

Review of the doctoral thesis

by

Yuliana Dafinova Hicheva

‘The Poetics of the Visual Arts (19th and 20th Centuries)’

for obtaining the academic degree of ‘Doctor’

by

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Yuliana Hicheva’s doctoral thesis, entitled “The Poetics of the Visual Arts (19th and 20th Centuries)”: 189 pp., 3 chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, a bibliography and an appendix, is a bold and ambitious endeavor. This is evident from the title itself, which implies an examination of an exceptionally wide range of issues and examples relating to the emergence and developmental trends of contemporary art (in the broadest sense of the term), for although a chronological boundary is specified, such a study cannot help but extend into the artistic practices of the present 21st century, if only as a continuation of the trends in question.

Naturally, a creative—rather than a merely enumerative—interpretation of the theme thus formulated necessitates a narrowing of focus. Yuliana Hicheva achieves this by focusing on the concept of mimesis as a fundamental category through which the specificities of the perception of the object of creativity across the various stages in the development of art are observed and explained. At the same time, the use of this concept necessitates a broadening of the dissertation’s thematic scope towards a historical-philosophical overview. Although concise, this is essential for the author because, by tracing the

evolution of the understanding of mimesis throughout the centuries-long history of art, she endeavours to substantiate her main thesis that ‘visual art is achieving a new kind of realism – not one that is immediately visible or based on external resemblance, but one constructed through imagination, conceptual thinking and material processes.’ By linking this ‘new type’ of realism to mimesis, she purposefully seeks a new conception of mimesis that would correspond to the realist tendency in the development of contemporary art, as identified by Y. Hicheva.

This also determines the choice of historical references in the first chapter of the thesis, which provides an overview of the understanding of poetics and mimesis from antiquity to ‘modern visibility’. The conception of mimesis as the imitation of actions dates back to the pre-Socratics, in particular to Democritus, as Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz emphasises in the first volume of his “History of Aesthetics” and specifically in his detailed study of six fundamental aesthetic categories, mimesis being one of them. Y. Hicheva has chosen to rely on Eva Küls for its specific characteristics in classical antiquity. Perhaps this is because Küls places particular emphasis on the dynamism of the concept, which, however – let us remind – is not its essential characteristic; for centuries, the prevailing definition of mimesis was that of a static imitation of external images.

The desire to establish dynamic mimesis as the primary, all-encompassing category for the aesthetic analysis of art probably explains the complete absence of the Middle Ages from the otherwise well-researched historical overview in the first chapter, as well as the leap from the Renaissance straight to modernism. To me, this also explains the restriction to painting, photography and cinema in the second chapter. (Yuliana Hicheva also draws attention to music, but only in its interaction with the image in the context of Kandinsky’s work). I find this limitation reasonable, not least because I trust Tatarkiewicz’s assessment that mimesis is a category difficult to apply in architecture or music.

In a dissertation, however, it is better not to leave the reader to interpret the limitations of the subject matter on their own. That is why, for further development, I would recommend that the author clarify her central concept through a specific section devoted to the analysis and presentation of ‘dynamic mimesis’. She could do this by drawing on the theses of Paul Ricoeur, which are otherwise comprehensively presented in two places in the dissertation, because actually he was the first to introduce it as a working category (though, of course, hints of it can be found as far back as Aristotle). In this way, Hicheva would categorically state her own interpretation, whilst I would cease to wonder whether, by chance or quite deliberately, she at one point equates mimesis with the cognitive process, as understood in a materialist Marxist interpretation – perhaps influenced by György Lukács, whom she mentions, though his name is absent from the otherwise extensive bibliography.

Thus, the second chapter—which is undoubtedly very informative and demonstrates the author’s broad knowledge of art history—would be better structured around more clearly defined theoretical concepts. I believe that this would overcome yet another weakness of this otherwise impressive, erudite text — in her endeavour to encompass and explain the work of numerous artists emblematic of the development of art in the nineteenth and, in particular, the twentieth century, the author sometimes links artistic techniques too directly with classical or those that gained popularity at the same time philosophical theories. It is my firm conviction that visual art very rarely is directly influenced by philosophy, even when the artist attempts to theorise and illustrate certain aesthetic ideas, as in the cases of Kandinsky or Duchamp, and even then one can speak of philosophy only in very general terms. To the extent that it does exert an influence, it is through the so-called *Zeitgeist*, the prevailing intellectual climate of the era. I believe that the explanation for one or another innovative movement should be sought rather through the history of art.

On the other hand, the parallels drawn in this way, although sometimes en gros and in need of detailed justification (if such a thing is possible) – for example, that ‘the aerial perspective is entirely in accordance with Spinoza’s philosophy’ – p. 48, nevertheless allow us to appreciate the author’s philosophical erudition, which is useful for the defense of a thesis. However, as my comments are directed primarily towards the further development of this text into a standalone monograph, I offer them without my overall impression of a successfully completed doctoral thesis being affected. And this is the case because, alongside the informative nature of the first chapter, it is precisely the second chapter that serves as a clear testimony not only of Hicheva’s erudition but also of her analytical abilities – describing the theses of selected theorists and artists, she skillfully seeks to establish her conception of the transformation of mimesis from a static model of imitation into a ‘dynamic principle of meaning-making’, which interprets and even transforms reality, creates new visual forms, a principle ‘in which imagination, perception, matter and life intersect’.

This broad conception of mimesis logically leads to an equally broad conception of realism in the third chapter of the thesis, entitled ‘The Metaphysics of the Image: From Mimesis to Bioart and Scientific Visualizations’. Building on Rosalind Krauss’s theory of the ‘expanded field’ in the context of sculpture, the author directly links realism with postmodernism in art, understanding realism to include references by which she means references to one material substance or another, in a manner similar to Gaston Bachelard’s interpretation of the four elements.

Similarly, Kiroga’s theory of conceptual cells, Sartre’s concept of the ‘analogon’ and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of the gaze are interpreted as an interaction between matter and consciousness, or, as the author prefers, a ‘metaphor between matter and consciousness’. I would dispute these interpretations, but they do pave the way for an analysis of bioart as a triumph of

realism in art. This conviction of the author is further supported by the conversation with Iglia Hristova, included as an appendix to the thesis, who works with living, mobile material particles both as an object and as the creator of ‘artistic’ – the quotation marks are mine – works.

In this way, Y. Hicheva substantiates the thesis’s overarching conclusion that mimesis not only does not disappear in modern and contemporary art, but ‘reveals itself as a fundamental poetic and cognitive principle through which the interaction between the individual, the image and the world takes place’. It is clear that, from this perspective, life and the artistic image merge or, as she writes, ‘cease to be separate spheres. I would add a big BUT, because in this way the specificity of the aesthetic is lost and it remains an unclear concept, emptied of its own content, gradually disappearing from contemporary discourse within and about art.

It is too early to say to what extent this is a prevailing and irreversible trend – it is extremely difficult to draw theoretical conclusions about phenomena that are currently unfolding. This thesis, however, demonstrates the extent to which fundamental concepts, which art history has employed for centuries, have become blurred and lost their specificity. The same is true of the very concept of art itself, which has expanded its boundaries to the point of merging not only with everyday practices but also with science. This might lead the reader to the somber conclusion that artistic creation, as a spiritual process, is becoming mechanized and fading away; yet this does not trouble the doctoral candidate – the overall tone of the thesis is materialistically optimistic. But do we have grounds for optimism in the context of such a vision of the future of art?

In his famous essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (discussed, albeit from a different angle, in this thesis), Walter Benjamin does not lament the loss of the specific aura of the work of art. On the contrary, he considers that technical reproducibility, by freeing ‘the work of art from its

parasitic dependence on ritual’, paves the way for it to play a significant, revolutionary social role. The question arises: does the contemporary art described in the thesis—created using laboratory methods, whose works are indistinguishable from scientific experiments, which is not merely devoid of an aura but has been reduced to an impersonal, idea-less, a material object obtained by chance with the aid of microorganisms—does it have any specific socially significant role?

The thesis does not set itself the difficult task of discussing such issues, but the very fact that it provides abundant material for such reflections makes it relevant and important for contemporary aesthetic theory. Written in a scholarly manner, with good logical coherence between the individual sections, it is a text that deserves to be further developed and published in print. Therefore, notwithstanding my skepticism regarding the universal validity of such broadly understood concepts as mimesis or realism in art, I wholeheartedly recommend that the academic degree of ‘Doctor’ be awarded to Yuliana Hicheva, as I agree with the significant contribution made by the text. The bibliography is comprehensive, the number of publications meets the requirements, and the abstract provides a good overview of the entire thesis.

I declare that I have no joint publications with the PhD student, nor any other shared professional interests; that I have acquainted myself with the report confirming the absence of evidence of plagiarism; and that I have signed a declaration for NACID.

|Pravda Spasova