

**Dorthe Jørgensen, *Historien som værk: Værkets historie* (History as a Work: The Work's History). Published in 2006 by Aarhus University Press. 305 pages, 9 color illustrations.**

## ENGLISH SUMMARY

In order to perform an idea-historical consideration of what takes place in the field of aesthetics, it is necessary to follow one or more of the ideas that have historically structured the phenomena in this area. An account of this kind is interdisciplinary, uniting art history and history of theory. Most books about what takes place in the field of aesthetics are, however, written from the viewpoint of *either* art history *or* history of theory. An idea-historical account of the history of aesthetic ideas has thus long been lacking, but in 2001 this need was met by the publication of *Skønhedens metamorfose* (The Metamorphosis of Beauty). Furthermore, considering something in an idea-historical way does not just involve the representation of history, but rather, since it is a matter of history of *ideas*, it must also involve philosophy. But modern philosophy has had reservations about concerning itself with aesthetics; Germany is one of the only countries that have an advanced tradition of philosophical aesthetics, and even here reflections on aesthetic phenomena generally assume the character of philosophy of art, if not theory of art. When philosophical aesthetics was founded by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, it was however not as a theory or philosophy of art, but rather as a theory of the aesthetic experience seen as a source of true knowledge. So there has long been a need not only for an account of the history of aesthetic ideas but an account that, besides deriving from the history of ideas, also maintains that aesthetics should not be reduced to theory or philosophy of art, and that *philosophical* aesthetics is essentially theory of experience.

The latter condition was also met with the publication of *Skønhedens metamorfose*, which precisely emphasizes and elaborates on the epistemological component of philosophical aesthetics. The book articulates this aspect not only through explicit references to Baumgarten's concept of aesthetics, but also through the register of various forms of experience (including that of divinity) that structures the book's representation of the history of aesthetic ideas, as well as through the proposal for a metaphysics of experience that the book constitutes as a whole. However, in doing history of ideas one is not only dealing with ideas and must therefore work philosophically; as a

*historian* of ideas one also does historiography. Good historiography involves theory of history, meaning reflections on the essence and form of historiography, and likewise work in the history of ideas should also be supplemented with a historiology of ideas, in the sense of a philosophy of what history of ideas actually is and what an idea-historical work might look like. While the theory of history can in a certain sense be traced all the way back to its infancy with Aristotle, in the shape of his reflections on the difference between poetry and history, the historiology of ideas is still in embryo. An essential part of the aim of *Historien som værk* (History as a Work) is therefore to contribute to developing the historiology of ideas by supplementing *Skønhedens metamorfose* with the philosophical considerations that, due to the chosen mode of expression, could not be included in that book.

To this end, the starting point of *Historien som værk* is an idea that is inspired by Aristotle's poetics, but which he himself did not entertain, and that is formulated in part I of the book. It is the idea that the historian should follow the poet's example and poeticize historiography. Within philosophy, the understanding of history *has* in fact become more 'literary' since Aristotle's time, although modern historical scholarship has at the same time challenged historiography for its 'literariness.' Hence, even Immanuel Kant acknowledged that the philosophy of history involves interpretations of history, and Friedrich Nietzsche realized that interpretation is essentially poetry. As regards history, this means that it is not just given, but is created by the historians themselves. And as regards the understanding of history, this means that it is not sufficient to simply reflect on the nature of history; one must also consider the nature and production of works. *Historien som værk* emphasizes the latter in particular in parts II and III, and thus does not only satisfy the need for these considerations, but also demonstrates that aesthetics can bring knowledge and insight into historiography and the historiography of ideas, because aesthetics in particular has been the place where discussions of issues concerning the work have occurred for centuries.

If we pursue the above-mentioned idea of poeticizing historiography, the historian's reading of history is revealed in the coherence achieved by history when it is formed as a work. Rather than resulting in aestheticism, this poeticization produces knowledge. For the forming of the work allows empirical history to appear in a transfigured light inasmuch as the act of making a work, according to Aristotle, consists in concentrating on what is important and in making its coherence visible: creating a construction based on a guiding principle, an idea, a perspective. What is formed as a work is therefore both more universal and more philosophical than what is not formed as a work. Yet since Antiquity there has been a widespread tendency to accuse artists and poets of not

speaking the truth. Therefore, *Historien som værk* also concerns itself with the questions of which truth is encountered in a work, how it manifests itself in the work, and from which source works arise. Furthermore, the book treats the question of the form of what is formed as a work as well as the relationship between work and experience, because the path to the work goes through human experience, and more precisely through the human experience of the form of the work.

The knowledge of and insight into the history of aesthetics that is brought into play in *Historien som værk* conveys, however, that our understanding of the work has undergone historical changes. From Aristotle to early German romanticism, the work was defined as having a beginning, middle and end. The work was the classical work, which according to Aristotle was characterized by unity in multiplicity, yet which he in practice primarily treated as a question of totality or harmonic proportionality. But in early German romanticism, experiential reality and the ideal of the work became opposed to each other, and the unity of the work faded out of sight, though its metaphysical meaning had just become evident. Unity became an ideal that continued to be pursued, but with the awareness that the ideal could not be effectualized (any longer) and thus the work went to pieces. Twentieth-century avant-garde and postmodernism even effectualized multiplicity to the detriment of unity, gave priority to fragmentation over form, and declared the work dead just like God and reason. This development had consequences not only for art and aesthetics, but also for our understanding of history, inasmuch as every idea about coherence in history became taboo as an expression of obsolete metaphysics.

While *Skønhedens metamorfose* took issue with the twentieth century's rejection of the beautiful, *Historien som værk* raises objections to the distrust of all philosophy of history that has resulted from this development and that has long been opportune. Yet the answer to the question of beauty that was formulated in *Skønhedens metamorfose* did not consist in an appeal for a return to classicism, but rather in an invitation to differentiate the concept of beauty. Correspondingly, the aim of *Historien som værk* is not a return to the idea of historical progress stemming from what is usually meant by 'philosophy of history,' but rather to revise our understanding of what it means to philosophize about history. This revision is a precondition for being able to answer the question of what history of ideas actually is, that is, to do so in an unprejudiced way that is not inhibited by any anti-metaphysical reaction to the word 'idea.' The revision is necessary in order to discuss the question *philosophically* rather than to just pragmatically refer to what happens to call itself 'history of ideas.' A substantial portion of part IV of *Historien som værk* is dedicated to these

considerations, which also offers the opportunity to systematically account for the intentions of *Skønhedens metamorfose* as a work in the history of ideas.

*Historien som værk* shows that poets and artists do not have a monopoly on the work as a form, but must share it with philosophers and historians of ideas. Furthermore, part V, the final section of the book, shows that even human activities *as such* can assume the form of a work. For artists as well as the traditional kind of independently working people (e.g., farmers), the purpose of work does *not* exist outside work itself, as Aristotle thought. Work is not done only to make the product at which it is aimed, but is also practiced for its own sake and basically contains its own purpose. This however also means that, for instance, the creative efforts of an artist constitute a work in themselves. Creative activity is self-supporting and thereby constitutes a practical actualization of the knowledge that beauty symbolized for the ancient Greeks – that is, their realization that not everything has its purpose outside itself; that there is, on the contrary, something with intrinsic value. As is evident in the introduction and conclusion of *Historien som værk*, current aesthetic theory usually dismisses the concept of beauty and rejects metaphysics, and therefore it does not have the possibility of understanding that ancient realization. Nor does it understand what takes place in the kind of modern art that may have renounced the classical work but still communicates with tradition owing to its openness towards the beautiful.

As a continuation of *Skønhedens metamorfose*, *Historien som værk* is not only an invitation to reconsider the *raison d'être* of philosophy of history and its foundation, as well as, to contribute to the development of the historiology of ideas. The book is also an invitation to deal with aesthetics more philosophically and to treat the traditional concepts, including the concept of the work and that of beauty, in a more differentiated way. *Historien som værk* thus follows up on the appeal in which *Skønhedens metamorfose* resulted, that is, the appeal to actualize philosophical aesthetics which was indeed never really actualized. However, *Skønhedens metamorfose* showed that if philosophical aesthetics is to be actualized as a theory of aesthetic experience seen as true knowledge, as conceived by Baumgarten, it must result in a metaphysics of experience that has the experience of divinity, or more precisely the most recent historical interpretation of this experience – that is, the experience of immanent transcendence – as its starting point and final reference. *Historien som værk* shows that this kind of experience fundamentally conveys that there *is* something with intrinsic value, however poorly we manage to define it. We can hardly get beyond this experience, but the experience itself is also enough to put pragmatic utilitarianism in perspective. Actualizing philosophical aesthetics as metaphysics of experience by reflecting on

these experiences therefore has consequences not only for aesthetics, but for thought as such and hence for life in general. Already suggested at the end of *Skønhedens metamorfose*, this is now explicitly stated in *Historien som værk*.

*Translated in 2006 by Stacey Cozart and Alan Crozier. © Copyright 2006 Dorthe Jørgensen and Aarhus University Press. Translation revised by Dorthe Jørgensen.*