

Nicholas Davey, *Unfinished Worlds. Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

When Sebastian Gardner (University College, London) wrote, “In this excellent work, Davey gives a superlatively clear, sharp-edged and analytically precise account of Gadamer’s hermeneutic aesthetics, which makes clear both the capacity of Gadamer’s thought to meet stringent philosophical demands and its distinctive appeal as an approach within aesthetics. A more engaging and persuasive account could not be asked for,” Gardner had perceived but the aspirations driving this innovative study of Gadamer’s aesthetics. In this acclaimed volume, Davey explores Gadamer’s key but contentious assertion that artworks ‘address us.’ This suggests that artworks are not visual phenomena alone but have meaningful cognitive content. For philosophical hermeneutics, that meaning is relational. The experience of art addressing us can therefore be a transformative one that entails the cognitive relations within a spectator’s outlook being transformed by those which constitute the work. Davey’s book argues that this is made possible because of the surplus meaning attached to visual signs, symbols, and the mental images of literature and poetry. Symbols and poetic ideas serve as placeholders across a variety of discourses such that the meaning of a central term in one’s own framework of understanding can be transformed when it meets different deployments from within a foreign horizon. In a transformative encounter, the spectator’s horizon is significantly not displaced but achieves a new and significant permutation of its form. The transactional capacity of symbols, poetic images and what Gadamer calls subject-matters (*Sachen*) to act as placeholder terms across contrasting frameworks of meaning offers not just an insight into how transformative experiences of art are structured but also an understanding of how the transformative capacity of interdisciplinary study depends precisely upon the movement of shared placeholder terms across practices. Philosophical hermeneutics points towards an account of aesthetic attentiveness as a practice, a practice not concerned with the passive appreciation of art and its aesthetic qualities in any standard sense but with actively facilitating movement between significant semantic placeholders in the horizons of both the artwork and the spectator so as to promote the possibility of transformative experience.

Unfinished Worlds primarily concerns the relationship between philosophical hermeneutics and visual art: it is not an examination of Gadamer’s analysis of the ‘poetic work’ but offers a ‘poetics’ of the visual, an exploration of the antecedent cultural and historical conditions which allow an image to communicate effectively. Whilst this poetics must involve an analysis of the elements at play within a work. It must also consider how they combine to render the work an effective communication. The notable value of this hermeneutical poetics lies in its answer to the fundamental question, “How do art works *work*, and how is this working to be understood?” The answer which this study proposes is a response to a riddle at the heart of Gadamer’s aesthetic: how do silent images speak?

The principal value of hermeneutical aesthetics lies in its participatory account of the experience of art. Gadamer’s dialogism is widely appreciated, but this study proposes that the consequences of

dialogism for a relational aesthetics are not fully understood. Focusing on the cognitive content of an artwork, dialogism deprives the theoretician and practitioner of any privileged interpretive position. This is because Gadamer's ontological orientation transfers effective agency from subjective consciousness to its ground in language and tradition. Emergence, transformation, and transmission demand participation. Subjectivity is not dissolved but serves as a catalyst for the reception, mutation, and development of the cultural subject matters that both inform and transcend subjective consciousness. This suggests that intense aesthetic insight does not transcend its informing language but must be interpreted as a transformative variant. Dialogism implies that the content of such insight is expressible in public terms. What *Unfinished Worlds* makes clear is that artworks can address us individually precisely because of shared ontological structures. Works offer different perspectives on shared phenomenological contents (structure, narrative, delicacy, sensitivity). Indeed, it is these very differences of perspective regarding common content that allow artworks to be of such unquestionable educative value: our individual visual and cognitive horizons are continually expanding because of their interaction with different perspectives. Indeed, Davey argues that in the sphere of the aesthetic, it is the difference that communalizes. It is the emergence of different perspectives regarding a subject matter that discloses something that is common. This does not establish a common perspective but manifests a common interest in a subject matter. In other words, it is the moments of difference within the collectivity of aesthetic experience that are crucial. It is they that promise the possibility of a communality grounded in and enabled by a common interest in its very differences.

Davey's study of Gadamer's aesthetics concludes by showing that Gadamer's ontology of art is directly linked to his critique of the subjectivism of aesthetic consciousness. To deny that the transformations of consciousness achieved within our experience of art are not reducible to subjective consciousness alone, he has to demonstrate their ontological status. This is done by claiming that the disclosive power of both word and image reveals the procedural nature of reality itself and that, furthermore, the transformative capacities of art allow the real to become more real by achieving a greater historical effectiveness. This achieves a major ontological shift in the relation of art to reality: art becomes a mode of Being's self-presentational nature. As a 'showing,' Being discloses itself through the emergence of word and image, not because either capture it but because both exhibit its processural features. Gadamer's ontology of art is participatory: experiencing art (interacting with it) is a mode of art's being. This supports the claim that aesthetic attentiveness is not a passive contemplation of the real but, rather, contributes to the actualization of the real. In this respect, Davey's book reveals that it is Hegel's rather than Plato's argumentation that drives Gadamer's analysis of art. In allowing reality to become more (*Werden zum Sein*), art's images enhance rather than distort the real. This exposes the extent to which traditional aesthetics has been too long in the thrall of the ancient Greek metaphysical assumption that Being is complete and without any need to regenerate its forms. By contrast, Gadamer's presentational aesthetics is Promethean in nature: the movement of Being is revealed in the bringing forth and the withholding of aesthetic presentation. What makes Davey's study of Gadamer's aesthetics notable is its offering of both a clear and acute analysis of the traditional and somewhat opaque categories of phenomenological categories of representation, presentation, and likeness and its realignment of these categories in a poetics of ontological increase.