

REVIEW

By Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kristiyan Rusev Enchev,
Section "Ontology and Epistemology" at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology –
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences,
of the dissertation work of Juliana Dafinova Hicheva
"Poetics of the Visual Arts (19th and 20th centuries)"
for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor"
Professional field 2.3. Philosophy (Aesthetics)
Scientific supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Silvia Borisova

The dissertation of Juliana Hicheva meets the minimum national requirements. I have no joint publications with the doctoral student, and I am not in a conflict of interest in my role as a reviewer of her dissertation. No plagiarism was found during the review.

1. General characteristics of the dissertation

The dissertation of Juliana Dafinova Hicheva proposed for review is an ambitious philosophical-aesthetic study that focuses on a classical problem – the problem of mimesis – but examines it from the perspective of its historical transformations and contemporary changes in the status of the artistic image. An essential merit of the dissertation is that it is not limited to a historical reconstruction of the concept, nor to its application to individual works and artistic trends. The author strives to build her own interpretative framework in which mimesis is thought of as a dynamic, procedural and generative principle, allowing perception, imagination, materiality, artistic gesture and meaning making to be connected.

It is this conceptual reformulation that determines the character of the entire study. If the traditional understanding of mimesis emphasizes the relationship between image and model, original and copy, represented and representation, the dissertation consistently shows that the mimetic does not disappear with the crisis of the representational model in modern art. On the contrary, it changes its way of functioning. In the final part, this line is brought to the thesis that mimesis moves from a model of representation to a principle of participation through which the image is included in the processes of perception, material organization and meaning formation.

This setting is productive and well chosen in view of the nature of the researched material. It allows the author to move from Antiquity to Modernism and from there to contemporary interdisciplinary practices, without these areas remaining simply successive historical episodes. They are united by a constant problematic center: how the relationship between image, reality and the process of formation changes and in what way visual art can be understood as a specific form of knowledge.

2. Relevance, subject, goals and methodology

The relevance of the dissertation stems primarily from the fact that contemporary visual art is increasingly difficult to analyze through the classical opposition between representation and reality. This is especially true for interdisciplinary practices, scientific visualizations and bioart, where the material of the work can no longer be simply depicted matter, but an active participant in the process of the emergence of the artistic form. In this perspective, the classical understanding of mimesis as imitation naturally proves to be insufficient, and it is precisely from this that the need for its philosophical rethinking arises.

The subject of the dissertation is adequately formulated: the poetics of the visual arts in the 19th and 20th centuries is considered through the concept of dynamic mimesis as a poetic and cognitive principle, in which the image functions as a process of meaning formation. The main goal is to analyze mimesis as a variable, productive and mediating category, connecting perception, imagination, materiality and artistic form formation. The tasks set are in line with this goal and encompass both the historical and philosophical transformation of the concept and its applicability to modern, avant-garde and contemporary artistic practices.

The fact that the author clearly states the limitations of her interdisciplinary approach should be assessed as particularly positive. This is important because the attraction of concepts from biology and neuroscience could easily lead to unjustified naturalism or to the transformation of a heuristic analogy into a claim for a scientific explanation of artistic creativity. The work explicitly states that autopoiesis, “conceptual cells,” and biological matter are used as interpretive and conceptual tools, not as a substitute for aesthetic analysis. This methodological self-reflection is one of the work’s undeniable merits.

The methodology is necessarily pluralistic. Phenomenological, semiotic, hermeneutic, cultural-anthropological and art historical approaches are combined. The theoretical framework is built around Aristotle, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gaston Bachelard, Paul Ricoeur and Rosalind Kraus, while artistic analyses include Cézanne, Kandinsky, Duchamp, Rothko, Nam June Paik and other authors. Interdisciplinarity is not externally added to the subject but gradually arises from the logic of the study itself: if the image is thought of not as a finished product, but as a process of formation, the question of the relationships between material, perception, imagination and form inevitably arises.

3. Structure and development of the argument

The dissertation is organized into three main chapters. The first builds the historical and conceptual basis of the problem of mimesis; the second explores the transformations of visual thinking in Modernity; the third extends the analysis to interdisciplinary practices and bio art. This structure is logical and allows for the gradual complication of the thesis – from the historical liberation of mimesis from its reduction to copying, through the modern rethinking of visibility, to the models of procedural and material complicity in contemporary art.

3.1. Chapter One: From Imitation to Dynamic Mimesis

The first chapter is of fundamental importance because here the decisive liberation of the concept of mimesis from its reduction to “copying” takes place. An important move is the turn to the pre-Platonic layers of the concept and to its connection with action, movement, corporeality and embodiment. This is precisely what subsequently allows modernism not to be described simply as the “end of mimesis”. On the contrary, it becomes possible to claim that modern art reactualizes a deeper procedural layer of the mimetic.

This is one of the conceptual strengths of the work. The author does not build the story according to the scheme “mimesis – crisis of mimesis – non-mimetic art”, but proposes another trajectory: mimesis – transformation of mimesis – dynamic mimesis. Even photography and realism are presented not as fields of complete coincidence with the visible, but as forms of interpretative construction. In this way, the historical material begins to work in support of its own theoretical thesis.

Of particular interest is the introduced critical category “mimicry of mimesis”. It denotes the reduced form of the mimetic, in which its transformative potential is replaced by external similarity and adaptation to already existing models. Against this negative pole, dynamic mimesis is placed as participation, transformation and meaning-making. This distinction has the potential for further theoretical development and can be indicated as one of the original moments of the dissertation.

3.2. Chapter Two: Modern Visual Thinking

The second chapter takes the problem to the field of modern visual art. Painting, photography, and cinema are thought of not simply as different media, but as different modes of seeing. This is a strong point of the analysis, because the history of art becomes the history of the transformations of visual consciousness. Painting raises the question of the very act of seeing and the internal organization of form, photography radicalizes the problem of realism and the technical imprint, and cinema introduces time, movement, and the media environment as conditions of the image.

The Cézanne-Kandinsky-Duchamp line is particularly productive. With Cézanne, the question moves from the depicted to the very act of seeing; with Kandinsky, form acquires an autonomous internal necessity; with Duchamp, the change reaches the status of the artistic object itself and the conceptual gesture. Thus, a conceptual continuity is established between otherwise very different artistic practices, which supports the main thesis of the transformation of mimesis from a relation of similarity to a process of construction.

The use of Sartre's concept of *analogon* is also significant. It performs a mediating function between the material carrier and the imaginary image and gradually becomes one of the bridges to the third chapter. In the work, *analogon* is thought of not as the image itself, but as a condition for its emergence, which is why the intersection between materiality and imagination can be conceptualized through it. It is here that the dissertation begins to clearly go beyond a purely historical study and to build its own model of the artistic image.

3.3. Chapter Three: Bio Art, Scientific Visualizations and “Living Drawing”

The third chapter is the riskiest, but precisely because of this, one of the most interesting parts of the work. In it, the author moves from classical philosophical-aesthetic categories to concepts such as autopoiesis, “conceptual cells”, scientific visualization, bio art and living matter. The transition is argued through the already developed concept of procedural mimesis. Bio Art is not introduced as a side example, but as a kind of borderline case, in which the material ceases to be a passive carrier and itself participates in artistic form formation.

The analogy with the “conceptual cells” of Rodrigo Cian Quiroga acquires particular significance. The author tries to think of the artistic image as a cultural analogue of a process in which different sensory variations are organized around a relatively stable semantic unity. It is essential that the text itself sets a methodological boundary: it is not about neuroscientific proof of an aesthetic thesis, but about an analytical model. Similarly, the concept of autopoiesis is used by Maturana and Varela – not as a literal description of the work as a biological system, but as a model for the internal organization and process of the artistic form.

The culmination of this line is the analysis of the “living drawing” by Iglika Hristova. In this case, dynamic mimesis acquires an almost literal material concreteness: the image no longer simply depicts the living but arises through interaction with life processes. The artistic act can be thought of as a complicity between artistic intention, natural dynamics and material organization. In this way, the author closes the historical circle: the early understanding of mimesis as action and participation is reactualized in a contemporary form, in which the work of art is once again thought of as a process.

4. Scientific contributions

I accept the scientific contributions formulated in the dissertation as valid. First, the model of dynamic mimesis should be highlighted, through which the mimetic is interpreted as a transforming principle in the development of visual art. It is important that the author does not simply expand the definition of mimesis but tries to show the historical re-actualization of its procedural and dynamic aspects - from the pre-Platonic understanding, related to movement and participation, to modern and contemporary visual practices.

I see a second contribution in the argumentation of the relationship between mimesis and poiesis. In the perspective of the dissertation, these categories cease to be opposed as imitation and creation: dynamic mimesis itself acquires productivity, insofar as the image not only represents the world, but participates in its formation. A third contribution is the construction of an interpretative network between analogon, material imagination, autopoiesis and conceptual cells. Regardless of the different genesis of these concepts, an attempt has been made through them to examine the artistic image as a process of interaction between perception, imagination, materiality and memory.

The interdisciplinary analysis of bio art and hybrid practices is also essential. The case study of the “living drawing” provides a concrete artistic test of the proposed model and shows its applicability beyond purely historical reconstruction. In this regard, the thesis is convincingly put forward that modern and contemporary art do not abolish mimesis but reveal its kinship with poiesis and its potential to participate in the processes of emergence, transformation and creation of forms.

5. Critical remarks and questions

My positive assessment of the work does not exclude a few critical remarks, which I would rather define as opportunities for future refinement and development of the concept.

First of all, the very productivity of the concept of “dynamic mimesis” raises the question of its limits. The more mimesis is freed from resemblance and begins to mean transformation, participation, processuality, meaning-making and form-making, the more serious the risk becomes that the concept will acquire an excessively broad scope. If every productive relationship between matter, form, perception and meaning can be described as dynamic mimesis, it is necessary to indicate even more strictly what distinguishes it from poiesis, creativity or form-making. Therefore, I would pose the following question to the doctoral student: what is the minimal condition under which a process should still be defined as mimetic?

The second remark is related to the relations between mimesis and poiesis. In the dissertation, their convergence is convincing, but in places it becomes so strong that the boundary between them begins to blur. If mimesis is already productive,

generative, and formative, what function remains specific to poiesis? An even clearer distinction between the two principles would make the author's model stronger, not weaker.

The third note concerns interdisciplinary analogies. The transition from Sartre's analogon to autopoiesis, "conceptual cells," and bio art is intellectually bold and undeniably interesting. At the same time, this is also the place where the argumentation requires the greatest methodological caution. The author herself is aware of this problem and explicitly insists that scientific concepts have a heuristic, not an evidentiary, function. However, in some places the language of analogy shifts to stronger claims, for example, when talking about a common neural basis of perception and imagination. In the event of a possible publication of the work, these places could be even more carefully distinguished from the philosophical-aesthetic argumentation itself.

Fourth, the concept of "autopoetics" deserves, in my opinion, a stricter distinction from the biological concept of "autopoiesis". In the dissertation, this difference is practically assumed, and the author repeatedly states the analogous nature of the transfer, but the terminological fixation of two levels – autopoiesis as a concept of Maturana and Varela and autopoetics as an aesthetic model – would prevent possible misunderstandings.

Fifth, the title emphasizes the 19th and 20th centuries, while the argumentative arc is significantly broader – from the pre-Platonic meanings of mimesis to contemporary bio art. The author herself motivates this expansion as methodologically necessary, and therefore I do not accept it as a drawback. However, in the future development of the dissertation as a monograph, one could consider a title that more clearly reflects the transformation of mimesis from Modernity to contemporary visual practices.

Finally, in places the study shows a tendency to accumulate philosophical concepts and authors. This is understandable given its interdisciplinary nature, but a stricter hierarchization of the concepts would make the author's own contribution even more visible. In my opinion, the central axis mimesis - poiesis - analogon - dynamic mimesis

is strong enough to carry the argument, while some of the other concepts can be clearly marked as secondary heuristic tools.

These critical remarks do not affect the validity of the main thesis. On the contrary, they show that the proposed concept has sufficient theoretical potential to raise questions beyond the immediate tasks of the dissertation.

6. General assessment and conclusion

The dissertation work of Juliana Hicheva represents an independent, conceptually ambitious and interdisciplinary philosophical-aesthetic study. I particularly highly appreciate the attempt to rethink one of the oldest categories of aesthetics not by rejecting it, but by revealing its inner transformability.

As a result of the conducted research, mimesis is revealed not as a historical remnant of the aesthetics of imitation, but as a productive category through which image and life, matter and imagination, vision and creation, form and process can be thought of simultaneously. The philosophical intuition formulated in the conclusion is particularly strong, that mimesis can be thought of as the ability of life to give rise to forms and of forms to participate in life. It is this formulation that contains, in my opinion, the most essential theoretical result of the work.

The fact that the dissertation does not conceal its own methodological limits also deserves a positive assessment. The author explicitly states that the work does not claim to be either an exhaustive history of mimesis or a biological or neuroscientific explanation of artistic perception. This shows methodological maturity and awareness of the difference between interdisciplinary analogy and reductionist explanation.

Ultimately, I would define the most essential result of the dissertation as a transition from mimesis as a relation of similarity to mimesis as a relation of formation. It is through this transformation that it becomes possible to think of the poetics of the visual arts not as a set of normative or stylistic principles, but as a philosophy of the emergence of the image.

The presented work possesses the necessary qualities of a dissertation study: a clearly recognizable scientific problem, a consistently developed thesis, an

independent conceptual approach, knowledge of significant theoretical and artistic material, an interdisciplinary methodology, and well-argued contributions. The critical remarks that I have presented are recommendations for further development and refinement of the concept and do not diminish my positive assessment.

Based on everything said, I give a positive assessment of the dissertation "Poetics of the Visual Arts (19th and 20th centuries)" and I strongly recommend that the esteemed scientific jury award Juliana Dafinova Hicheva the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the professional field 2.3. Philosophy (Aesthetics).

Date: 10.09.2026

Sofia

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