

EVALUATION
on
“Poetics of the Visual Arts (19th—20th Centuries)”

a dissertation

presented for the awarding of the PhD degree,

by Yuliana Dafinova Hicheva,

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“Poetics of the Visual Arts (19th-20th Centuries)” is a nuanced, in-depth, and timely study that demonstrates theoretical command, artistic sensibility, and scholarly maturity. The dissertation extends over 235 standard typescript pages structured into an introduction, three chapters with their respective sections, a conclusion, and an appendix. Its bibliography comprises 135 titles in Bulgarian, English, and French; it also includes 10 carefully selected illustrations.

The candidate, Yuliana Hicheva, meets the minimum national requirements for awarding the academic and educational degree Doctor. The official plagiarism check, as well as my own review, has found no evidence of plagiarism in her work. We have no joint publications, nor are there any other conflicts of interest with the author of this evaluation. Although perhaps somewhat brief, the abstract has the required structure and adequately reflects the content of the dissertation. The doctoral candidate has submitted four scholarly articles directly relevant to her research.

I shall begin **the substantive part** of my evaluation by addressing the two obvious criticisms that may be levelled at Dr. Hicheva’s dissertation, considered in their interrelation: (1) the broad scope of the formulated problem, both thematically and chronologically, and (2) the seemingly limited length of the study. Although such criticisms are not entirely without basis, in this particular case they should carry negligible weight, as will become clear in what follows. That is because: (1) within the relatively broad problem indicated in the title, Hicheva’s study has a clearly formulated conceptual focus and specific points of emphasis in art history, and (2) the actual scope of the study is greater than the 171 pages presented to the jury (see above); more importantly, the amount of text is not the result of insufficient development, but rather of scholarly judiciousness and maturity.

What we have before us is a study remarkable for its restraint of formulation, a theoretical modesty that allows its substantial achievements to emerge on their own. Hicheva mobilizes the concepts of poetics (and *poiesis*) inherited from classical antiquity, as well as that of *mimesis*, in order to illuminate them through their reconfigurations not only in the modern era but also in the early and late twentieth century. All of this revolves around the idea of *poiesis* creation of images as a process of complex and dynamically conceived mimetic activity – beyond any reductionist understanding of it as literal “imitation” – an activity that points toward the search for an imagistic and imaginative self-understanding and self-formation of life itself. This places the visual-artistic, as Hicheva conceives it, not within some closed aesthetic or art-for-art’s-sake sphere, but rather in direct

communication both with the human life-world and with the world of the material or natural, which here is not opposed to art but constitutes an integral part of it.

The central research thesis is formulated on p. 10: “**mimesis, in its capacity as a key category in the poetics of the visual arts, does not disappear in modernism and the avant-garde movements, but undergoes a transformation in response to changing understandings of image, perception, and reality**” (cf. p. 7 above and p. 91 below, within the second chapter, which is central to the study). This is a sufficiently provocative and intriguing proposition, and it should be emphasized that throughout Hicheva’s investigation it is pursued steadily and consistently, establishing the parameters within which the research problem is articulated. In her argumentation and conclusions, the author is free of any scholarly bravado or mannerism, for which she deserves particular praise. Among the strengths of the study is the way it traces sometimes radical ruptures in imagery, convincingly depicting them as stages in a complex interweaving of transformations and incarnations of the power of *poiesis*. Where others might see *only* rupture, Hicheva discovers creative continuity, without, however, insinuating any necessity or teleology underlying these highly complex developments.

The relevance of the study is further supported by the observation that “contemporary visual practices increasingly call into question the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, the living and the imagistic, materiality and imagination” (p. 8). The approach is interdisciplinary, with a primary focus on artistic practice and its philosophical interpretation; particularly toward the end of the study, heuristic concepts from contemporary biology, such as *autopoiesis* and *conceptual cells*, are introduced skillfully and with the necessary limitations. Hicheva draws on a wealth of supporting authors beyond the theorists (and practitioners) principal for the study, such as Cézanne, Kandinsky, Benjamin, Valéry, Sartre, Ricoeur, and others, while quite reasonably insisting that her exposition does not claim to be exhaustive. It is precisely in this way that the study achieves a convincing distinctness and relief in its observations and conclusions.

The genre of a scholarly evaluation likewise does not call for exhaustiveness, so here I shall allow myself to draw attention to those aspects of the study that, in my view, make the strongest impression. The **first, historical-theoretical chapter** deserves praise for its clear yet supple definition of the leading concepts, and in particular for its treatment of the relationship between the imagistic and imagination, understood not merely as a source of fictionality but as a cognitive faculty. Hicheva’s historical analysis is not necessarily chronological, but often brings authors from different periods and fields into dialogue with one another. Thus, we encounter not only Heidegger in conversation with the ancients, but also, for example, a productive interaction between Rothko and Aristotle, or between Badiou and Miró. Such moves constitute a particular achievement of the dissertation.

At certain points, however, there are relatively abrupt transitions, making the analysis appear somewhat fragmentary (e.g. just during the discussion of Schlegel’s notion of the fragment, p. 36) and in need of greater elaboration (in this case, the Enlightenment thinker Kant as an inspiration for the German Romantics). This observation, however, concerns only a minor aspect of the work and not a substantive deficiency. On the contrary, in its skillful combination of observations drawn from such diverse yet kindred theorists and creators of the visual image, Hicheva’s study possesses its own *poiesis*. Among the heuristic observations that will prove constructive for the subsequent

chapters is the insight that realism is not prosaic, but possesses its own poetics, combined with a specific “ethics of looking” that allows reality to speak for itself (p. 48).

The second chapter examines “the visual arts as ‘specific ways of thinking ... autonomous systems that construct their own modes of seeing and understanding the world. ... From Paul Cézanne’s new way of seeing, through the sensory analysis of Impressionism, to the radical gestures of Wassily Kandinsky and Marcel Duchamp, a process emerges in which the image ceases to reflect the world and begins to construct it” (p. 61). Here, Cézanne’s work and thought play a central role; they are skillfully presented as a careful and profound investigation of the inner structures of nature and their significance for the perceiving-and-creating subject. Particularly compelling is the transition from the analysis of Cézanne to that of Kandinsky in their shared search for the real within and beyond reality, which defines the emerging and ultimately culminating abstraction in their work as the opposite of anti-realism. Kandinsky, of course, goes decisively beyond artistic representation, moving – in Hicheva’s own interpretation – toward the self-creation of form through the force of the inner necessity of nature itself. The chapter concludes with interesting reflections on imagination in Sartre (but also Kant), which will be taken up again in the third chapter.

This is the point at which it should be mentioned that the study exhibits a certain cyclicity and recurrence of motifs. This, however, is not primarily a weakness, but rather demonstrates how the themes examined in the dissertation intertwine on multiple levels and in diverse directions, making a wholly linear exposition impossible. Nevertheless, the text also contains some literal repetitions (p. 123), as well as lacunae (p. 53).

And if the second chapter seeks to identify continuities – reasonably understood – despite the ruptures of high modernism and avant-gardes with tradition, **the third chapter** ventures boldly into various manifestations of postmodern art, as well as contemporary art after postmodernism. Here, in surveying a highly diverse palette of artistic practices (many of them brought together through a thematization of the perception of time or, in particular, through the investigation of living matter), Hicheva draws attention to the way postmodern and post-postmodern art channels the forces of vulnerability, uncertainty, and fragmentation, not as lack or trauma, but as a force for transformation (p. 129). Certain tensions are present, which the author herself notes and which will be the subject of my questions.

Among the interesting conclusions of this final chapter is the way in which, in the artistic phenomena examined, the image becomes an *autopoiesis* of imagination itself oriented toward the processes of life – both phenomenologically lived life and the microscopic cellular life of living matter. “Thus art appears as a continuation of life itself – not through imitation, but through an inner resonance with its *autopoietic* rhythm, where imagination is a form of thinking life, and the artwork a kind of cellular metaphor of consciousness” (p. 140). Particular focus in the study is placed here on the interaction between art and living nature/science; in this connection, I would take the liberty of directing the author’s attention to projects such as <https://figure1a.org/>, which investigate the artistic potential of images generated within scientific research.

In summary, I can say that Juliana Hicheva’s study convincingly revitalizes key concepts from antiquity in order to demonstrate how they continue to be productive throughout the long twentieth century. The dissertation also displays a well-controlled rhythm of exposition, demonstrated not least in its balanced division into chapters and sections, perhaps with the exception of the

comparatively shorter final chapter. This brevity, however, is compensated for by the accompanying in-depth interview with Iglia Hristova – the artist with whom the third chapter concludes – in which we encounter interesting points such as Ernst Haeckel's contribution, implicit Schellingianism, and an explicit critique of certain tendencies in postmodern art. In this sense, the appendix constitutes an integral part of the dissertation research. The inclusion of Bulgarian authors (by no means only Hristova) is another of its many merits.

The interview-appendix is also significant because Iglia Hristova articulates certain oppositions that are implicitly present in the second and, especially, the third chapter of the text. My questions will be related to these:

1. When art becomes a “thought experiment” (as early as p. 83), and when we speak of the artist's “absolute distrust” of reality (p. 116), does this not interrupt the central role of imagery at the expense of the conceptual?
2. Iglia Hristova criticizes certain strands of postmodern art for arbitrariness in relation to nature, and contemporary art, too, for placing excessive trust in machines and algorithms, at which point, in her view, creativity comes to an end. What is Juliana Hicheva's position toward such tendencies, which she herself examines (e.g. pp. 145–148)?

It goes without saying that these questions do not constitute criticisms, but rather an invitation to dialogue.

In view of the above, and subject to a successful defense, of which I have no doubt, I will vote with confidence **IN FAVOR** of awarding Juliana Hicheva the academic and educational degree Doctor of Philosophy.

Sofia, 23.09.2026

Respectfully,

Ognian Kassabov