cast on and by spectacles, exhibitions, and demonstrations that sought to educate a public by simultaneously showing and explaining the workings or products of nature; metaphorically understood, it was the inner or strictly intellectual source of a militant reason that found itself struggling against what it took to be the dangers of charlatanry and superficiality in artful science. Stafford sees a number of tendencies that coalesce, more or less by chance, in a high baroque culture of entertaining educational games, recreations, and displays. These forces included the Jesuits' cultivation of spectacle as well as the growth of a public eager for learning outside official and limited academic channels. A new middle-class audience, including women and children, provided a new market for books, pamphlets, games, and courses of public instruction that promoted a truly popular science.

Stafford has accomplished the monumental task of reconstructing a culture based on the material remains of these practices. A brief review does not provide the space necessary to give some account of the wealth of the material brought to light here. It is not a complete surprise to see that the eighteenth century pioneered so much of the popular science that we are familiar with by means of children's chemistry sets, science fairs, and books of mathematical puzzles and recreations. What is more striking is Stafford's reconstruction and analysis of the voices that were opposed to these entertainments and her suggestion that much of the high art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should be understood in terms of the struggle between the entertainers and their opponents. If a contemporary analogue of much that Stafford discusses could be found in today's science museums and planetariums, which encourage spectators to manipulate various devices in order to learn things for themselves by direct experience, we ought not to draw the conclusion that nothing has changed.

It is precisely the identification of these activities and institutions with children that would lend strength to Stafford's argument that the text-oriented enlighteners were successful in marginalizing practices that they saw as infantile amusements likely to lead us astray. The iconoclastic tendencies of Protestantism, the philosophical skepticism of the senses evident for example in David Hume's argument against miracles, and the rise of learned professions that saw a need to distinguish themselves from amateurs all contributed to an attack on a culture that gloried in the senses. The Gypsy and the charlatan became the grid through which more dour enlighteners presented their condemnation of popular visual education. And there was indeed a good deal of deception practiced, as Stafford shows in her amusing discussion of Cagliostro or Vaucanson's automatons.

This book will clearly be required reading for historians of art and science for the period it discusses. As a philosopher, I found it helpful to see the suggestions of a larger context for many of the transformations and oddities of philosophy from Hume to Hegel. It would be instructive, for example, to see the polemical edge in the eighteenth-century invention of aesthetics, involving a sharp separation between the aesthetic and the cognitive (given a definitive statement by Kant) as a move within the enlighteners' campaign to separate knowledge and entertainment. The primacy of verbal art in the romantics and in Hegel's immensely influential aesthetics might be seen as a sign of the same transformation. While these are not Stafford's examples, they are perhaps an indication of the fecundity of the site that she is excavating.

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