

## REVIEW

Stefán Snævarr, *Kunstfilosofi: En kritisk innføring*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2008. 303 pages. ISBN 978-82-450-0707-7

There is something nearly paradoxical in writing a review in English on the Icelander Stefán Snævarr's introduction to the philosophy of art. (Snævarr is a professor at Høgskolen in Lillehammer, the University College of Lillehammer, Norway). Not only is his book in Norwegian, but Snævarr has also taken pride in not only drawing on the common and well-known international literature in the field, but also in including Norwegian and other Nordic aestheticians in his discussion. If he had not done that, he remarks, he might just as well have written the book in English or German.

The basis for Snævarr's book is partly his notes for lectures on the philosophy of art in Bergen in the 1990s (later held also in Lillehammer and Kristiansand), partly his other, more scholarly work in aesthetics, e.g. his PhD-thesis (in English!) *Minerva and the Muses: The Place of Reason in Aesthetic Judgment* (1999); actually, Snævarr himself is the author with most entries in the bibliography. This double basis has contributed to giving the text and the whole construction of the book a rather rambling touch.

The basic tone is a surprisingly consistent and forceful orality – surprising because the basis for the text is the written notes, not e.g. recordings of the actual lectures. Not only does one find phrases like “as I *said* in the introduction” (p. 19, my italics), but also remarks like “If I understand Goodman correctly” (p. 169), “This reminds me of a story by an Indian author whose name I do not remember” (p. 200) and “What would Bourdieu have said? Well, he would probably have said yes” (p. 210) – and I shall refrain from trying to render any of Snævarr's often not too wonderful verbal puns.

But even though the oral style is kept through the whole book, long passages become quite heavy because of their detailed renderings of the theories of specific philosophers or faceted discussions of nuanced differences between theoreticians. A beginner in this field will here get a thorough impression of what philosophical reflection of the analytical kind looks like; I doubt, however, that these readers will be able to stay on around the curves and through the particulars. But even though it says “En kritisk innføring” (“A Critical Introduction”) on the title page, Snævarr makes it clear in his preface that “this is not solely an introduction”, partly because it

contains these critical discussions, and partly because it also introduces some of the author's own theories. To me this is completely in order in itself, but I believe that critical discussion and one's own points of view can easily (or with a little effort) be integrated in an introductory work that insists on being introductory, i.e. sticks to a target group of readers to whom the topic of the book is new.

Snævarr's *Philosophy of Art* is divided into three parts. The first is a series of inquiries into the history of aesthetics from Plato to Nietzsche; the second a presentation of main themes and figures of 20th century aesthetics; and the third one a more detailed look at four more or less current aesthetic questions. In principle this is a reasonable structure of an introductory work, in practice a rather uneven and inconsequential presentation, e.g. with a rather unclear distribution of the subject matter between the second and the third part – but then again: Everywhere you will find fine and interesting reading matter.

The historical part is the least satisfying. Snævarr seems not to have taken a clear stance on which kind of history he wants to tell. He starts out by reminding us that the modern concept of art does not evolve before the beginning of the 18th century, and of course this makes the reader expect a narrative about the rise of this concept. But later he suggests that it is the development of the concept of beauty that we will follow from Plato to Nietzsche, i.e. to the point in time where "Beauty loses its status as the highest value of art" (p. 20).

Such a storyline is however not kept up through the presentation of Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche that follows, joined by nearly insipid asides (mostly based on secondary sources) on e.g. Boileau, Baumgarten, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Schiller, Schelling, Croce and Collingwood. In my view, the mixture of presentations of the various main characters and discussions of alternative presentations (most clearly with Noël Carroll on Hume) does not work – and especially not in an introductory text. And one must ask oneself whether Snævarr is writing history at all, or whether this should be taken as one of those "histories of philosophy" that treat the philosophers of the past as our contemporaries with whom we enter into an equal dialogue. At any rate, Snævarr does not tell us much about the historical context of the main characters and their theories, e.g. about what their background was for theorizing about art or aesthetic experience.

What had Kant – to take him as an example – seen and heard and read as his basis for the few remarks he has about art in his *Critique of Judgment*? Did Königsberg have a theatre in the latter half of the 18th century?

To exemplify what a Kantian “uninterested judgment” about “the pleasant” can be, Snævarr chooses an example (p. 65), not from Kant himself, but from J. O. Urmson’s often reprinted essay “What Makes a Situation Aesthetic” from 1957; an example that in Urmson’s original English text begins in this way: “Let us . . . suppose that we observe a man in the audience at a play who is obviously beaming with delight and satisfaction”.<sup>1</sup> But is it that kind of experience Kant speculated about? Sitting in a theatre, looking at a play? I shall not claim that I know the answer, but I take it to be a must for a real historical discussion to consider such questions.

In the second part of the book it gets clear that Snævarr does not only have his background in analytical aesthetics, but that he also lets himself be inspired by the continental tradition. But the case is pretty much what I indicate here: Snævarr finds inspiring material and points of view in continental philosophy, but he writes like an analytical philosopher.

He starts out with Adorno, and the Adorno chapter is extended with some material on the Frankfurt School, figures Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin and a short side glance to Georg Lukács before the chapter concludes with a discussion of Feminism in aesthetics. The next chapter has Martin Heidegger as protagonist, even though it is impossible to find much aesthetics or philosophy of art in his writings; Snævarr finds it first of all in the essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (first version from the middle of the 1930s) where Heidegger’s main example is van Gogh’s painting of a couple of his own boots (which Heidegger mistook for belonging to a peasant women). It is characteristic of Snævarr’s use of these instances of continental writing that his presentation gets its volume from all the ideas of other philosophers, mainly from the analytical tradition, of which Heidegger’s text reminds him (here e.g. Kuhn, Polanyi and Wittgenstein).

From here we reach the chapter on “Beardsley’s Grand Edifice”, concentrating on Beardsley’s concept of the work of art and his discussion of aesthetic judgments, and with a few concluding remarks on his criticism of “The Intentional Fallacy”. Then follows a chapter on the Wittgenstein tradition in aesthetics, where also the Bergen School is deservedly mentioned (Gunnar Danbolt, Kjell S. Johannessen and Tore Nordenstam), and one on Nelson Goodman, the presentation of whom is not followed by remarks on disciples or successors, but only with the views of several critics. Even though I consider myself a follower of Goodman to a certain extent, Snævarr is probably right here: during the now 40 years since the publication of his *Languages of Art* in 1968, Goodman’s often rather ex-

treme (but precise) nominalist and constructivist views have more often worked as points of departure for criticism and theoretical refinement than as examples for imitation.

This second part of the book ends with a chapter on pragmatist aesthetics, John Dewey and first of all Richard Shusterman, and here Snævarr is really on home ground with critical approval. (After Snævarr himself, Shusterman is the philosopher who has most entries in the bibliography.)

Then follows the third part of the book, with chapters on single issues, beginning with the question whether one can define *art*, and if so, how. A grumpy reviewer would here claim that the architecture of the book breaks down because we have already read long discussions on this theme in the Beardsley chapter, and it has also been treated e.g. in connection with Goodman's "When is art?"-stance. And the construction gets really wobbly when we see that the chapter starts with the Wittgenstein follower Morris Weitz and the notion of "family resemblance" as his answer to what connects the many different works and genres of art under one common concept. But somehow the structure is no problem in this case!

Not surprisingly the chapter tells the story from Weitz (1956) over Arthur Danto and his "Artworld" (1964) and George Dickie's institution of art (1969), rounded off with Jerrold Levinson's and Noël Carroll's "historical turn" in the 1990s – except that Snævarr treats Dickie before Danto (and misdates Dickie's presentation of his theory to 1974). A coherent narrative that it makes good sense to tell and to discuss.

The following chapter, about interpretation, is on the other hand far from coherent and pertinent. Snævarr begins with a slightly skewed introduction to hermeneutics that quickly reaches Hans-Georg Gadamer. From there the text takes a completely superfluous and useless turn around a little bit of Saussure, continues with the French film semiologist Christian Metz, the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, the Lithuanian-French semiologist Algirdas Julien Greimas (Snævarr writes "French-Lithuanian"), the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (just turned 100, by the way!) and the French semiologist Roland Barthes to reach the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and his deconstruction. Here Snævarr seems to be on foreign ground: neither Propp nor Greimas is in his bibliography, the linguistically educated Greimas is called a literary scholar and gets his first name wrongly spelt, and Lévi-Strauss – with French Jewish parents from Alsace, and grown up in Paris – is called Belgian-French, probably because his father, a painter, had taken his family to Bruxelles where he had a job during the weeks around the birth of his son.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the theories within analytical philosophy about rationality and relativity in the interpretation of literary works (with a side glance to interpretation of movies). Issues concerning interpretation of other visual arts or of music are not mentioned.

In the chapter on the evaluation of works of art Snævarr really feels at home: This is the theme of his dissertation. Here the different positions get names and are discussed in a fairly exact way: Objectivism (Noël Carroll), Scepticism, divided into Relativism (e.g. Bernard C. Heyl) and Subjectivism (e.g. Alfred Ayer and Pierre Bourdieu), and then we reach Rationalism, Snævarr's own stance: judgments about works of art are not completely subjective, but contain an element of reason and a certain empirical basis. I would probably have divided the positions differently, e.g. making use of the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive theories (Snævarr considers subjective theories non-cognitive, but they may of course also be cognitively relativist, e.g. if you claim that "A good work of art' is a work that pleases me"). And I would have used the term *sceptical* in a more specific fashion than Snævarr does. I am tempted to say that he could have been much more precise in defining the various positions.

The last chapter is about the question of whether art is autonomous, liberated from any kind of social, political or moral connection. Snævarr starts out with a discussion about the existence of a special aesthetic experience, based on Edward Bullough's well-known essay on "Psychical Distance" from 1912 (and with Dickie's criticism of the concept). It is an important discussion, but I do not really see the relevance in connection with the autonomy of art. In general I must confess that I have trouble taking the whole question of autonomy (and "l'art pour l'art" etc.) seriously because of its essentialistic foundation. Of course art "is" nothing in itself, and every single person is free to decide whether she wants to focus on aesthetic or moral aspects of a work of art.

I imagine that Snævarr here thinks the way I do, but strangely enough he does not make his position clear in this chapter. He restricts himself to giving a series of adequate presentations of the positions of various contributors to the theme and of their mutual discussions, and only at the end he – surprisingly – suggests an essentialistic stance. It may e.g. "be the case that instrumental music is close to autonomous" (p. 275), he writes; he does not seem to know the story of how in Italy in the middle of the 19th century just to whistle a theme by Verdi could mean making a political statement because of Verdi's well-known political position, and because his name could be understood as an acronym of *Vittorio Emmanuele, Re d'Italia* (*Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy*). But right after this unlucky remark about

instrumental music, Snævarr wraps up the whole book with an insipid observation that it may all be as in the Bible: There is a time for everything, a time for seeing art as autonomous, a time for seeing it as a tool of morals, etc.

I hope that my reader has understood that Snævarr's book is full of interesting material, even though it may also contain some annoying aspects. For me he gets a high score for his mixture of oral language and perceptive presentations and discussions. Then one must bear with the places where he just rattles off some standard material he may not even quite master himself, or which he does not manage to communicate to anybody, especially not to newcomers (e.g. the list of "actants" of Greimas, p. 225). And one must bear with the fact that he is not quite precise everywhere.

This is probably not because he wants his text the way it is – he is, e.g. quite keen on mentioning sources and giving references (to both original, yet often reprinted, editions and to texts translated into Scandinavian languages). I guess it may be because he remembers wrongly as he goes along (as one often does in free lectures), or maybe it is because he now and then renders his own, somewhat worn, pedagogical version of a point, rather than revisiting the original source to see what it would reveal. But mostly, he masters his material in a convincing way. I, for one, have the special pleasure of seeing that he (contrary to some other Scandinavian commentators) has noticed the radical differences between the institutional theory of art that I introduced in my book *Æstetiske problemer (Problems in Aesthetics)* in 1971, and Dickie's much better known version from nearly the same year.

Here at the end one small reservation (which concerns not only Snævarr's book, but many other contributions to its field): The text demonstrates quite clearly that Snævarr both masters and takes delight in the philosophy of art. But he presents this field nearly without mentioning the scholarly disciplines on the various arts (literary studies, art history, musicology etc.), even though they (at least in my view) overlap with aesthetics and are much closer connected with the purpose of it all, namely making us understand and enjoy actual works of art.

And even more intriguing: does Snævarr take any delight in the arts themselves? Google can provide us with the information that he has published several volumes of poems in Icelandic, and his text does suggest that literary fiction (and probably also music) is closer to his heart than the unenthusiastically treated visual arts. (And at least he is very much engaged in Old Icelandic writings and several times picks on the Polish-Norwegian

cultural studies professor Nina Witoszek for some nonsense that she, in his view, has written about the concept of nature in the *Edda* and the Sagas). Somehow his book reveals a strange absence of delight in the visual arts and of concrete examples of painting and sculpture, except for some trite standard cases like *Mona Lisa* and *Skrik (The Scream)* plus what the discussed theoreticians have referred to. On the cover of the book we see a reproduction of a marvellous painting of a young girl by Ernst Ludwig Kirschner, but nothing of the kind plays any role in the text.

SØREN KJØRUP

### Note

1. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 19–26, 20.