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Hermeneutic Philosophy and the Sociology of Arts by Janet
Wolff (review)

Kim James

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skiing, motoring and other forms of 'navigation' in big cities and across the moorlands of Scotland.

She reports in brief form many serious studies of perception and behaviour in the 'field'. The book calls upon readers for a serious use of their intelligence and of their capacity to re-think many old problems, such as the cause of the apparent difference in the size of the Moon on the horizon and at zenith and the explanation of the 'electric' brae phenomenon, in which going down appears to be up and going up appears to be down. Furthermore, it presents many new and fascinating problems and researches, such as those relating to perception and communication under water and the awareness and influence of danger and the assignment of blame for accidents.

All topics are documented by numerous references and there is a liberal supply of diagrams and illustrations. Many of the references are particularly valuable because they would be unknown even to up-to-date psychologists. The author says that the references cited are only the tip of an iceberg.

It is perhaps permissible to add that her Classical education, in her pre-psychological days, has not enabled her to avoid some linguistic and perhaps other snares. For example: 'Commercial divers are usually riskier than sports divers' (p. 151). Do divers use 'risky' in two senses? While instincts, drives and urges are disallowed as means of psychological explanation (p. 159), it is nevertheless permissible to make statements such as the following: 'Normally the brain discounts the vestibular sensations of acceleration that result from voluntary head movements, provided the body is stationary or moving slowly' (p. 141). No doubt the brain is a very shrewd judge in such matters. A passage on page 68 may give some readers food for thought—or perhaps it will only make their brains hesitate—'Stob Binean and Ben More (Perthshire) appear to be about 200 m higher than each other, when both are about 1,170 m and 2 km apart'. Furthermore, 'restricted vision, on the other hand, may cause worse performance than when blindfolded . . .' (p. 105).

Joking apart, however, I must say that I read the book with great pleasure and clapped my hands in applause. I feel sure that many another reader will do the same and I hope that it will have the wide circulation it deserves.

Hermeneutic Philosophy and the Sociology of Arts. Janet Wolff. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975. 149 pp. £3.95. Reviewed by Kim James*

'It is not easy to arrive at a conception of a whole which is constructed from parts belonging to different dimensions. And not only nature, but also art, her transformed image, is such a whole'. Paul Klee went on to direct attention to the difficulties that our linear sequential language places in the way of an ability to convey our multi-modal experience. Wolff's book is an attempt to elaborate a philosophical basis that would permit a more fruitful approach to the problem of art than has been the case so far.

Her approach is through hermeneutic philosophy. Though she defines her field as the sociology of art, it is by no means restricted to the historico-social description that is most familiar to artists. For her an adequate sociology of art must make clear the social nature of art in terms of the expression *in* art of the total ideology or world-view, or aspects of the world-view, of the social group in which the art-form arises. This involves an understanding of the social origin of ideology itself 'in language, interaction and learned interpretation of the world'. Whilst taking into account features of art that lie outside the purely aesthetic, consideration of the sociology of art must still maintain a central aesthetic perspective.

A hermeneutic philosophy allows an examination of the role of art in which the observer can take his own historical condition into account whilst interpreting art forms from any culture. It permits the experiencing of parameters of

existence that the observer may not fully possess. As described by Wolff, hermeneutics is a philosophy based upon a phenomenology of existence, but with a socio-historical dialectic that facilitates the perception of social co-ordinates of the life-world, both dynamically and genetically. Her contribution to hermeneutic philosophy is to make explicit the inherent dialectic that takes it beyond existential phenomenology of inter-personal or cross-cultural understanding. Thus, the observer sees himself *in* a context rather than as detached. In this way the criticism that there is a loss of the perspective of supra-personal phenomena is answered by the necessity of the hermeneutic interpreter to become aware of his own consciousness in a historico-cultural context. The great importance of this philosophy lies in its combination of epistemology with theory and methodology. The advantage over many approaches is that, by its self-definition, it breaks down barriers between disciplines.

The criticism that hermeneutics, by its interpretive framework, unites observer and observed in such a way as to preclude scientific methodology is to miss the point. The traditional linear logical approach of critical method remains valid for the investigation of discrete aspects. Hermeneutics gives an over-view of world experience that facilitates understandings of the unity of aspects.

This is not an easy book to read. For those with no knowledge of the development of phenomenology and kindred philosophies, the book is marred by an almost unreadable style, above all in its early chapters. Perhaps the most serious criticism of Wolff's book is that there is no indication that she is aware of the hermeneutic statements made by artists themselves about art and its place in sociology. These criticisms apart, it is a book that is a must for those concerned with the social role of art.

Craft and Consciousness: Occupational Techniques and the Development of World Images. Joseph Bensman and Robert Liliensfeld. Wiley, New York and London, 1973. 369 pp. £8.00. Reviewed by Rémy G. Saisselin**

This book is worth reading despite its lack of style, the grey prose of sociology; though, unlike many sociologists, these authors do not use jargon. Yet, it is a pity that they are not as much part of the literati as they are of the academic community; for a sense of style might have shortened their book by at least half.

The book might be described as one treating sociology in the phenomenological mode of the various *métiers* in the superstructure of society; I say superstructure because industrial workers, foremen, farmers and other types of laborers are not examined. The authors consider crafts, occupations, techniques and methodologies from artists as dancers to intellectuals as bureaucrats, and it seems to me that the term *métier* can take in all of these, because, thinking of Molière's reference to his *métier* of making people laugh and the reference of Louis XIV to the *métier de roi*, the term covers art, craft, technique, occupation, object pushing, people pushing or pencil pushing. The authors examine not only *métiers*, but the attitudes that they engender or develop and, as well, their own internal development towards pure aesthetic activity or bureaucratization, or both, and through this the world images that are fabricated or implied and the social implications of certain of these world images. Instead of studying views of the world and attitudes in terms of the Marxist concept of class, they argue logically and rigorously (there are too many sentences following upon each other beginning with 'thus') that our consciousness, our mental perception of the world in which we live and even our values are formed not so much by class adherence but by occupations and the techniques, methodologies and skills required. The result is a much more refined view and description of the relation of certain types to society

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