

# **AESTHETICS**

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KIRCHBERG AM WECHSEL (AUSTRIA)

EDITOR

Rudolf Haller

VIENNA 1984  
**HÖLDER-PICHLER-TEMPSKY**

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# THE ESSENCE OF ART – WITTGENSTEIN VS. GADAMER

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## 1.

One of the main lessons of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* is that works of meaning can only be understood rightly in their contexts. Applying this to Gadamer's own statements, we must begin by asking, What kind of project do his statements belong to? I think the project can be described summarily as an attempt to counter the imbalances of the hermeneutic tradition in Germany, especially in the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey. Gadamer accuses Dilthey of subjectivism, and sees only one way out of this, viz. phenomenological and ontological analyses in a style inspired by Martin Heidegger, supplemented with historical analyses of the development of the concepts we use to talk about such things as art and history. Conceptual histories form a large share of *Truth and Method* (for instance, notes on the history of such concepts as taste, *Bildung* and *Erlebnis*, the central concept in Dilthey's aesthetics and hermeneutics). Analysis of the notions of aesthetic experience and historical experience is the leading motive of the whole book. And the whole of aesthetics and hermeneutics is founded on a kind of ontology à la Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

The core of Dilthey's aesthetics can, I think, be summed up in the form of a simple model: The artist, considered as a genius both in the field of human experience and in the art of expressing human experience, makes his experiences of life (his "Erlebnisse", in Dilthey's terminology); he then expresses this in the form of publicly available works of art, which are finally recreated into subjective experiences, viz. the recreated experiences which arise in the beholder's mind when he is confronted with the work of art, given that a number of conditions conducive to this result happen to be fulfilled. Goethe is one of Dilthey's paradigms. Through his incomparably rich experiences of life and through his unique gift of rendering his experiences in words, we have received works of art which have taught us what man is in more depth, purity and truth ("Goethe und die dichterische Phantasie", in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*, p. 165ff.).

Gadamer does not disagree with the view that through art we learn what man is in more depth, purity and truth. This is precisely the view of art that Gadamer propagates in *Truth and Method*. But he wants us to dissociate ourselves from the experience-expression-re-experience model of aesthetic communication, particularly the version of the model which regards works of art as empty formulas which can be filled in *ad libitum* by the beholder. Works of art have got a deeper function than that of expressing the subjective experiences of certain individuals, according to Gadamer, and therefore works of art make demands upon the beholder who is not free to interpret the work of art in any way which pleases him.

This applies as much to history as to art. Gadamer's critique of Dilthey's *Erlebnis*-aesthetics is followed by a similar critique of subjectivistic approaches to historical understanding. Gadamer's topic is not the methodology of history and the rest of the humanities. His topic is the contribution that art and history can make to the formation of *humanitas*. He sees himself as a carrier of the European humanistic tradition, and indeed he is one.

So much for the general setting of Gadamer's treatment of things aesthetic (roughly the first third of *Truth and Method*).

Given the aim of vindicating the humanistic tradition and given the methods of analysis at Gadamer's disposal (conceptual histories, attempts to elucidate the nature of our experiences of art, for instance, and attempts to elucidate the essence of art and other things), given this we can hardly expect to find detailed examinations of the on-goings in such disciplines as the history of art and literature and dance in Gadamer's text. If we do, we will get disappointed. But we do find a doctrine of what the essence of art is, in the first part of *Truth and Method*.

Gadamer approaches art through a comparison with games. This is a common-place in aesthetics and in the humanistic tradition (cf. e.g. Schiller and Huizinga's *Homo ludens*), and has little to do with Wittgenstein's use of the game analogy in the *Philosophical Investigations*. There are no references to Wittgenstein and no signs of influence from Wittgenstein's writings in the main text of *Truth and Method*. In the foreword to the second edition, Gadamer emphasizes that his analyses of play and language are intended in a purely phenomenological sense, and adds in a footnote, "Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games' seemed quite natural to me when I came across it" (note 12 to the Foreword to the 2nd edition). The side of Wittgenstein's language game philosophy which seemed familiar to Gadamer was probably the pragmatic one, those aspects of the *Philosophical Investigations* which have to do with everyday experience in what the phenomenologists call the "life-world". But Gadamer seems to be completely unaffected by Wittgenstein's attempts to undermine essentialistic thinking.

The analogy with games may, indeed, be a good way of preparing us for the idea that works of art cannot be reduced to the subjective experiences of the producers and consumers of art. A game is more than the consciousness of those who play, as Gadamer stresses. Games have "their own proper spirit", as he puts it (p. 96), and by this he means that the nature of a game is determined by the particular rules and structures which determine the game. But in addition to this Gadamer claims that there are certain general characteristics which belong to all games. It is true of all games, he claims, that they have no exterior aim or purpose (p. 94). Rather, the point of playing a game is to go up in it: "The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game tends to master the players" (p. 95). The individual players have to subordinate themselves to the game. This is the analogy which Gadamer exploits to elucidate the essence of art. Like games and plays (there is only one word in German, "Spiele"), works of art make demands upon the "participants". Gadamer, indeed, wants us to look at works of art as processes analogous to play processes. This is an idea which comes more naturally to the mind for certain kinds of art than for others, and Gadamer has to begin with the clearest cases.

The clearest cases, for Gadamer's purposes, are to be found in those aesthetic activities which most resemble taking part in a game. Ideal cases for Gadamer would (I presume) be such things as rites, dances and other performances where we find no distinction between performers and onlookers. At several places in *Truth and Method* he compares the experience of art with the participation in holy rites. "It is not accidental that religious terms seem appropriate when one is defending the particular level of being of works of fine art against an aesthetic levelling out" (p. 132); "The spectator does not hold himself aloof at a distance of aesthetic consciousness enjoying the art of representation, but in the communion of being present" (p. 117); "The tragic affirmation . . . has the character of a genuine communion" (p. 117); to give three examples only.

There are at least three claims which are being made in these comparisons between works of art, on the one hand, and games and rites, on the other hand. The first claim is that participation is an essential aspect of a work of art, just as it is an essential aspect of a game, a communion or any other religious rite. "The spectator is an essential element of the kind of play that we call aesthetic" (p. 114). The second claim is that a work of art has a peculiar character which, like a religious rite, sets it apart from the profane world. "A work of art always has something sacred about it" (p. 133). The third claim (which helps to explain the semi-sacred character of works of art) is that works of art, like religious rites, have to do with truth, in

some sense which has to be explained. "An aesthetic consciousness, however reflective, can no longer consider that only the aesthetic differentiation, which sees the aesthetic object in its own right, discovers the true meaning of the religious picture or the religious rite. No one will be able to hold that the performance of the ritual act is unessential to religious truth" (p. 104).

The three claims obviously require some elaboration. It is not immediately obvious that participation is an essential aspect of *all* works of art. This may be true of theatre and dance and other so-called performing arts, but does the same hold for poems and pictures and statues? And it is not immediately obvious that all works of art have something sacred about them which sets them apart from the profane sphere. Does the same hold for say Donald Duck films and the kind of pictures which hang around in most people's sitting-rooms? And, again, it is not immediately obvious in which sense art-works are essential to truth. And behind all these questions there lurks a question which concerns the whole attempt to characterize the essence of art: What are we to do if we encounter things which we want to call works of art but which don't seem to fulfill the claims that Gadamer makes for the essence of art? Should we conclude that we have been mistaken in thinking that this is art, or should we conclude that there is something wrong with some of Gadamer's claims?

Gadamer couches his elaborations of the participation claim, the sacredness claim and the truth claim in a Heidegger-inspired language which makes it difficult (at least for me) to understand exactly what the claims amount to. Hence, it becomes difficult to evaluate the validity of the claims and to give a clear answer to the last question about what we should do if we encounter "works of art" which do not fulfill the three demands. But let us try, considering the three claims in the reverse order.

### 3.

If you want to say something in general about how art is related to man and the world, within a limited space, without going through a great number of cases from different art-forms in different times, you have to place yourself on a very abstract level. Gadamer places himself on a very abstract level when talking about truth in art. When Gadamer talks about truth, he seems to presuppose Heidegger's distinction between the kind of truth which is ascribed to statements ("Richtigkeit") and the kind of truth which is a characteristic of the world itself ("Wahrheit"). (Cf. Heidegger's *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*.) To see the world in its truth is to see it as it is. And the world here is the human world and not the thing-world which is presented to us in abstraction from all human concerns in the natural sciences. The kind of knowledge we can get through experiencing art is therefore self-knowledge as much as knowledge of the world. Classical Greek tragedies are good examples for Gadamer's purposes. He talks about "the ecstatic self-forgetfulness of the spectator" in the tragic experience, and continues: "The tragic emotion flows from the self-knowledge that the spectator acquires. He finds himself in the tragic action, because it is his own world, familiar to him from religious or historical tradition, that he encounters" (p. 117). But it is not a question of presenting the familiar world just as it is, in the familiar ways. The function of art that Gadamer stresses is its ability to clarify the world of human being, and this is precisely what he means by saying that art presents the world in its truth. Through art we can get experiences which change ourselves and our world. The world can e.g. become clearer, more transparent, more perspicuous. In Gadamer's language, this is expressed by saying that art-works are ontological processes which involve an increase in being (p. 124). And here one can think Wittgenstein's notion of perspicuous representation: "The concept of perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things" (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 122). The emphasis that Wittgenstein gives to perspicuous representation does indeed make it justified to say that for him philosophy was an art form. (Cf. Viggo Rossvør, "Philosophy as an art form", in Johannessen & Nordenstam, eds., *Wittgenstein—Aesthetics and Transcendental Philosophy*.)

That some works of art can have this function is undeniably true, as Gadamer's own favourite examples illustrate (classical Greek tragedies, representational pictures through which the man represented "acquires a new, more real mode of appearance"). But is this true of all works of art? The doctrine that the essence of art is to represent the world in such a way that there is an increase in being can be compared to the doctrine that art is significant for (Clive Bell). Both doctrines are formulated in so general and abstract terms that we are at a loss when confronted with cases which do not belong clearly to the core of favourite examples which the authors adduce to make their doctrines plausible. Is Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem "The Hunting of the Snark" a work of art in the sense that it involves an increase in being etc.? And what about the trombone solo with the same title by the composer Arne Nordheim?

It is, I think, becoming clear that what Gadamer does when he goes through the truth-claim of art and establishes an essential connection between art and truth (in the Heideggerian sense of "Wahrheit") is to emphasize one of the many functions of art. By elevating certain features, which are clearly displayed by certain art-works and less clearly or perhaps not at all so by other art-works, to the status of the essence of art, he is propagating a certain ideology of art. If one can refer to Clive Bell's ideology of art as "formalistic", in some sense, I think one could refer to Gadamer's ideology of art as "classicistic" in some sense. (In fact, Gadamer's ideology of art is not very far away from the ideology of art that Kant expresses, or presupposes, in the *Critique of Judgement*. Kant's aesthetics is also the starting-point for Gadamer's treatment of art in *Truth and Method*.) When Gadamer declares for instance that "it destroys the meaning of the picture of a figure if we recognize in it the well-known model of a painter" because a model is only "a disappearing schema" (p. 128), it seems to me that he voices opinions which you can accept or reject according to your own taste. This side of Gadamer's treatment of art is far away from the transcendental level of analysis of necessary presuppositions for the possibility of understanding which is officially the main theme of *Truth and Method*. (Cf. the foreword to the 2nd edition, p. xviii.)

In Gadamer's treatment of the essence of art, there is a strong ideological element which can be seen at work in the treatment of the art-and-truth cluster. The same applies (I submit) for the claim that all art-works have a sacred character, although I don't want to exclude the possibility of reinterpreting this claim into say a statement on the autonomy of art which would indeed capture an important aspect of the modern concept of art in our culture. It should however be clear by now that Gadamer's main purpose is not to analyse current notions of art but to propagate a certain conception of art. (And the same applies to his treatment of history in the second part of *Truth and Method*.)

The remaining one of the three claims which we distinguished in Gadamer's doctrine of the essence of art, the participation claim, does, however, stand on other ground, which can best be seen, I think, by focussing on the pragmatic aspects of Gadamer's treatment of art.

#### 4.

There is an awareness throughout *Truth and Method* of the ways in which works of art and other works of meaning are embedded in human contexts which has a familiar ring to those who have worked with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty* and the *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics*. But the emphasis on aspects of being, in a Heideggerian sense, never lets this awareness come fully into the foreground. It is no doubt to the point to stress that all works of art require a public. This is obviously true of say theatre performances, and there is no need for long hours of reflection to see that something similar applies to poems and pictures and statues. In Gadamer's ontologizing language, this comes out as the assertion that the actual being of a work of art cannot be detached from its representation and that in the representation the unity and identity of a structure emerge (p. 109). But this is not enough to set works of art apart from other things. The paradigm of experiencing art for Gadamer is the case where the spectator gets absorbed by the work of art to the

point of self-forgetfulness (p. 111). With this kind of full absorption he contrasts analytical and reflective attitudes to works of art. "It is to move out of the actual experience of a piece of literature if one investigates the origin of the plot on which it is based, and equally it is to move out of the actual experience of the drama if the spectator reflects about the conception behind a performance or about the proficiency of the actors", writes Gadamer (p. 106). He goes on to say that "for the meaningfulness of the experience as such it is . . . not even important whether the tragic or comic scene which is played before one takes place on the stage or in life—if one is only a spectator" (p. 106). But this is clearly not true. Undeniably there is something in common to seeing someone skid on a banana skin on a pavement outside the university and seeing the same thing on the stage. If you like, you can refer to that common element as "the meaningfulness of the experience as such" or the "content" ("Gehalt") of the experience. But equally undeniably there is a difference between the two situations which does not come out clearly in Gadamer's ontologizing perspective. The difference does not lie in the proceedings considered in isolation. Rather, the proceedings are what they are because they belong to certain situations. The difference can be seen more clearly in the reactions of the onlookers than in the contents of the experience as such. Certain reactions are appropriate in real life situations, other reactions are appropriate in aesthetic situations. To use a term which occurs often in Wittgenstein's writings and sometimes, though not often, in Gadamer's text, one could say that the banana skin situation belongs to two different practices, one every day practice and the other one an aesthetic practice of some kind. What is the difference between real life practices and aesthetic practices? Not, I think, that reflection and analysis is inappropriate in one case but not in the other. There is room for both reflection, analysis and absorption in everyday situations as well as in aesthetic situations. Now I do not want to deny that it might be possible to reformulate the difference between works of art and other things in a more satisfactory way on the ontological level which Gadamer prefers to stay on. But this would in fact mean that the whole of pragmatics would be squeezed into ontology, with results which would be not false but strained and non-perspicuous. (That this is what Heidegger and Gadamer attempt to do, in fact, might help to explain why their texts tend to look so cramped.)

Instead of searching for more adequate formulations of the mode of being of the work of art (in general), I propose that we should start from the total action contexts in which works of art and aesthetic communication are embedded. Gadamer makes a hint in this direction when he writes that "the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows or itself" (p. 104), but he never develops this in more than very abstract, ontological terms (The aesthetic attitude "is a part of the essential process of representation and is an essential part of play as play" (p. 104), and so on).

To bring home the point that the pragmatic aspects, which are somehow present all the time in *Truth and Method*, never get a chance to get fully developed there, we can consider one of the rare passages where Gadamer talks explicitly of traditions and practices (pp. 106–107). He reminds us of the fact that in the theatre there are traditions which stem from certain productions or role creations and in music there are practices of performance which build on certain models. In these fields, "there is no random succession, a mere variety of conceptions, but rather from the constant following of models and from a productive and changing development there is cultivated a tradition with which every new attempt must come to terms" (p. 106). True, but Gadamer fails to see how deep this goes.

The observation that models have a role to play in the traditions of performance in say the world of music and theatre can indeed provide an opening to the question about the conditions for the possibility of understanding in the aesthetic sphere, and in every other sphere. Models or paradigms (in the sense in which Wittgenstein uses that word in the *Philosophical Investigations*) play an essential role in the formation of meaning of linguistic expressions, actions, works of art and other meaning-bearing entities. In the pragmatic perspective which is developed in a sketchily way in Wittgenstein's later writings, the traditional role of essences in the philosophy of language is taken over by paradigms. The meaning of an expression is

determined by the paradigm cases to which it is tied, and the criterion of having grasped the meaning of the expression is the ability of continuing the series of cases on one's own.

Instead of the traditional picture of the world consisting of a number of unchangeable essences, to which we attach our linguistic labels, the world presents itself as a cluster of series of paradigms in constant development. Good illustrations can be adduced from the aesthetic field. All who frequent galleries and exhibitions of paintings can testify to the revealing effect of seeing the collected works of a painter or a group of painters, particularly if the works are arranged in chronological order. The sequence of Piet Mondrian's paintings is an excellent example for this purpose because his development proceeds so neatly in a chronological order, as one can see from a catalogue of his works (e.g. Jaffé's *Mondrian*). But the same applies, in fact, to all meaningful things, actions, expressions, and so on. The principle of the series, which Gadamer touches on in passing, plays a fundamental role on the level of concept formation and meaning production.

A precondition of successful communication is a shared repertory of paradigms. Initiation into the sequences of paradigms on which an artist builds is therefore an essential aspect of all aesthetic training, and the same applies, of course, to all other fields. Now, this is precisely what Wittgenstein captures with the notion of rule-following behaviour. The ability to follow a rule, in the sense in which the term is used in the *Philosophical Investigations*, consists precisely in the ability of continuing the given series in a manner which is adequate for the purposes at hand.

My conclusion is that the practice philosophy which can be developed on the basis of the fragments of Wittgenstein's later philosophy would serve the analytical side of Gadamer's enterprise well. But it would not, I think, serve his ideological purposes—rather, it would be completely neutral in this respect. For in so far as philosophical analysis concentrates upon the truly necessary conditions for the possibility of understanding and acting, it leaves everything as it is, as Wittgenstein emphasized.

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A pragmatic approach to the arts inspired by Wittgenstein's later philosophy has been outlined in a number of papers and books by Kjell S. Johannessen, Tore Nordenstam and the art-historian Gunnar Danbolt. See e.g. the papers by these authors in *Wittgenstein—Aesthetics and Transcendental Philosophy*, and in Lars Aagaard-Mogensen & Göran Hermerén, (eds.), *Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia* (Lund 1980).

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