Since the focus of critical theory has recently shifted from aesthetics to the media, this book will probably not receive the attention it deserves. It provides a clear and comprehensive account of modern marxist aesthetics — its essential directions and arguments — through the major representatives Lukacs, Benjamin, Brecht, Adorno, Marcuse and the Althusserians, in that (chronological) order, and also adds a political dimension to the debate which is lacking from previous analyses: the question of the emancipatory function of the art work. The author takes seriously the (explicit or implicit) claim made by the aesthetic theorists of the '30s and '60s that certain works of art have an enlightening effect. She therefore argues, quite rightly, that in order to support this claim, aesthetic theories 'need to specify the practical basis within immediate experience for a changed consciousness. An account of the enlightening potential of the art work must attempt to find the foundations within the recipient's consciousness for a new, emancipated way of thinking'. What is required is a "specifically democratic account of the process of ideological change", which can show "that the process of enlightenment does not merely involve the substitution of a correct consciousness, but crucially concerns the appropriateness of the response of the art work to the recipient's own dissatisfaction with his/her alienated consciousness" (p.2).

In support of her analysis, Pauline Johnson draws on Agnes Heller's The Theory of Need in Marx (1976) and her idea "that daily life in capitalism generates certain needs whose satisfaction requires the overcoming of an alienated social life". She concludes from this that "an aesthetic theory which successfully explains the emancipatory impact of the work of art is necessarily founded upon a convincing account of the radical needs produced by modern social life", it needs to "establish the specifically dissatisfied character of an alienated consciousness and the appropriateness of the response of the true perspective of the work of art" (p.5).

The author works her way through all the major writings of the various theorists in order to judge the success of their theoretic enterprise in the light of the above questions. Lukacs' early theory of realism is regarded as unsuccessful because it is unable to explain "how the recipient is able to recognise that the work of art's totalising outlook offers a better, a truer perspective". The division between the falsity of everyday (fetishised) thinking and the truth of the art work remains, and Lukacs cannot explain "how realism is able to enter the dynamic relationship with everyday thinking" (p.281). The later Lukacs is more successful. His last work The Specificity of the Aesthetic (so far untranslated) overcomes the previous dilemma through the category of "species consciousness", which establishes "a totalising relation between individual particularity and social life" (p. 37). According to the author, Lukacs' Aesthetic is able to show "that the dialectics of everyday life creates the need for a totalising species consciousness. The falsity of everyday experience and the truth of the artistic reflection of reality thereby enter into a dynamic relationship .... " (p. 46).

Having declared Lukacs'solution as the correct one, the author then contrasts it with the remaining aesthetic theorists, all of whom are deemed to be basically unable to equal Lukacs' achievement. First there is Benjamin, who gets the best treatment. Even though his position is contrasted unfavourably with Lukacs on the basis of his inferior — antiprogressivist and mystical — philosophy of history, the author acknowledges the 'humanistic' position which he shares with Lukacs and concedes that there could be a "fruitful dialogue" between both theories. Whereas Benjamin gets a sympathetic hearing, all other theorists do not fare very well. Brecht fails because of his conspiratorial position. Adorno's attempt "to establish the subversive capacity of authentic art leads to a paradox. While he gives to the serious work of art a formally subversive ability, the way in which he analyses the character of everyday thinking prevents the exercise of this capacity .... " (p.94). For Marcuse, "radical needs have been excluded from experience in a one-dimensional society. Revolutionary
praxis involves the subversion of, and qualitative change in the character of felt needs” (p.100). And the Althusserians (Althusser, Macherey/Bakhtarin and Eagleton) get the worst deal. Their attempt to develop an aesthetic theory is deemed to be altogether unsuccessful.

Whereas the reconstruction and explication of the various aesthetic theories is very sound, based on a thorough reading of the works and not relying parasitically on secondary material, the evaluation and ‘political’ judgment gives rise to some objections. Firstly, Agnes Heller’s theory of needs, which provides the ultimate yardstick of the author’s judgment, follows, directly or indirectly, Lukacs’ theoretical position. This largely explains why Lukacs’ aesthetic theory is credited with providing the most convincing solution to the question of the enlightening capacity of art, and why all other theoretical proposals are basically judged from a Lukacsian perspective. Secondly, if the author is right, then ironically the realist novel of the 19th century, which Lukacs espouses as the model for his theory, must be considered as the fulfilment of the demand for an enlightening art work, whereas the works of Brecht or Kafka or Beckett are virtually denied an emancipatory potential. The author does not address herself to the relationship of aesthetic theory and art works at all — and therefore disregards the aspects of reception. Apart from the fact that the enlightening effect of art does not reside in the text or work alone, but crucially depends on the ‘reading’ (an important question in the light of her major thesis), it needs pointing out that Lukacs’ position is idealist if it assumes that one individual work of art or the oeuvre of one individual author alone can possibly provide a totalising perspective. Is it not rather the conflict and interplay between different texts and different authors (e.g. of modernist and realist writers) which have provided a more totalising perspective and which had an enlightening effect in the latter half of the 20th century?

The insistence on the classic realist text violates recent insights into the mechanisms of communication and aesthetic reception. Furthermore, it seems surprising that the author attempts to honour one theoretical position, that of Lukacs, as the only correct one. Is it not, rather, that all the various theories contributed something to the debate and to the central question raised. Was not the process of enlightenment which these theorists hoped to initiate in the ’20s/’30s and the ’60s the result of a constructive debate and dialectic interplay in which no one can be declared the ultimate winner? After all, Brecht, Adorno and Marcuse had much more impact on the intellectual movement in the ’60s than did Lukacs and, in recent years, Benjamin seems to have provided the most important stimuli for aesthetics and media theory.

There is one last objection to be raised. Pauline Johnson dismisses, in her final conclusions, the "false democracy of a radical populist alternative" — i.e. the attempt by some leftist intellectuals to "describe alternative cultural styles" and to "locate a nascent resistant consciousness within a variety of popular culture practices" (p.148). The author’s rejection of popular forms seems to be at odds with her search for a democratic account of the foundations within immediate experience for an enlightened consciousness. If the masses of people never read the classical enlightened art-works, then through which medium can they ever be reached? If popular culture and the mass media do not provide the channel for such critical consciousness-raising, what will? Are the latter merely producers of false consciousness, without any insight into radical needs — as some leftist media theory would have it? — or do they have the potential to provide the ground for a revolutionary consciousness? The book leaves these questions aside, even though they are being raised by some of the theorists whom she discusses — notably Benjamin. It is here where the tradition of critical aesthetic theory can most fruitfully be continued.