

Stephen Snyder. *End-of-Art Philosophy in Hegel, Nietzsche and Danto*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, 299 pp. ISBN 978-3-319-94072-4

The idea that art has, in a specific sense, come to an end belongs to the history of aesthetics. The first articulation of the issue is associated with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, but it reappeared in the 1980s in the writings of Arthur C. Danto, Hans Belting, and other thinkers. In recent years, contemporary philosophers have returned to this topic, particularly to Danto's version of this claim.¹ For Danto, art came to an end in a narrative sense, that is to say, there was a narrative objectively realized in the history of art which then ended at a certain point.² The narrative Danto had in mind was progressive and based on a general definition of art, and artists aimed to improve their skills to accomplish the purpose of their art as given by that definition. When they achieved that purpose, their task was fulfilled, and they had no other agenda to carry forward. Danto's thesis was not, however, concerned with the production of art but rather with the historical structure of art history. Accordingly, he had no intention of asserting that no more artworks would be produced, but his thesis influences our understanding of art in so far as it draws a line between historical and so-called post-historical art – namely, that between art produced before and after the end of art.

The book under review is the most recent contribution to the discussion about the end of art, and the choice of the title indicates Stephen Snyder's aim and marks out the scope of his book. Nonetheless, *End-of-Art Philosophy in Hegel, Nietzsche and Danto* offers more than an erudite introduction and summary of the views held by this trio of philosophers on the end of art.

In the first, introductory, chapter, Snyder outlines the end-of-art debate and raises the crucial question of what these philosophers have in common apart from their apparent interest in the issue of the end of art. According to Snyder, what unifies the general philosophical approaches of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Danto is their aim to overcome Cartesian dualism, and this intention is mirrored in their attitude towards art (p. 2). This common denominator serves as Snyder's vantage point for his analysis, enabling him to grasp the end-of-art topic from a new perspective. This step seems promising, particularly with regard to Danto, whose end-of-art thesis is usually not associated with other branches of his philosophy (except for his

¹ See Katharina Bahlmann, *Arthur C. Danto und das Phantasma vom 'Ende der Kunst'* (Paderborn: Fink, 2015); Sonia Sedivy, *Beauty and the End of Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

² Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 4.

philosophy of history).³ Yet, Snyder isolates another purpose of his book: he aims to propose an alternative narrative of twentieth-century art which can cover and explain the profound changes in the art of this time but without an assumption that art has come to an end (p. 3). Consequently, Snyder sets two main goals for his speculation. First, he seeks to clarify what meaning each of these thinkers ascribed to the notion of the 'end of art', and second, he attempts to introduce and defend an alternative model to explain twentieth-century art based on a concept proposed by the art historian Ernst Hans Gombrich.

While the first chapter serves as an introduction to the topic and the book as such, in the second chapter Snyder examines the first key figure from the title, Hegel, and the question of the significance of his view regarding the end of art. Hegel's philosophy forms a coherent system, and this fact determines the way its particular topics – art included – are interpreted: the notion of the end of art is integral to the whole of Hegel's philosophy, and it is not possible to discuss it without considering the principles on which the system is based. Snyder, accordingly, interprets the end-of-art thesis in the light of Hegel's notion of the absolute, emphasizing Hegel's dialectic attitude as expressed by the term 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*). He defines the absolute as a mode of consciousness while stressing those aspects of the absolute which contribute to the problem of overcoming the subject-object opposition. Following selected interpreters, Snyder characterizes absolute knowledge as the subject-object unity which is achieved through the dialectical process (through sublation).

Snyder makes an effort to paint a larger picture of Hegel's ideas about art. To do so, he describes Hegel's distinction between three stages of art – namely between symbolic, classical, and romantic art. But rather than going into details and connecting these three stages with Hegel's system of art, Snyder considers mainly those aspects which contribute towards understanding the end of art. Art reaches its perfection in its classical form because here it serves as the most suitable form of expressing the spirit. Accordingly, Snyder pinpoints the end of art as the moment when classical art transitions to romantic art, as it is at this point that its ability to perfectly serve the spirit is lost. Concerning Hegel's metaphysics, art is not the only means for expressing the spirit; it shares its purpose with religion and with philosophy in that all three are linked through

³ The problem of the relevance of Danto's philosophy of history for his philosophy of art is emphasized for example by David Carrier, Noël Carroll, and Lydia Goehr. See David Carrier, 'Danto and His Critics: After the End of Art and Art History', *History and Theory* 37 (1998): 1–16; Noël Carroll, 'The End of Art?', *History and Theory* 37 (1998): 17–29; Lydia Goehr, 'Afterwords: An Introduction to Arthur Danto's Philosophies of History and Art', *History and Theory* 46 (2007): 1–28.

their preoccupation with truth. Snyder emphasizes that art and religion are subordinate to philosophy, and that this fact presupposes the possibility of the consumption of art as the ideal form of expressing the spirit.

What is quite surprising, however, is Snyder's step to widen the scope of this chapter and embrace Immanuel Kant's reflection on the beautiful, the sublime, and the ugly. Snyder's comparison of Kant's ideas on these phenomena with Hegel's triad of art forms – symbolic, classical, and romantic – is meant to provide readers with a deeper insight into Hegel's thinking and reveal its originality in a broader context of idealist and pre-idealist philosophy. From the perspective of overcoming dualism, his choice to relate Hegel's conception of art forms to Kant's ideas presented in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* makes more sense. Snyder understands Hegel's philosophy as a reply to Kant's critical project in the sense that Hegel aimed to resolve the problem of overcoming the subject-object opposition left in Kant's philosophy using the principle of unifying spirit.

In the third chapter, Snyder examines Nietzsche and his philosophical writings, claiming that his end-of-art theory constitutes the opposite of Hegel's. However, the first problem with Nietzsche's version of the thesis which Snyder addresses results from the character of Nietzsche's writings. Contrary to Hegel, Nietzsche did not approach this topic systematically, and therefore there is no other option than to abstract the notion from the larger body of Nietzsche's work – this fact necessarily determines Snyder's analysis. Instead of a systematic study, he traces the theme of the end of art throughout different periods of Nietzsche's philosophy. In each of the four periods which Snyder – following Julian Young – identifies, Nietzsche understands the end of art differently because his attitude towards art as such has been evolving as well.

Moreover, Nietzsche does not reserve the term 'art' only for the skill or activity of an artist, but he relates it to general human creativity. Accordingly, Snyder – on this occasion following Danto – distinguishes between two meanings of the term 'art': we can think of art in a narrow or a wide sense while the wider sense derives from the narrow one. The term 'art' in its narrow sense refers to the skill, or creativity, of an artist as well as to the works that are produced, and therefore it is possible to say that this sense corresponds to our understanding of art as an artist's product. Contrary to this, art in the wider sense describes a creative aspect of our everyday activities. The end-of-art thesis, however, applies only to art in the narrow sense. In his early phase, as represented by *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Wagner at Bayreuth*, Nietzsche discusses the loss of art and religion in Western civilization, and this leads Snyder to locate Nietzsche's first end of art, which is linked to the concept of myth and

its restoration through Richard Wagner's music. Although the genius of Wagner raises hopes of a return of an authentic art experience and therefore to a state of the healthy society, according to Snyder, Nietzsche believes that the metaphysical grounds of art are in danger and therefore concerns about the end of art are justified. In the second stage of his writings, in the book *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche predicts the end of art because it blocks the way to truth and prevents humanity from further advancement. This diagnosis goes hand in hand with his denial of all myths as well as with his observation of the strengthening role of science. The scientific mind has overshadowed other skills and therefore blocked artistic creation. However, science is seen as a kind of salvation which enables truth to be revealed. Art thus has to end in order for truth to be saved. The third stage of Nietzsche's philosophy provides us only with an implied account of the end of art, which Snyder identifies in the struggle to overcome language with the result that new linguistic schemata will replace the old ones. On the one hand – and Snyder refers to Zarathustra in this context – there are things words can no longer express but, on the other hand these ideas need to be articulated. Zarathustra, accordingly, is looking for a creative principle to overcome this tension. The end of art corresponds with the end of these old schemata. In the final stage, Nietzsche rejects science, which formerly served as an alternative to art and religion, thus realizing that his philosophical position needs a creative principle to remain defensible. At this stage, Nietzsche returns to art, which can help humanity to overcome linguistic frameworks. Snyder, aware of the fragmentary nature of Nietzsche's attitude towards the end of art, relates it to his more general ideas about humanity and points out its specific character. On the one hand, art cannot serve to shield humanity from existential dread any longer, but on the other, people still have a hunger for what art formerly provided. This tension, considered to be basis for several of Nietzsche's texts, illuminates the presence of an end-of-art motif.

Given the purpose of Snyder's book, it is necessary to turn to the question of Nietzsche's contribution to the overcoming of dualism. However, Nietzsche does not provide us with a concrete solution in that he, according to Snyder, rejects the division as such. Since there is no positive insight into the problem but rather only a denial of its existence, Snyder's decision to include a discussion of Nietzsche's philosophy is a bit surprising in light of his mission to prove that all three philosophers aim to overcome dualism. But more on this later.

The primary purpose of the fourth chapter is to investigate Arthur C. Danto's claim that art in a narrative sense came to an end and freed itself from any

'master narrative'. As in the previous cases, this chapter takes into consideration texts which, at least after a brief survey, do not seem to contribute to the topic of the end of art. But, as Snyder rightly observes, these texts – and the book *The Body/Body Problem*, in particular – illuminate Danto's opinions on art. Before I proceed to details of Snyder's interpretation of Danto's account, I would like to recognize that Snyder steps out of the sphere of the philosophy of art and takes Danto's writings on different topics (action, history, knowledge, and so on) into consideration. I agree with him that these texts can actually shed new light on the art-philosophical issues to which Danto and others before and after him paid systematic attention (I have in mind questions with regard to definitions of art, beauty, and, of course, the end-of-art thesis).

The thesis that even Danto sought to overcome Cartesian dualism determined Snyder's choice of relevant literature as well as the structure of his explication. Therefore, his investigation includes an analysis of Danto's reflections on the question of body and mind. Danto's treatment of this topic is tied to the general characteristics of his philosophy, that is to say, to his emphasis on representation. According to Snyder's interpretation, Danto assumes that it is through representations that we experience the world, and that a narrative description can transform how a particular event is experienced. This thought has consequences for several branches of Danto's philosophy. Regarding the mind–body problem, Snyder identifies Danto's philosophical position as 'representational materialism' and observes that, for Danto, we as human beings are both inside and outside of the world at once, and representation serves as a mediator between language and the world. Danto occasionally refers to his notion of a person understood as a representation and a text which goes hand in hand with representational materialism. Similarly, the artwork is for him a materially embodied representation, and this enables Danto to compare artworks to human beings. The parallel between the two is quite simple: whereas human beings have their mind and body, artworks have their meaning (mind) embodied in a material (body).

Danto's ideas on the mind–body problem also pervade Snyder's analysis of Danto's account of the philosophy of history, which is seen from the perspective of the problem of 'other minds': our access to the mind of another person is always mediated through a representation such as language or art. Similarly, we cannot take the view of a mind from another era but, as Danto claims, we are not forced to do so. To understand historical events, we are even better equipped than people living through these events because we have the advantage of a temporal distance. A past event can cause a new event in

the future, and therefore the new event should be integral to the interpretation of the past event.

But of course, the main topic of this chapter is the question of the end of art to which Snyder relates the issues described above. Concerning art as such, Snyder gives an account of Danto's ontology of art, that is to say, his definition of art as embodied meaning. This definition, originally articulated in Danto's *After the End of Art*, has been recently extended by adding the new necessary condition of 'wakeful dreams' in the book *What Art Is*.⁴ This condition aims to capture the skill of the artist which is responsible for the reaction of the audience. The artist creates an illusion, or an appearance, which leads a viewer to a certain emotional response. Snyder, aware of this change, attempts to consider it at least partially – he claims that he will further address this topic (p. 154). However, I did not succeed in finding where exactly he does so. Concerning the entirety of the text, this omission is not a serious one.

In Danto's writings, there is a bond between his ontology of art and his end-of-art thesis. Not only is he interested in the structure of the definition of art, that is to say, in its defining conditions, but he focuses on the reformulation of the question about the essence of art and the historical circumstances of it, and his observation of these historical circumstances leads him to the idea of the end of art. Danto's encounter with Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* initiated a profound shift in his philosophical understanding of art, especially with regard to the problem of the definition of art and his thinking about art coming to an end. Since *Brillo Boxes* were perceptually indiscernible from their real supermarket counterparts, they required another philosophical treatment to differentiate one from the other. The task was to explain why only one of these should be considered a work of art. Snyder stresses Danto's conclusion that this need for a reformulation of the initial question means the end of art because art has freed itself from the philosophical burden of capturing its essence in a definition. This claim that art has lost its philosophical dimension, or that it has lost its ability to philosophize, forms the target of the last chapter of Snyder's book.

The final chapter differs significantly from the previous ones in several ways. Whereas up to this point Snyder focuses on interpreting philosophical texts and remarks regarding art and artworks are rare, in this chapter he provides an in-depth examination of the situation in the twentieth-century artworld. The most significant difference, however, lies in the fact that the previous parts were mostly interpretative, while this final one aims to introduce an original

⁴ Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

contribution to the explanation of twentieth-century art. For this reason, the chapter needs to be read differently from previous ones.

Behind Snyder's deliberation, there is his assumption that Danto was wrong about his conclusion that art has come to an end. Following Noël Carroll's criticism presented in his essay 'The End of Art, and the Orientational Narrative', Snyder insists that the progress of art did not necessarily end with Pop Art and that art has not fundamentally changed. This assumption is based on Snyder's (and Carroll's) inference that Danto did not succeed in demonstrating that art is no longer philosophical. Snyder, however, seems to take a further step in that he believes that art – even contemporary art – has a philosophical capacity. His account relies on the term 'problem-solving structure'. This term refers to the capacity which Snyder ascribes to art and which is based on his understanding of philosophy. He characterizes philosophy as a problem-solving process, and it is this mechanism that art uses to formulate its self-definition. In this context, he outlines his polemic target, which is Danto's attitude towards the philosophical dimension of art. Snyder agrees with Danto on the self-definition, but their opinions diverge about the loss of this philosophical dimension, and about the handing over of the question to philosophy. For Snyder, art is not free from philosophical issues because it still has to face new challenges and find solutions to them. Moreover, this philosophical dimension is embedded in the character of art in a way that is integral to its structure. This ability is, in consequence, responsible for the progress of art and prevents it from coming to an end.

Snyder looks for theoretical support for his statement to Gombrich's book *Art and Illusion*. But Snyder's adoption of Gombrich's ideas is not so straightforward. To support his argument for the problem-solving nature of art, Snyder considers Jürgen Habermas's notion of the self-criticism of modernism and his communication theory which Snyder uses in two ways: first, to criticize Danto's end-of-art thesis, and second, to draw on its ascription of a communicative aspect to art. Although Danto and Habermas describe the same period of art and society, they arrive at different conclusions. Habermas does not interpret the major break in the history of modernism in terms of its ending but rather as its transformation into postmodernism. In this explanation, Snyder finds a certain continuity of art practice. Moreover, there is a second aspect: the accent on communication in Habermas's writings corresponds with Snyder's notion of the problem-solving structure of art in that both ascribe to art the power to convey meaning.

Snyder relates the idea of meaning to the problem of continuity and draws on Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* to specify the kind of continuity which

determines the character of art. The continuity in question does not mean a succession of different art forms, but a process with an internal logic. It is true that Gombrich is concerned with the progress of representational art, yet Snyder argues that Gombrich's findings can be applied to abstract art as well. Although he agrees that representational art has ended, this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that non-representational art has come to an end too as long as we could claim that there is an internal logic that drives art and which has nothing to do with representation. Instead of following Gombrich's notion of 'making and matching', Snyder replaces it with his concept of the problem-solving structure which is not tied to mimetic representation.

To sum up, Snyder adopts Gombrich's idea of progress as well as Habermas's idea of the communicative dimension of art, and he relates both to Danto's definition of art. To prevent art from coming to an end, Snyder incorporates his notion of the problem-solving structure into the definition of art by adding one condition to Danto's definition. The artwork is an embodied meaning but what also has to be embodied is the problem-solving structure (p. 266). Accordingly, since there is an unlimited number of problems art can deal with, it cannot in principle come to an end.

In the final paragraph, Snyder returns to the issue of overcoming dualism and seeks to propose what Hegel, Nietzsche, and Danto have in common regarding this question: all three philosophers find a solution in transformation of a kind. Nietzsche reflects on the transformation of the harsh reality of human existence into beauty; Danto discusses the transfiguration of commonplace objects into artworks; and, finally Hegel provides us with complex dialectics based on the unifying principle of the spirit.

At the beginning, I stated the two goals Snyder aims to fulfil in his book: to examine the end-of-art theories of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Danto from the point of view of overcoming dualism, and to propose an alternative to Danto's narrative of the end of art. Already the formulation of these two goals indicates that Danto is the most important of the three figures. Danto's centrality becomes more and more apparent throughout the reading, as Snyder refers to Danto frequently even in the chapters devoted to Hegel and Nietzsche. For example, concerning Nietzsche, Snyder adopts Danto's distinction between the narrow and wide sense of art (p. 89) and similarly in the opening paragraph to the section dedicated to Hegel, Snyder refers to the anthology *The Death of Art* where Danto's essay 'The End of Art' was published. The dominance of Danto in the book is, of course, not necessarily problematic and may even be welcome by people interested in analytical philosophy. Snyder has proven his erudition and ability to explain the position of each of the analysed philosophers, and he

definitely fulfils the first stated task by clarifying what meaning these thinkers ascribed to the end of art. Snyder's claim that all three philosophers aim to overcome the dualism brings a fascinating insight into the issue of the end of art. Perhaps, it would be worth comparing the way each of the thinkers aims to overcome the dualism in more detail. As I have already outlined above, Nietzsche's position in this discussion is unclear, since Snyder himself concluded that Nietzsche's contribution to overcoming the dualism consists in his denial of the subject-object opposition (p. 137). Accordingly, the treatment of Nietzsche in this context might be considered problematic.

Snyder also proposes an alternative narrative in the final chapter and so it is possible to conclude that he has achieved his second goal as well. His condition of the problem-solving structure works for so-called conceptual art quite well, and Snyder's argumentation against the end of art based on this term is persuasive. Snyder focuses only on the art of the twentieth century and implicitly on the art of the twenty first century, but as follows from his discussion of Gombrich, it is possible to extend the reflection on art's problem-solving structure to the art of previous centuries. What might be open to objection is the fact that the condition of the problem-solving structure is not art-specific in that philosophy is also involved in solving problems. Snyder, as I have mentioned above, drew his inspiration for stipulating this condition from philosophy, so there seems to be a justified question of how art and philosophy differ. But since Snyder adopts the definition from Danto, he would probably refer to the condition of embodiment and the specificity of artistic media. Accordingly, Danto fulfils a double role in Snyder's text: on the one hand, the end-of-art thesis is a target of Snyder's criticism, on the other hand, Danto's definition of art provides Snyder with a basis which he enriches with the condition of the problem-solving structure. What is surprising is that Hegel and Nietzsche and their particular versions of the claim that art has reached its end disappear in this context, and Snyder does not consider them when defending his narrative. Similarly, he does not relate his new narrative to the problem of overcoming the subject-object dualism and therefore his position in the discussion is not specified.

Following what has already been said, Snyder's concentration on two different aims arguably posits a complication to the reader since the book oscillates between two topics that are not necessarily interconnected. Or, more precisely, it seems possible to divide the book into two parts: the first dealing with the explanation of Hegel's and Nietzsche's accounts of the end of art from the perspective of overcoming Cartesian dualism, and the second part which aims to explain Snyder's new narrative of twentieth-century art. From this point

of view, the fourth chapter devoted to Danto serves both tasks, and appears to be the mediating element between the two parts of the book. I cannot help thinking that both topics deserve more detailed treatment, perhaps in separate volumes. However, despite these criticisms, the book under review brings a valuable contribution to the discussion about the end of art, grasping it from an interesting point of view which provides the reader with an original insight into the end-of-art theories of three significant philosophers.

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