

Dorthe Jørgensen, *Skønhedens metamorfose: De æstetiske idéers historie* (The Metamorphosis of Beauty: History of Aesthetic Ideas). Published in 2001 by Odense University Press. 481 pages, 56 color illustrations.

ENGLISH SUMMARY

The book *Skønhedens metamorfose* (The Metamorphosis of Beauty) is conceived as an idea-historiographic introduction to the history of aesthetic ideas, and as such is the first of its kind. Though it is primarily an introduction catering for students and lecturers at university level, it can also be read with advantage by others, for example, students at the Danish folk high schools. To fulfil its aim as a general introduction the book is equipped with comprehensive bibliographies covering both source material for the history of aesthetic ideas and secondary literature related to the primary source material. Furthermore, the book contains 56 annotated color illustrations and includes both a name index and a subject index. *Skønhedens metamorfose* aims not only at being an introduction to the history of aesthetic ideas, but also hopes to create a basis for the recognition that aesthetics essentially is metaphysics of experience. The book thus develops a philosophical perspective that finds its point of departure in the link between divinity and beauty suggested by the metaphysics of beauty. This metaphysics was central to ancient thought, and in a sequel to *Skønhedens metamorfose*, a book entitled *Den skønne tænkning* (Beautiful Thinking, 2014), the author has presented a systematic understanding of aesthetics as metaphysics of experience, especially in light of more recent concepts of beauty.

Skønhedens metamorfose is divided into five sections: “The Aesthetic Ideas of Antiquity”, “The Aesthetic Ideas of the Middle Ages”, “The Aesthetic Ideas of the Renaissance”, “The Aesthetic Ideas of the Eighteenth Century”, and “The Aesthetic Ideas of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”. These five sections are rounded by a detailed introduction and a comprehensive conclusion, which clarify the historical discussions and provide a broader perspective. The introduction defines, among other things, the book’s understanding of concepts such as *aesthetics* (including metaphysics of beauty, art theory, philosophy of art, and philosophical aesthetics), *divinity* (its relationship to God and the divine), and *experience of divinity* (including this experience’s relation to metaphysical, religious, and aesthetic experiences, and to the experience of modernity). The conclusion, which for one thing elaborates the book’s understanding of experience, its concept of history, and the relation between philosophy and history of ideas,

gathers together the many threads and figures touched upon in the book, in a discussion of the relation between the Greek and the Jewish traditions in the history of aesthetic ideas, and in an introduction to the future challenge: understanding aesthetics as metaphysics of experience.

In that each of the five sections in *Skønhedens metamorfose* opens with a short summary of the manifestations that the experience of divinity takes in the period in question, and closes with an analogous summary covering the same period's understanding of beauty, there are two levels one can move on throughout the book: the introduction to the history of aesthetic ideas formulated in the five main sections; and the meta-reflection and larger contextualization that appear in the book's introduction, conclusion, and ten short summaries. Yet these two different levels are by no means independent of each other. For example, the positing of a philosophical perspective found in the meta-level of the book is crucial to the substance of its five main sections, enabling their presentation of the history of aesthetic ideas to unfold as a narrative of the historical metamorphosis of the conception of beauty – and the experience of divinity. In the philosophical perspective's explanatory light, the history of aesthetic ideas appears as a story of change, in which beauty and divinity have been transformed to profane aura and immanent transcendence in our time.

Skønhedens metamorfose builds on the tenet, that although philosophical aesthetics and autonomous art have only existed for a few hundred years, the history of aesthetics can be traced back to Homeric poetry, and indeed, all the way back to stone age cave paintings. This view implies that aesthetics is neither identical with the modern kind of philosophy called philosophical aesthetics, nor with theories of autonomous art. Nor is aesthetics the same as philosophy dealing with sensuous experience, taste, or the edifying effects of beauty, just as aesthetics is not identifiable with art theory or theories of man-made artefacts. On the contrary: aesthetics is metaphysics of experience, and as such stretches over the entire field of aesthetic ideas that in the course of history has been divided into varied areas and corresponding forms of theory. The metaphysics of beauty of Antiquity and the Middle Ages belongs to these theoretical forms, as do more recent philosophies and theories of art.

The greater part of aesthetics formulated since the eighteenth century has been marked by a tendency to regard aesthetics as the philosophy of art and beauty as the beauty of art, just as there has been a propensity to see art and aesthetics as serving the ethical purpose to emancipate mankind. For a long time the beauty of nature has not held the same interest as the beauty of art, just as the question of knowledge has been toned down in favor of questions of ethics and politics. In our day, this tendency divides itself into two different positions: an art theoretical position that

continues the Aristotelian interest in the formal language of the work of art, and a social-philosophical position continuing the humanist-idealist tradition's interest in the moral effect of the beautiful. Although these two positions elaborate on different traditions, they share the idea that art has first priority and relate themselves morally to art. Furthermore, both positions end up, when they attempt to transgress their own boundaries, by tuning into a life-oriented concept of aesthetics as ethics.

However, it is the metaphysics of beauty, rather than the art theory or social philosophy of life-as-art, that has been most conscious of and has best reflected that which is the fundamental thesis of *Skønhedens metamorfose*: that art and aesthetics have their origins in the experience of divinity. The metaphysics of beauty can be followed from its awakenings in the belief expressed by the Homeric theory of inspiration that poetry originates in divine madness, and the Pythagorean cosmological idea of the beauty of the cosmos, through Plato and Plotinus' fully unfolded metaphysics of beauty, and the elaborate and more or less esoteric systems of Byzantine and Gothic thought, plus the Neoplatonic philosophy of the Renaissance, to the romantic philosophy of nature and literary theory, as well as to the modernistic art and aesthetics. If the metaphysics of beauty and the experience of divinity are to have a chance today, then modern aesthetics must more effectively shift its gaze from the artwork, the artist, and the art institution, to the aesthetic experience, just as it must take more seriously the realization that aesthetic experience does not alone arise from art and artefacts.

The study of the traditional metaphysics of beauty reveals that aesthetic experiences are related to metaphysical and religious experiences, and that these different forms of experience have a common origin in the experience of divinity. In *Skønhedens metamorfose* the expression 'experience of divinity' is not used as a synonym for the divine, God, or gods, nor should the experience of divinity be seen as having the divine, God, or the presence of God as its subject matter. Differing from traditional metaphysical and religious experiences, the experience of divinity has no actual subject matter as such; it does not build on an experience of a 'something' of divine character. The experienced divinity exists only as a dimension revealing divinity – a sort of unreachable and incomprehensible 'more' – within metaphysical, religious, and aesthetic experiences. This universal dimension of experienced divinity, which aesthetics has traditionally described as 'the manifestation of beauty' or 'the sublime', cannot only manifest itself aesthetically, and therefore the history of aesthetics can be considered a result of the workings of the experience

of divinity. Thus, *Skønhedens metamorfose* is itself a method of presenting the idea-historiography of the experience of divinity, namely as it becomes discernible in the history of art and aesthetics.

In the history of aesthetic ideas, the experience of divinity has manifested itself in many ways, though with two notable variations: as an *experience of form* and as an *experience of light*. Both of these experiences have been considered experiences of beauty and have thus given rise to two different kinds of aesthetics: an *aesthetics of form* and an *aesthetics of light*. As an experience of form the experience of divinity manifests itself as a perception of the beauty of the beautiful form, which already the Pythagoreans were aware of; as an experience of light the experience of divinity manifests itself as a perception of the beauty of beautiful light, and Plato already associated light with truth and with man's possibilities for knowing truth. While the outline of an aesthetics of form was present as early as Pythagoras, the conception of light was first transformed to a specific aesthetics of light by Plotinus, but thereafter light would play a central aesthetic role in both art and aesthetics.

In the Middle Ages a heavenly light expanded in the golden surfaces of the Byzantine icons, and later Venetian Renaissance painters would discover the use of natural light, just as in modern times an independent 'art-of-light' arose in the form of photography, cinema, video, holography, light events, and neon installations. But the aesthetics of form, resulting from the experience of form, ruled absolutely in Antiquity, and it has also played the decisive role in those periods where attempts were made to rejuvenate classical aesthetics, for example, in the Carolingian period in the Middle Ages, in the Italian Renaissance, and in seventeenth century French classicism. Nevertheless, the aesthetics of light originating in the conception of light was most important for the Middle Ages, and surpassing the Renaissance's and classicism's devotion to form, light has played an increasingly larger role in the romantico-modern art and aesthetics. In other words, the link to the experience of divinity is not broken despite modern secularization; the experience of form has weakened since romanticism, but in turn the experience of light has borne the experience of divinity home.

The strict aesthetics of form, defining itself as symmetry and mimesis, arose when classical art began to reflect the Pythagorean experience of divinity – that is, the experience of cosmic harmony – anthropometrically in the symmetry of classical buildings, sculptures, and pictures. The aesthetics of form is thus a distinctively Greek phenomenon, whereas the aesthetics of light, which arose from Plotinus' subjection of the metaphysics of beauty and the aesthetics of form to a sort of metaphysics of experience adaption, is related to the Jewish tradition. The Middle Ages inherited

both the aesthetics of form and the aesthetics of light, and furthermore combined them with the Old Testament's aesthetics of the symbol. Christian aesthetics can literally be seen as one giant attempt to reconcile the Greek harmony of form with the Jewish dynamism of the symbol: to alloy the beauty of peace and the beauty of life with each other. This attempt at reconciliation resulted, in the Greek Orthodox domain, in a metaphysical aesthetics oriented towards the truth of the beautiful, given that the mediation here was prompted by Dionysius the Areopagite's mystico-theological aesthetics of light. In the Roman Catholic domain, however, where it was Augustine's interpretation of the moral teachings of the New Testament that formed the basis for reconciliation, the result was an ethical-ascetic aesthetics that focused on the good in the beautiful.

The Middle Ages' Christian endeavors of reconciliation were thus based on the fact, that the Greeks not only reflected the experience of form of Pythagorean origin but also Plotinus' experience of light, and that the Jews not only formulated the Old Testament's ban on pictures, but also nurtured a characteristic joy for the material and its potential symbolism. As the aesthetics of light constituted an element in Greek philosophy related to the Middle East, it was eminently suited to mediating the Hellenistic experience of the aesthetic beauty of the form with the experience of the symbolic meaning of the material known by the Middle East. At the same time, the symbol-aesthetic dimension of Christian aesthetics involved an 'all perspectivism', not found to the same extent in Antiquity, and both the aesthetics of light, the aesthetics of the symbol, the synthesis of Greek and Jewish thought, and this all perspectivism appeared in the Byzantine icons, which refusing to depict Christ naturally alluded to the divine light and folded many worlds together in the same picture.

The all perspectivism of the Middle Ages was, however, rejected as the Greek aesthetics of form again appeared on the agenda in a purer form during the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The all perspectivism succumbed to the 'gathering together' of the picture facilitated by the central perspectivist construction of pictures that was developed to the extreme in the High Renaissance. The aesthetics of form based upon the central perspective of the Renaissance was expressed in an exemplary way in the Florentine School's output, and the ideal of beauty that was connected to this aesthetics ruled almost absolutely for centuries. Only in glimpses could the beginnings of a breach in the hegemony of form be seen, through the Venetian's light-aesthetical interpretation of form to mannerism's fragmentation of form and the baroque's dynamic impelling of it. In the eighteenth century, the aesthetics of form based on the central perspective actually received a new lease on life, in that the modern philosophy of emancipation attempted to utilize

neoclassicism. At the same time, romanticism problematized the hegemony of form, and with modernism the break with the central perspectivist aesthetics of form was completed; light was now released in modern colorism, and cubism revitalized the all perspectivism in a modern form.

The use of elements from the aesthetic universe of the Middle Ages, executed by modernism and the avant-garde, resulted in new interpretations of both the aesthetics of light and the symbol-aesthetic tradition: a *mystique of form* and a *magic of things*. Such modern artist's break with the Renaissance tradition's aesthetics of form based on the central perspective thus implied a reaching behind the Greek element in the European history of ideas, down to the Jewish element in it. This 'orientalism' (in a positive sense of the word) stands in opposition to neoclassicism's heroification of the Greek classicism, but is related to romanticism's criticism of classicism. The romanticists certainly cultivated Antiquity, but it was archaic poetry and the archaic temple ruins that interested them, and in contrast to classical art, archaic art is not a product of a pronounced Greek culture but rather a culture marked by the above mentioned 'orientalism'. In the light of this, romanticism, modernism, and the avant-garde did succeed in launching a modern kind of beauty, one that not only was non-classical (i.e., so-called ugly), but was built on a kind of 'Benjaminian' sense of the profane aura in and about this world of ours. The beautiful constituted (once more) a potential of experience that was not restricted to aesthetic dealings with art but in principle was accessible wherever and whenever for everyone. However, such a version of experience of divinity calls more on an ontology of experience than an aesthetic explanation; it calls for the actualization of aesthetics as metaphysics of experience.

Translated by Phillip Joseph Shiels in 2001. © Copyright 2001 Dorthe Jørgensen and Odense University Press. Translation revised by Dorthe Jørgensen.