

Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia

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and Göran Hermerén

Scholars from different fields (philosophy, history of literature, art, and music) discuss aesthetic problems each one from his aspect. The result is an anthology that reflects the fruitful diversity in the approaches to aesthetics current in Scandinavia today.



Doxa

AESTHETIC COMPETENCE

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1. Reflections on a ready-made

“The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose”, said Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*.¹ When reading Wittgenstein and his followers, we are above all reminded of the manifold of meaning which is the manifold of our world. The classical theory of language, which we have inherited from Plato and Aristotle, assumes that every meaningful term has a corresponding essence, which is the meaning of the term.² If you work as an aesthete under the influence of the classical theory of language, you are led on a search for the essences which make up the unity of the concepts with which we approach the world of art.³ If you work under the influence of Wittgenstein’s alternative to the classical theory of language, you become sensitive to signs of essentialism in contemporary aesthetics and your work is led in other directions.

¹ Oxford 1953, § 127.

² Morris Weitz, *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*, London 1972, p. 217 ff.

³ “The assumption underlying every philosophy of art is the existence of some common nature present in all the arts, despite their differences in form and content; something the *same* in painting and sculpture; in poetry and drama; in music and architecture.” De Witt Parker, “The Nature of Art” (1939), in M. Weitz (ed.), *Problems of Aesthetics* New York 1959. Cf. K. S. Johannessen, *Kunst og kunstforståelse*, Bergen 1978.

When I see a paper with the title "The Reading Process", I am reminded of the view that we use the work "to read" for a family of cases, so that it may be presumptuous to speak of *the* reading process.⁴ When I see Morris Weitz trying to squeeze the whole of hermeneutics into a singular pattern of explanation, I take this as a sign of a half-way station between traditional views and a praxis-oriented conception inspired by Wittgenstein's late philosophy.⁵ And when I encounter attempts to encompass the characteristics of literary texts in handy formulas, I look for counter-examples.

Various attempts have been made to find the defining characteristics of literature *within* literary texts, for instance by making a deviation from the normal grammar or a high degree of organization the defining feature of literature. But such features are neither necessary nor sufficient for a text to be counted as a piece of literature.⁶ For, as a recent writer puts it, "Fictional language, particularly literary prose, often has a verbal structure that is so similar to the everyday use of language that it is difficult to make a distinction."⁷

The similarity is carried to its extreme in the case of ready-mades. Let me quote a literary analogy to Duchamp's classical exhibits, a poem taken from the Swedish author Björn Håkanson's *Love in the White House* (1967):

The lips of the scientist move:

We have found that law-conforming behaviour as well as criminal behaviour sometimes may be characterized as being uniform. I.e., both those species of behaviour may be characterized as customary. In our society there exists a *social custom* to respect the life and property of others, in a gang of criminals on the other hand the social custom seems to reign that one shall appropriate the property of others.⁸

Towards the end of the book one finds a couple of pages with the heading "Information", where the poet explains that "The lips of the scientist move" is a quotation from Torngy Segerstedt's dictionary article "Criminal Sociology" in *The Handbook of Criminology*. Only the title is the poet's contribution. In the criminological handbook the text is a piece of social

⁴W. Iser, "The Reading Process. A Phenomenological Approach", *New Literary History* III (1971/72); also in R. Cohen, ed., *New Directions in Literary History*, London 1974, and in R. Warning, ed., *Rezeptionsästhetik*, München 1975. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 164.

⁵M. Weitz, *op. cit.*, Ch. XV.

⁶J. M. Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism*, Berkeley 1974, ch. 2.

⁷W. Iser, "Die Wirklichkeit der Fiktion", in R. Warning, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 289.

⁸B. Håkanson, *Kärlek i Vita Huset*, Stockholm 1967, p. 80.

scientific prose, in *Love in the White House* it is a poem. What makes the difference? Obviously the *use* that is being made of the text in the two contexts.

Ellis and Iser have attempted to characterize the use we make of literary texts in a general way. Ellis defines “literary texts” as “those that are used by the society in such a way that *the text is not taken as specifically relevant to the immediate context of its origin*”.⁹ Similarly, Iser emphasizes that the conventions of the historical world become “depragmaticized” in fictional prose.¹⁰ I find these remarks illuminating. They suggest features which are characteristic of the ways in which many literary texts are often used in our kind of society. But if the suggestion is made that the remarks should be taken as definitions of “literary texts” in general, my counter-suggestion is that literary texts should perhaps more appropriately be regarded in analogy with families, games, numbers, reading processes, and so on.¹¹ It seems likely that no set of necessary and sufficient conditions will be able adequately to characterize the use of such terms.

Håkanson’s ready-made seems to lend some support to this claim. The sociological text does not seem to become “depragmaticized” when it is used in the context of *Love in the White House*. Rather, the functions of the text in the poet’s context presuppose the functions of the text in the social scientist’s context. *Love in the White House* begins with a quotation from Lyndon B. Johnson 21.9.1966, in which the President declares that “we love peace” but as long as the aggressor does not give up his aggression, “we have no choice”. We are thus invited by the poet to reflect upon the nature of the uniform behavior of the men in the White House. Neither does it seem to hit the mark to say that “the text is not taken as specifically relevant to the immediate context of its origin”. We have to do with a sequence of poems written in a certain political situation and with certain aims in mind. And if it is objected that it is the hallmark of literature that it *can* be used also in other situations than its immediate context of origin, the answer would be that this does not seem to differentiate between the scientific and the poetic uses of the quoted text. In both cases, the text claims a general relevance and validity.

The case of the ready-made underlines the context-dependence which is characteristic of sentences in ordinary language, in contrast to the logician’s ideal of the context-independent proposition. The context-dependence of literary texts makes special demands on their readers, who must be presumed

⁹Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁰“Ein solches Entpragmatisieren ist ihre pragmatische Dimension.” Iser, *op. cit.*, 287.

¹¹*Philosophical Investigations*, § 65 ff.

to have a certain aesthetic competence in order to be able to appreciate the texts as literary. A minimum condition that must be fulfilled for an adequate reading of "The lips of the scientist move" is that the reader masters the concept 'poem'. And in order to master a concept like 'poem', the reader must acquaint himself with the relevant aspects of the relevant literary praxis, which in its turn presupposes some familiarity with the institutions which surround the relevant praxis in our society. In addition to his specifically aesthetic competence, the reader must be assumed to have a number of background skills like fluency in contemporary Swedish and a serviceable knowledge of the political situation in the mid-sixties. The quotations from Wittgenstein (in German) and Foucault (in French) as well as the allusions to Ulysses, Don Juan, Mayakovsky, Einstein, and so forth, make further demands on the reader's competence.

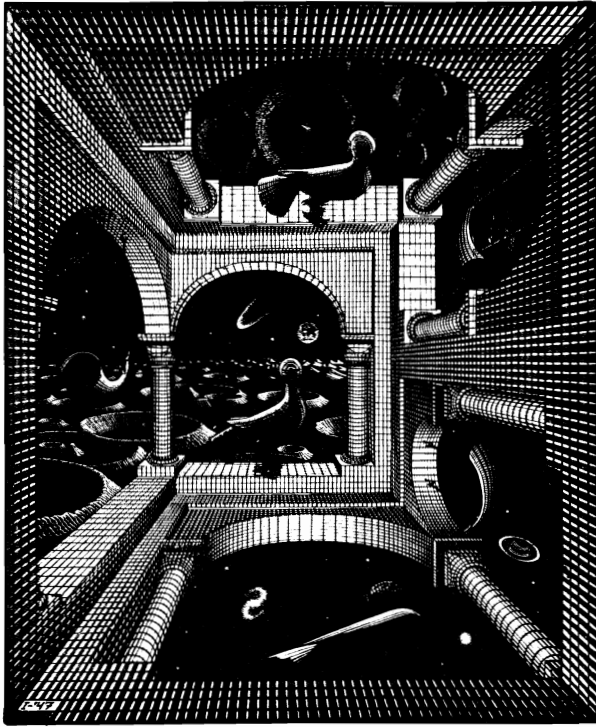
To sum up so far: An adequate appreciation of the little poem which we have considered here requires a rather complex set of competences in its readers. Those competences are both aesthetic and non-aesthetic. The diversity of literary texts and other objects of art makes it plausible to assume that there exists a family of aesthetic competences which are more or less similar to each other. There seems to be no reason a priori to assume that there is one specific Aesthetic Competence which is demanded in any encounter with any Work of Art.

2. On the logic of pictures

My second example is taken from the realm of images. It will serve to remind us of some further aspects of the competence required for aesthetic communication.

Ernst H. Gombrich has emphasized that all images are inherently ambiguous, so that a picture with a seemingly faulty perspective may be interpreted as a correct rendering of an unusual world.¹² A typical picture by M. C. Escher illustrates the point:

¹²Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Princeton 1969, p. 244 ff.



*M. C. Escher, Autre Monde. Woodcut, 1947.*¹³

In terms of the making-matching terminology derived from Karl Popper, one can say that any picture will be such that one can find possible worlds which the picture depicts; and a given picture can always be matched against an infinite number of worlds. A moment's reflection on the conditions of geometrical projection will help one to see why this must be so. An infinite variety of threedimensional patterns can be seen to result in the same picture on a sheet of paper. Looking through a peephole, one can indeed construct any number of objects that will result in the identical aspect, as Sir Ernst puts it.¹⁴

The phrase "any number of objects" must be taken to mean "an infinite

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹⁴ See the woodcut from Dürer's "Unterweisung der Messung", which Gombrich uses to illustrate his point (*Art and Illusion*, fig. 214).

number of objects, but not whatever object you happen to choose". Because of the natural limitations of our own equipment and the world in which we happen to live, a given picture cannot be a correct rendering of anything you please. I find it hard to imagine circumstances in which a picture which we would normally characterize as a good picture of an adder could be said to be a proper rendering of a quiet and philosophical cat. Since a given picture logically can be a picture of an infinite number of things, experience is required to decide which thing a given picture is a picture of. And in order for picture communication to be possible, the maker of the picture and his public must have shared experience.

The shared experience must concern the reality in which they live. Images of parts of the world which are *completely* unknown to us are incomprehensible to us. We do not know how to organize the lines and surfaces and colours to a unity, since we do not know which unity of all possible unities that the images is intended to portray. Since we all live in a world with roughly the same natural properties and since we all share the same basic biological features, there is a basis for shared experience in *la condition humaine*. The rest must be supplied through socialisation into the relevant culture and subculture.

The shared experience must also concern the images. The choice of the medium depends upon the tradition to which the artist belongs. Once the medium has been chosen, the artist can utilize the freedom within the natural limits of the medium and his instruments. In order for him to be able to communicate with a public, he and the public must agree upon a set of conventional ways of using the natural possibilities of the medium. They must agree, for instance, that red parts of the picture should be taken to indicate a reddish complexion; or that red parts of the picture should not be taken to indicate red skin, as on some amphoras; or that it should mean something else.

It seems perfectly possible to generalize from the case of images to other works of art. A text like "The lips of the scientist move" is inherently ambiguous in a similar fashion as an image. The existence of a set of natural limitations and the existence of a set of conventional ways of realizing the freedom within the natural limitations may be said to be transcendental conditions of aesthetic communication. Aesthetic communication thus requires shared competence. The artist and his public must belong to the same tradition. They must participate in the same aesthetic praxis.

3. The reconstruction of aesthetic competence

It will perhaps prove possible eventually to fit the reminders I have assembled

into a systematic theory of aesthetic competence considered as a department of a comprehensive theory of competence. Taking a cue from Ryle and Chomsky, one could also suggest that the general theory of competence should be supplemented with a general theory of performance.¹⁵ "There seems to be little reason to question the traditional view that investigation of performance will proceed only in so far as understanding of underlying competence permits", says Chomsky.¹⁶ If one generalizes from the syntactic model, one can dimly see the outlines of a group of "reconstructive sciences", each divided into a theory of competence and a theory of performance, which would jointly cover the field of human action.¹⁷ The existing sciences and philosophies of human action are however such that for the time being we had better stick to the more modest task of unpacking some of the implications of the remarks of the foregoing sections. Works on those lines, based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy, has now been going on for some time in Bergen. The work done so far does not point in the direction of quasi-axiomatic reconstructions of systems of rules, but rather in the direction of historical analyses, based on models for the generation of meaning in social contexts.¹⁸

The manifold of aesthetic competence may be seen as a reflection of the manifold of aesthetic praxis. Communication between an author or artist and his public is possible on the condition that they are anchored in the same tradition of rule-governed activities or the same praxis. An aesthetic praxis, like games and other practices, gets its identity partly through the rules which govern the activities within the praxis, and partly through its situation in the surrounding social space. The official rules of football and the conventional and individual ways of using freedom given by the official rules are supplemented with a set of rules governing the activities of the public, sports journalists, news paper readers, money investors, and so on. In football, we may distinguish the internal aspects of the game from the external aspects, which consists of the relations between the internal aspects and the relevant surrounding institutions. Considering an aesthetic praxis in analogy with a game like football, the same features

¹⁵G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, London 1949, Ch. II; N. Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Cambridge, Mass. 1965, Ch. 1.

¹⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁷Cf. J. Habermas, "Was heisst Universalpragmatik?", *Sprachpragmatik und Philosophie*, ed. K-O. Apel, Frankfurt a. M. 1976.

¹⁸See contributions by G. Danbolt and K.S. Johanssen to the present volume; and the reports from the seminar on philosophy of art and foundational problems in the history of art at the University of Bergen.

may be noted and summarized in the kind of diagram found in Johannesen's paper above (p. 97).¹⁹

The diagram draws attention to the fact that aesthetic actions, creative as well as hermeneutic, are constituted through the exercise of a certain competence in a social space which must include a tradition of similar actions and a number of relevant institutions. The competence required is internally related to the relevant praxis and institutions. Consequently, the aesthetic competence required will change as the relevant praxis and its background institutions change.

Aesthetic competence changes over time. Also, works of art of different kinds put different demands on the participants in aesthetic practices. Escher's woodcut and "The lips of the scientist move" do not require the same competence. It is the task of the historian to reconstruct the ways in which the general categories of the diagram have been realized under different historical conditions, including a mapping of the resources that a competent participant in a given aesthetic praxis must be assumed to have at his disposal.

The philosopher's contribution to the reconstruction of aesthetic competence consists in analysing the logical structure of the situations which are the domain of the historian. That there seems to be no reason a priori to assume that there are unchanging transcendental conditions of aesthetic praxis, does not mean that it is impossible to discern logical structures of a more general kind in aesthetic communication. But unlike Kant, we ascribe only a "conditional necessity" to the transcendental conditions we are interested in here.

One way of analysing the basic conditions of aesthetic communication would be through reconstruing the fundamental concepts required and bringing out the relations between those concepts with the help of models. The models would be reconstructive in the sense that they would not attempt to construe a new totality with the help of newly constructed elements; rather, they would attempt to reconstrue a given totality of meaning through an analysis of the elements by which it is constituted.²⁰ The fundamental concepts or "proto-concepts" would be of two kinds. First, there are a number of general concepts which together constitute action situations, e.g. 'situation', 'question', 'answer', 'goal', 'means'. The analysis of such concepts belongs to the general theory of action and philo-

¹⁹Cf. G. Danbolt, "Kunsthistorisk metode og den estetiske praksis," *Norwegian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1977).

²⁰Cf. Dietrich Böhler, "Handeln-Können, Reden-Können, Verstehen-Können," *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftstheorie*, 1977.

sophical anthropology.²¹ Secondly, there are a number of concepts which are specific to aesthetic action situations, e.g. 'work of art', 'aesthetic praxis', 'aesthetic competence'. The reconstruction of such concepts could be said to belong to the pragmatics of art.

Reconstructive models of this kind could be supplemented with general models for the building-up of aesthetic competence, which like the other models could be used as starting-points for historical reconstructions as well as for criticism and planning.²²

The diagram also draws attention to the fact that aesthetic competence is intertwined with other kinds of competence. The competences fostered by the institutions surrounding an aesthetic praxis are internally related to the specifically aesthetic competence which is demanded by the praxis. In fifteenth century Italy, for instance, there existed no standard-sized containers. It belonged to the training of the merchants to learn to calculate the volumes of barrels, sacks and bales quickly and accurately. Therefore, when the business men of the time approached pictures, they did so equipped with special visual skills. And the artist knew that they could count on those skills when carrying out an order for a painting.²³ An analysis of the illustrations of the manuscript known as Codex Egberti similarly demonstrates the ways in which aesthetic competence presupposes and mingles with other kinds of competence, for instance familiarity with the liturgical praxis at the time of Emperor Otto II.²⁴

Another way of unravelling some of the complexities of aesthetic competence would be to reflect on what is involved in the acquisition and mastery of aesthetic concepts. To avoid the temptation to regard concepts as a peculiar kind of entity, one may regard concepts simply as linguistic expressions considered in abstraction from their linguistic form.²⁵ What is left when you abstract from the linguistic form of an expression is its meaning. The competence one has when one masters the meaning of a

²¹ Böhler, *op. cit.*; *idem.* "Sprachkritische Rehabilitierung der philosophischen Anthropologie," *Philosophische Rundschau* 23 (1976), pp. 17–35.

²² Cf. T. Nordenstam, "Vetenskaplig kompetens," *Refleksjon og handling*, Oslo 1976, p. 91 ff; *idem.* "Forskningens yrkesetik—ett kompetensanalytiskt perspektiv," *Ideologi och systemutveckling*, ed. B. Göransson, Lund 1976, p. 86 f; and B. Göransson, T. Nordenstam & M. Wågström, *Arbetsformer på Dramaten*, Stockholm 1976, Ch. 2.

²³ M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Oxford University Press 1974, p. 86 ff.

²⁴ See Danbolt's paper below.

²⁵ W. Kamlah & P. Lorenzen, *Logische Propädeutik*, Mannheim 1967, p. 85.

²⁶ Cf. L. Nørreklit *Concepts*, Odense 1973, p. 37; D. Böhler "Handeln-Können, Reden-Können, Verstehen-Können", *op. cit.*

linguistic expression normally involves skills of several kinds: linguistic, cognitive, perceptual, pragmatic.

In order to master a concept 'C' a person would normally be required to have at least the following abilities:

- (1) the ability to identify instances of 'C' as instances of 'C',
- (2) the ability to use the expression "C" or one of its synonyms in a meaningful way,
- (3) the ability to understand "C" or one of its synonyms when it is used by other persons,
- (4) the ability to carry out rational actions in connection with instances of 'C',
- (5) the ability to think rationally in connection with instances of 'C',
- (6) at least a rudimentary ability to talk about the concept 'C'.

To illustrate, let us return to Håkanson's "The lips of the scientist move". A minimum condition for handling that text in an adequate way is that one masters the concept of 'poem'. This conceptual competence may now be broken down into several components: the competent reader must be able to recognize poems when he encounters them (1), he must be able to use the expression "poem" or one or more of its synonyms (the Swedish word "dikt", for instance) in a correct way (2), he must understand the expression "poem" (et cetera) when he hears or sees it (3), he must be able to act in a rational way when he encounters poems (for instance by reading the text rather than starting to measure it) (4), he must have the relevant cognitive ability (5), and he must be capable of giving at least a primitive kind of explanation of what the meaning of "poem" or one of its synonyms is (6). The skills of the literary critic and historian may be viewed as methodologically refined versions of such hermeneutic skills.

Consequently, the learning of aesthetic concepts ('poem', 'picture', 'beauty', 'integritas', 'prospectivo', etc.) cannot be dissociated from the learning of the world. We live in conceptually structured worlds. Aesthetic facts, then, are constituted in the encounter between competent individuals and relevant situations.

Against the background of our sketch of what is involved in aesthetic praxis, it can be seen to be an oversimplification to talk of aesthetic facts or "data" as "given", in the way that Morris Weitz did in his analysis of the criticism of *Hamlet*.²⁷ When Weitz lists the "données" of *Hamlet* (that Hamlet is athletic, brutal, obscene; that rottenness is the tenor of the imagery of the play; and so on), he presupposes the existence of institutions,

²⁷*Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*, p. 228 ff.

practices, and competences, which are left in the dark. Only on the assumption of a certain hermeneutic background does it make sense to talk of “a body of true (or false), verifiable statements about what is given, and which, hence, are undeniable.”²⁸

Alternatives to such empiricist short-cuts may be found in the hermeneutic tradition as well as in the tradition from Wittgenstein.²⁹ Miss Anscombe’s remarks in the short paper “On Brute Facts” on what it means to act within the context of an institution seems equally applicable to aesthetic actions as to her own example, that I owe the grocer a sum of money because he sent me a quarter of potatoes. That he sent me a quarter of potatoes is a brute fact in relation to the fact that I owe him a sum of money. In the same way, that Håkanson wrote down some lines on a sheet of paper, beginning with the words “The lips of the scientist move”, is a brute fact in relation to the fact that he wrote down a poem. What makes his writing down the words a case of writing a poem is the context. Håkanson’s writing a poem, then, consists of some brute facts in the context of our institutions.

Miss Anscombe’s observations on the logical relations between descriptions of brute facts and the institutional facts which are connected with them, need not be repeated here. In conclusion, it may only be noted that her way of cutting through the “is”/“ought”-tangle might help to clarify the problem of aesthetic evaluation. It seems perfectly possible to derive what would traditionally be called aesthetic evaluations from what would traditionally be referred to as empirical statements, provided that the derivation takes place in a social space including the appropriate institutions, the appropriate aesthetic praxis, and the appropriate aesthetic competence.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 234.

²⁹ The hermeneutical tradition, e.g. H-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 2nd ed., Tübingen 1965; the Wittgensteinian tradition, e.g. G.E.M. Anscombe, “On Brute Facts”, *Analysis* 18 (1958): 69–72.