

## REVIEW

# An Intense Defence of Gadamer's Significance for Aesthetics

Nicholas Davey: *Unfinished Worlds: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. 190 pp.  
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Nicholas Davey is one of the most important philosophers working in the footsteps of Gadamer's hermeneutics today and in his recent *Unfinished Worlds: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, and Gadamer* he focuses on assessing the significance of Gadamer's thought for aesthetics more intently than before. The starting point of Davey's account is Gadamer's attempt to absorb aesthetics into hermeneutics, which he believes has some significant consequences for this field. From a Gadamerian perspective the thought that art is primarily concerned with pleasurable feelings and sensations, as something Davey calls "traditional aesthetics" assumes, is decidedly wrongheaded. Gadamer's hermeneutic approach to art reveals, Davey insists, art's relation to truth and the significant cognitive content artworks can possess. To grasp how art achieves the cognitive effects Gadamer attributes to it requires a transformation in our understanding of the experience of art. The experience is not a case of distanced perception, but a form of close participation. Davey tries to replace the traditional picture of how an artwork works with a hermeneutical poetics for which Gadamer's famous critique of aesthetic consciousness lays a foundation.

The book is a great illustration of Davey's thoroughgoing knowledge of Gadamer's work and it shows the author's enthusiasm towards this towering figure of hermeneutic philosophy. Davey calls Gadamer's aesthetics "a rare intellectual achievement" (42). Though people less acquainted with Gadamer's work will gain a good introduction to some of the most important threads of Gadamer's hermeneutics from the book, it is by no means a mere exegetical study. About his goals, Davey writes that his intention is to think "with Gadamer" and to develop "what his hermeneutical aesthetics suggests but does not state" (13). The author's belief on the contemporary significance of Gadamer's thinking is clearly high and he corrects some misconceptions, such as the accusation of

traditionalism leveled against Gadamer, that have made some downplay his significance for a modernist aesthetics.

Though Davey does try to transcend Gadamer's own context, the terminology of the book is still very much rooted in Gadamerian soil and it would have given us non-Gadamerians a better position to assess the significance Davey believes Gadamer possesses for contemporary thinking on aesthetics and art, if he had tried to explicate some of the major concepts of the book in more everyday terms. One constantly hears about things like "transmission of meaning", "cross-currents of meaning", "frameworks of meaning", "transfigurations of meaning", as well as of subject matters (*Sache*) and poetic ideas, but at least to this reader, the exact content of these concepts remained unclear.

The view of the cognitive value and transformative capacity of art Davey builds on Gadamer's ideas relies heavily on a distinction between two levels of meaning. The first one has to do with what a word, sentence, sign or image refers to. This is a level of meaning we are explicitly aware of when we comprehend the content of the sign or word we confront. Yet, following Gadamer, Davey argues that language also involves a more fundamental level of meaning, which grounds the more explicit meanings our meaning bearing linguistic and other items possess. For example, the working of an individual word or, say, a road sign already presupposes a horizon of unstated meanings and associations that make the functioning of these individual meaning items possible. This is the speculative level of meaning both Gadamer and Davey believe language is permeated by. It refers to "a penumbra of unstated meanings whose presence can be sensed but never fully grasped or conceptualized" (51). The speculative workings of language draws attention to the fact that certain linguistic items have the ability to "bring things to the mind", which are not explicitly stated. Davey describes the speculative level of meaning as an "unspoken reservoir of culturally embedded meanings" (28), which, despite being impossible to articulate in propositional form, can have an effect on our experience.

The speculative character of meaning is an important component of Gadamer's investigation of the participatory character of the experience of art. Davey writes, "the speculative workings of language offer a crucial insight into how artworks work" (31). In other words, artworks do not address us by transmitting some kind of statement-like factors, but their capacity to shake and transform our understanding, that is, their cognitive content, is precisely based on the speculative level of meaning artworks embody and reveal to their experiencers. That is, if I understand

Davey's line of argument correctly, artworks are artefacts, which are especially powerful carriers of these unstated, speculative meanings, and we feel the pull of certain artworks because we have a sense, though an unarticulated one, that a given artwork presents its subject matter under a thought-provoking set of speculative meanings. This is how Davey explicates these difficult ideas on the speculative character of artistic meaning: "Art shocks and illuminates because it draws from a word's or an image's speculative excess, provocative realignments of meaning which disrupt the conventional status of a sign or symbol" (12). The tie Gadamer draws between his philosophy of language built around the notion of speculative meaning and his aesthetics shows how all art is for Gadamer language-like. However, Davey argues that this does not imply the thought that all understanding must necessarily be linguistic in character, a claim some critiques falsely assume Gadamer to hold.

The emphasis that Davey's reading of Gadamer places on the speculative dimension of artistic meaning leads him to argue that modernist art is actually a natural partner of hermeneutical aesthetics. Some commentators have held that the stress Gadamer places on tradition and on our dialogical relationship to it in his hermeneutics is hard to reconcile with modernist art, which exhibits a very different kind of attitude towards tradition. According to Davey, accusations, which see Gadamer falling into an unwanted conservatism, are off the mark, for hermeneutics of the Gadamerian kind and modernist art share many important points of contact with each other. They both "celebrate difficulty" and aim to make us "strange and difficult to ourselves" (27).

Davey also argues that the conception of tradition inherent in artistic modernism is not necessarily that different from the conception of tradition implied by Gadamer's hermeneutics. Again, some readings over-emphasize the role of continuity or uniformity in Gadamer's concept of tradition. "A commitment to tradition is not a commitment to academic antiquarianism", Davey states (59), but the kind of dialogical conception of tradition Gadamer in his view holds can also embrace the fact that traditions can exhibit significant breaks and paradigm shifts. This kind of take on tradition, according to Davey, goes well with the development of artistic modernism and that it cannot thus be used as a counterexample to Gadamer's thinking on art. But I wonder whether a different kind of reading of the connection of the different forms of artistic modernism would give another kind of view on the relationship of the conceptions of tradition inherent in Gadamer and artistic modernism. For example, Arthur Danto has called the age of modernism in art "the age of mani-

festos". With this term Danto draws attention to the fact that different schools and forms of modernism were accompanied by a written manifesto-kind text, which explicated the aims of the artistic movement and which usually involved debunking most other forms of making art. "This is the way art should be made and all other ways are wrong", is the catchphrase of the kind of artistic manifesto Danto has in mind and Gadamer's conception of tradition, even on Davey's more nuanced reading, is arguably not that well-equipped to embrace the discontinuous terms by which Danto describes the relationship between the different schools of modernism in his account of the age of manifestos.

This also brings me to another worry I have in Davey's account of Gadamer's dialogical conception of tradition. He evidently believes that it manages to give a convincing picture on the historical development of art, that is, how artists relate to past art and build on the work of earlier artists. However, it seems to me that some of the examples by which Davey tries to illuminate and defend this claim are a bit tendentious. For example, he cites the way Sofia Gubaidulina reuses and combines some musical themes and ideas developed by Bach and Webern in her violin concerto *Offertorium* as a textbook case on the structure of artists' dialogical relationship to the tradition of art takes and how tradition serves as a resource for creativity. This is indeed true of the Gubaidulina-case, but I wonder, whether it can be generalized in the way Davey seems to assume. For the rather explicit way Gubaidulina adapts and reworks past musical material in the work is arguably a rather special case, which is not typical of all composers. The manner of including quotations from past musical works and inserting explicit references to them is also a phenomenon that has come to describe composing on a more general level only in the latter part of the 20th century.

A similar problem plagues Davey's illumination of the relational conception of artwork Gadamer holds. In this context, he uses as an example a contemporary work of visual art that reuses past art historical material. However, it seems that to use works of art, which contain explicitly intended references to past artworks and artistic styles, makes the case in this connection a bit too easy for Gadamer's relational conception of artwork. The theory fits the data a bit too easily.

One of the interesting parts of Davey's book is the reassessment it presents of the relationship of Gadamer's hermeneutics to Kant's aesthetics. Though the two are usually viewed as being in total opposition with each other – Gadamer for example sees Kant's aesthetics as the primary exponent of the aesthetics of *Erlebnis* he attacks – Davey nevertheless argues

that Gadamer and Kant's ideas are not as incompatible as has been thought. In fact, Davey thinks that Gadamer actually needs to incorporate some of Kant's key thoughts on the aesthetic into his hermeneutic account of the experience of art. This especially concerns the Kantian idea of disinterestedness. In the hermeneutic framework, our experiences of art are seen to be infused by cognitive interests. We are not just passively contemplating the aesthetic features of a work, but art addresses us in a cognitive way and invites a thorough participation from the subject of experience in which her worldview comes into play. In this respect, the Kantian idea of disinterestedness seems to fit in very badly with Gadamer's account of the experience of art.

Davey, however, thinks that the way Gadamer describes ideal experiences of art actually involves a form of attentiveness to the work that, in his view, comes close to the kind of interaction with a work that Kant tried to capture with his idea of aesthetic disinterestedness. This form of attentiveness is an important part of Gadamer's conception of the ontology of the experience of art, for it becomes a precondition of the works working. That is, such attentiveness "allows the artwork to stand in its own right *and* challenge our interests" (68). An accurate account of the experience of art, in other words, needs to be established on "a hermeneutically aware mode of aesthetic attentiveness" (75). Davey, moreover, thinks that the reconciliation Gadamer achieves between "the interested and the disinterested" is "one of Gadamer's greatest unremarked contributions to contemporary aesthetics" (16).

With his book, Davey continues the line of thinking in hermeneutics that sees Gadamer as a transformative figure within this tradition and his attempt to distance it from methodological questions related to understanding that preoccupied Schleiermacher and Dilthey as a decisive turning point to it. In this respect, Davey's understanding of Gadamer's significance for hermeneutics is highly different from, if not completely at odds with the reading Kristin Gjesdal has proposed in her recent study on Gadamer, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). She accuses Gadamer of giving a distortive picture of the content and implications of Schleiermacher's methodological hermeneutics, which in her view is a result of Gadamer's highly shallow reading of his predecessor's texts. Gjesdal interestingly turns this failure she detects in his hermeneutics against the theoretical points Gadamer supports and argues that his failed understanding of Schleiermacher – which she argues is also partially intentional – shows that precisely methodological and normative questions about the grounds of valid in-

terpretation and understanding should be restored as the key questions of hermeneutics. These issues do appear in some parts of Davey's book, but never are they given the attention that I believe they deserve, and the solutions to the question of how it is possible to differentiate accurate interpretations from less valid ones Davey proposes are either no real solutions, like the reference to the internal coherence and consistency of an interpretation (36), or are really vaguely formulated (160).

*Unfinished World* is first and foremost a book on Gadamer and it clearly emerges from the profound experiences its author has had in connection with art and, evidently, he believes that Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics provides a great articulation of such experiences. There are references to other more contemporary figures of aesthetics from Iris Murdoch to Nicholas Bourriaud in the book, but Davey does not build any more systematic critical confrontation between Gadamer and some other prominent figure of contemporary aesthetics. Thus, the view of the great contribution Davey believes Gadamer's hermeneutics offers to contemporary aesthetics remains a bit inarticulate. In speaking about views Gadamer opposes, Davey uses such terms as "conventional accounts of aesthetic experience" (49) and "traditional aesthetics" (137). However, it's not always clear whether anybody has systematically defended the kinds of views Davey collects under these and similar terms and that Gadamer is seen to oppose. Also, the impact Davey believes Gadamer's hermeneutics has on both aesthetic education and the idea of interdisciplinarity within the humanities remains similarly underdeveloped. Let's hope that this interesting book will get a continuation in which Davey tackles these issues more closely.

KALLE PUOLAKKA