

Jelisaveta Mojsilović

Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia

“Outside the Box” – Another View on Modern and Contemporary Art.” Book Review: Nikola Dedić, *Između dela i predmeta: Majkl Frid i Stenli Kavel između moderne i savremene umetnosti*, Beograd: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2017, 179 pp., ISBN 978-8687107-80-9

Nikola Dedić (PhD) is a history of art professor at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. He is an author of several books concerning the history and theory of art, focusing on the second half of the 20th century. He is also a winner of the “Lazar Trifunović” award, for best art critique.

At the outset of this review I must emphasize that the book *Između dela i predmeta: Majkl Frid i Stenli Kavel između moderne i savremene umetnosti* [*Between Artwork and Object: Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell Between Modern and Contemporary Art*] is the first discussion written in the Serbian language in regard to philosopher Stanley Cavell and art historian Michael Fried. Although, this book not only regards the subject of these two individuals, it also discusses the transition from modern to contemporary art in the 1960s, which gives us one new possible theorization of these concepts, particularly the concept “contemporary art”.

Dedić’s text, although scholarly, is comprehensible and fluent, as demonstrated in the first chapter, titled “Introduction to one dialogue of history of art and philosophy”. There, he explains the need for the connection of these two essentially inseparable disciplines. This connection is given through the relation of the two above-mentioned figures, Cavell and Fried. As the author explains, their dialogue began in the autumn of 1962 at Cambridge University, and was continued through the influence of both sides: “Fried will refer to Cavell’s thesis in almost each of his books, while Cavell will develop his entire philosophy of modernism under Fried’s influence”. (15)

In his opening chapter, Dedić announces several terms which will be used in the discussion, such as: *modernism, high modernism, postmodernism, and minimalism*, in parallel with philosophical terms, including: *skepticism, metaphysics, ontology, constructionism, language-games, form of life, etc.* Moreover, the author introduces readers to concepts that cannot be understood without the comprehension of mutual theoretical connections: *skepticism, theatre, theatricality, acknowledgment, objecthood,*

presentness, and finally, *modernism*. Every one of these concepts are briefly elaborated and analyzed in the following chapters.

Modernism is a concept which connects these two authors in the first place. According to Dedić's main theses, Cavell and Fried map modernism as a part of one particular historical, macro-cultural situation. This came with the breakdown of the great, absolutist system of European monarchies. On the one hand, Cavell interprets this context (which is marked by a feeling of crisis and lack of *criteria* for an individual) from the philosophical vantage – through the philosophical analysis of language, utilizing the theory of *skepticism*. On the other hand, analyzing French art of the late 18th and 19th century, Fried places his concept of *theatricality*. Both authors begin their theories under the influence of the late Wittgenstein's works. These two concepts (*skepticism* and *theatricality*) constitute the subject matter of this book.

Following the introduction, the book is divided into three large sections (with subsections): "Cavell, modernism and skepticism"; "Fried, modernism and theatricality" and "After modernism".

In the first part of the book, in order to present Cavell's theories, the author focuses on Cavell's earliest works, primarily the book *Must we mean what we say* (1989), (with the essays "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy, "Music Discomposed", and "A Matter of Meaning It"). This is followed by the book *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (1999); and chapters 14 to 17 from his first study of the film *The World Viewed: Reflection on the Ontology of Film* (1971). Dedić presents the theoretical context of the Cavell's philosophy and his critique of Anglo-American philosophical tradition (usually marked as an analytical philosophy). In this part of the book, Dedić elaborates Cavell's theory of skepticism, i.e. private language (or *theatricality* according to Fried), as a main problem of the modern artist/philosopher. To clarify, discussing artwork, in the first place, this concept means the inability of an artwork to communicate with the audience, or the author's disinterest in that connection.

In the second section, "Fried, modernism and theatricality", Dedić examines the context from which Michael Fried is coming, as an art critic and art historian (the same as Cavell, as philosopher). The timeframe discussed is also a historical moment of great changes in the world, and the world of art as well, with the appearance of many new phenomena. In this period, 1967 to be precise, Fried published his most criticized and most influential text, "Art and Objecthood" in the magazine *Artforum*, where he had criticized the movement later to be called *minimalism*. This particular text is, among others, published in the book *Art and Objecthood*, in 1998. Due to the relation between Fried and Cavell, Dedić elaborates that Fried's history of art is not decontextualized or ahistorical, as it was criticized in the past. For this discussion, equally significant are Fried's books concerning French paintings of 18th and 19th century: *Absorption and Theatricality* (1988), *Courbet's Realism* (1990), and *Mane's Modernism* (1990).

In the last chapter of the book, titled “After modernism”, Dedić returns to both Cavell and Fried, but this time in a new context. First, he analyzes Fried’s return to contemporary art, through his texts written in the 2000s, such as the book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (published after a 30-year break, in 2008). Here, he returns to the question of difference between a piece of art and an object – i.e. how contemporary photography articulates this diversity. Once again, Dedić elaborates the concept of *presentness*, referring to Fried’s book *Four Honest Outlaws* (2011).

Finally, the last two chapters of the book are dedicated to Cavell’s philosophy of ordinary language. Presented here is Cavell’s critique of Jacques Derrida, and his theory of deconstruction. Nevertheless, Dedić concludes his book with Cavell’s interpretation of postmodernism, and again, in relation with Fried’s critique of contemporary art as a reflection of “cultural consensus, which had lost every feeling for artistic quality and philosophical importance”. (152)

Dedić’s book represents a refreshing of the literature in the field of theory and history of art, as well as philosophy, with its provocative subject and engaging conclusions about personalities from ‘the margins’, and, who are typically presented in a different discourse. Furthermore, to some extent I see this book as a critique of contemporary art in general. Through the discussion, Dedić gives his opinions and comments, which are based on his comprehensive knowledge in these disciplines, making this book accessible to a wider audience.