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Revisiting Historical Intersections in Art and Aesthetics

Edited by
Zoltán Somhegyi

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Introduction

Seeing the historical intersections of artworks and theories of art is always fascinating. Art professionals (e.g. artists, art historians, philosophers of art, curators, gallerists, etc.) and “general” art lovers are both particularly eager to search for meaning in art—what they can learn from it and about it—by examining it in its multiple historicity, interconnectedness, and cross-references.

The most intriguing research areas of cross-historical points of connection and interconnection include, for example, the scrutinization of artworks that reinterpret earlier pieces and that explicitly or indirectly refer to previous creations. Needless to say, when examining such works, we do not only rely on the earlier piece for interpreting a newer one, but the latter also acts reversely, i.e. the newer piece may provide us with important insights for a better understanding of a past artist’s creation. Similarly, our experience of the art of our present-day and the aesthetic theories that attempt to analyze, map, organize or even systematize the convoluted phenomena of contemporary art may be applied again to establish novel approaches in the study of classical art production and advance a fruitful re-reading of the philosophical considerations of the pioneers and predecessors of modern aesthetics. Therefore, the interest in pursuing a more insightful comprehension of art and aesthetics, which come from contemporary case studies, is valuable for understanding our age, but at the same time, such comprehension is also crucial for a profound and valuable reinterpretation of earlier aesthetic production and its continued relevance for us today.

Although the awareness of historical interconnections and intersections of artworks—as well as theories of art—is naturally not new at all, the conscious and methodical investigation of a broad array of consequences of aesthetic phenomena has certainly increased over the last decades. It is exactly this meta-level of investigation that interests a great number of researchers. In other words, the increased interest is in the two-directional interconnectedness of what is set forth *and back*, or what influences the past and the present. Important works by several scholars have investigated many instances of these problems as well as the aesthetic implications of

earlier periods, styles, and movements. To name a few researchers, we might consider Salvatore Settis with regards to Antiquity, Umberto Eco who wrote about the “new” Middle Ages, Else Marie Bukdahl who studied the actuality of the Baroque period, Robert Rosenblum who examined the significance of Romanticism on abstract art, Hal Foster who investigated the relationship between pre-war and post-war works of the avant-garde, or Benjamin Buchloh and his considerations on historicity. At the same time, however, we can find attempts to actively and consciously survey the past and its actuality in and for our present not only in scholarly discourse. Art shows and exhibitions, including many for-profit private galleries, besides state-sponsored ones, experiment with innovative modes of installations where contemporary pieces or works of art from the recent past are juxtaposed with classical ones, even if there is a difference in intentions. Commercial venues can use these modes as a way to increase curiosity, elicit more attention, and thus incentivize the art market, while non-profit larger institutions and museums may decide to do so as a curatorial choice to stimulate or even provoke, in the positive meaning of the word, further reflections on the direct and indirect connections and dialogues between the works.

From all this it becomes clear how wide-ranging the benefits of investigating the aforementioned aspects can be for specialized scholarship and the general audience both. On the one hand, we gain knowledge on the cross-historical references, direct or indirect influences between art pieces, as well as changes of meaning, significance, aesthetic value, and evaluation in actual art production through this very awareness of temporal interconnectedness. On the other hand, the study should also be a continuous, critical re-reading of the classics of aesthetics, with detailed analyses of historical concepts, theories, and interpretations in art related to the characteristics and reasons for temporal recurrences, intersections, and interconnections. Then, this will altogether help us not only gain a better understanding of a continuous fascination and revisitation of previous creations, but we will also learn more about various thrilling approaches to aesthetic production.

The articles in the present volume aim to pursue such polyvalent research, they analyze many aspects and instances of the aforementioned questions regarding aesthetic ideas and art practices. João Lemos examines the role of the historical sciences and their impact on art production and appreciation by discussing Kant’s interpretation of adherent beauty. In the next paper, Enea Bianchi focuses on the thought of Mario Perniola by mapping the influence of various philosophical and artistic sources on some of the thinker’s concepts. Lukáš Makky’s analyses open chronological perspec-

tives even further. He demonstrates the possibility of aesthetic interpretation as a mode of validating ancient artifacts. The last two papers pursue aesthetic investigations with an even greater emphasis on actual artworks. Judit Bartha traces the avant-garde's re-visitations of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Olimpia* in the visual arts by providing a cross-temporal analysis of the work. In the last paper, Zoltán Somhegyi examines re-interpretations and influences of classical objects, art forms, and media in the contemporary creative production of artists from the MENA region and Asia.

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Restrictions, Incitements, and Aesthetic Value. The Role of Historical Sciences in Art Production and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Art

Abstract

This paper addresses the role played by historical sciences—their concepts, rules, and examples—in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art. Based on Kant’s notion of ‘adherent beauty,’ and focusing on the case of ‘beautiful art,’ I will propose that historical sciences play a twofold role: not only do they work as restrictions when it comes to art production and appreciation, but they also function as enabling-conditions and incitements for the disclosure of new rules and the ascription of aesthetic value to works of art.

Keywords

Kant, Adherent Beauty, Aesthetic Value, History of Art, Rules

Introduction

In this paper, I will propose, within the framework of Kant’s aesthetic theory, that not only do historical sciences—their concepts, rules, and examples—restrict the imagination, but they also function as enabling conditions of art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art. What is more, they also function as incitements for testing and ultimately breaking old rules and for ascribing aesthetic value to works of art that disclose new rules.

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Taking into account that adherent beauty (conditioned, dependent beauty) and beautiful art (fine art, artistic beauty) are beautiful, and also considering that “[t]here is [no] science of the beautiful” (Kant 2008a, 184), it might be surprising, to say the least, that historical sciences understood as a corpus of knowledge play a role in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art. And yet, this is what I propose in my critical re-reading of Kant’s aesthetic theory.

As for my strategy, I will start by pointing out that art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art both involve taking rules into account. The imagination of both artists and appreciators is restricted in virtue of the consideration of those rules. Insofar as the rules are instantiated by objects which are part of the content of historical sciences, we can say that such sciences play a restrictive role in art production and appreciation.

Although historical sciences restrict imagination, this is just one feature of the role they play, namely a negative one. They also have a positive influence on art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art, insofar as these depend on the consideration of the rules that are instantiated in such sciences. Therefore, we can also say that the historical sciences play a positive role: they provide the enabling conditions of art production and appreciation.

Lastly, considering Kant’s account of genius, we will see that exemplary objects are part of a historical background and that artists create not only within but also against that background. To this extent, we can say that historical sciences function as incitements for testing and breaking rules. It is only if I am acquainted with such a corpus of knowledge that I can know the rules that exemplary objects instantiate. Only then can I recognize whether and how they are being tested and ultimately broken, and accordingly, I can ascribe aesthetic value to the objects that disclose new rules. To this extent, we can say that historical sciences function as incitements for the ascription of aesthetic value to works of art.

Concepts, Mechanisms, and Rules

In §16 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant introduces the distinction between ‘free’ and ‘adherent’ beauty. While the former “presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be,” the latter “does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it” (ibidem, 114). The scope of adherent beauty can include both artifacts and natural

objects. For instance, not only the beauty of buildings but also the beauty of horses, as well as the beauty of human beings, are counted among adherent beauties.

Kant claims that in our aesthetic appreciation of objects, our concepts of what those objects ought to be (should be, are supposed to be, should represent, are supposed to represent) ‘restrict’ our imagination.¹ To use Kant’s examples, our imagination would move freely if we were looking at a portrait and calmly contemplating a facial structure that had a pleasing, soft outline. However, if we knew that the portrait was meant to represent a warrior or the spirit of war in the person of Mars, we would consider it inappropriate that the artist had imagined the facial structure that way.² This sense of inappropriateness would preclude us from taking pleasure in the appreciation of the work, and therefore we would not call it beautiful—that is, we would not give it our aesthetic approval.

The same applies to the reading of a poem about love, the kingdom of hell, or let us say, the sublimity and majesty of creation, to keep using Kant’s examples. Kant holds that poetry is the art in which imagination “can reveal itself in its full measure” (Kant 2008a, 193), and it is precisely “by setting the imagination free,” that is, by letting it be original and produce aesthetic ideas, that the art of poetry “expands the mind” (ibidem, 203). Nevertheless, there must always be a tie between the material provided by the imagination (e.g., Jupiter’s eagle, with the lightning in its claws, or Juno’s peacock) and the concepts at stake (e.g., sublimity and majesty of creation).³ What applies to portraits and poems applies to art in general. In art, aesthetic ideas “must be occasioned by a concept of the object” (ibidem, 197).

Now, the imagination is restricted by more than the necessary consideration of a concept of what the object ought to be or what it is supposed to represent, e.g., a warrior, a child, a horse, a garden-house, love, the kingdom of hell, or the sublimity and majesty of creation. In what follows, I shall elaborate on the further restrictions on (the freedom of) imagination.

¹ Kant says that in the case of free beauty “[n]o concept of any end [...] is presupposed, by which the imagination [...] would merely be restricted” (ibidem, 114). Conversely, in the case of adherent beauty imagination is indeed restricted by the concept of what the object ought to be.

² As Eva Schaper remarks, according to Kant “facial features pleasing in themselves may not be congruent with what a particular kind of person is supposed to be: for example women are allowed to be pretty, warriors not” (Schaper 2003, 113).

³ It must be kept in mind that an aesthetic idea is “a representation of the imagination, associated with a given concept” (ibidem, 193), and that, as such, it belongs to the presentation of such concept. Were imagination left in a “lawless freedom” it would produce “nothing but nonsense” (ibidem, 197).

§17 is devoted to the ideal of the beautiful, that is, the ideal of human beauty. One of the two elements involved in this ideal is the ‘aesthetic normal idea.’ The aesthetic normal idea “represents the standard for judging” something “as a thing belonging to a particular species,” it is “a universal standard for the aesthetic judging of every individual of this species” (ibidem, 118). Such an idea is thus “the *rule*” which constitutes “the *correctness* in the presentation of the species” (ibidem, 119). If a presentation does not contradict this rule, then it is “academically correct” (ibidem, 119).

Academic correctness and the rules governing it are indispensable features in appraisals of human beauty, but they also play a role in art production and appreciation. When elaborating on art in §43, Kant claims that “in all liberal arts,” hence in fine art, “there is [...] required something compulsory, or as it is called, a *mechanism*, without which the *spirit* [...] would have no body and would entirely evaporate” (ibidem, 183).

To be sure, mechanisms apply to any art.⁴ Nevertheless, they change according to the kind, genre, or form of art in play. Kant’s examples of mechanisms in §43 are those which apply to the art of poetry: “correctness and richness of diction as well as prosody and meter” (ibidem, 183). Had he chosen another kind, genre, or form of art; he would have mentioned other mechanisms.

Thus, restrictions are not just a matter of having a concept of what the object ought to be or what it should represent. Our faculty of imagination is also restricted by the mechanisms and rules which works of art are supposed to follow as works of art of a specific kind, e.g., poems, paintings, pieces of sculpture, works of architecture, ready-mades, conceptual art objects, installations, happenings, and so on.⁵ For instance, our imagination

⁴ In §47, Kant describes the mechanical character of artistic beauty as something “which can be grasped and followed according to rules, and thus something *academically correct*”, and adds that it constitutes “the essential condition of the art” (ibidem, 188).

⁵ Kant’s distinction between free and adherent beauty, as Denis Dutton remarks, is after all “not only about the assignment of an object to a category (with its particular perfections), but also about the general background conditions for artistic practice” (Dutton 1994, 235). With respect to this specific issue, Henry E. Allison seems to be in line with Dutton, although Allison brings an additional distinction up—the one between aesthetic and extra-aesthetic constraints. While in the case of the concepts of what the objects ought to represent “it was a matter of some extra-aesthetic constraints on what is appropriate,” in the case of the kind, genre, or form of art “this likewise imposes constraints on what is appropriate, but these are no longer extra-aesthetic, since they stem from the art-form itself and may be seen as involving the academic norms or standards of correctness for that form” (Allison 2001, 296). Allison’s aesthetic/extra-aesthetic constraints distinction constitutes a significant step in his argument in favor of the possibility of ascribing free

would move absolutely freely if we were reading a text about the sublimity and majesty of creation, including some excerpts mentioning Jupiter's eagle and Juno's peacock. But if we became aware that the text was supposed to be a poem, we would consider it inappropriate that the poet had not followed the rules of diction, prosody, and meter. Just as in the case of the portrait of Mars with a pleasing, softly outlined facial structure, our sense of inappropriateness would preclude us from taking pleasure in the appreciation of the text. Therefore, we would not call it beautiful and we would not give it our aesthetic approval.

Naturally, some qualification is needed here. By 'rule' I mean a rule "that has a *concept* for its determining ground" (Kant 2008a, 186), rather than the rule that must be given to beautiful art through a gift of nature, namely, genius, and which "cannot be couched in a formula to serve as a precept, for then the judgment about the beautiful would be determinable in accordance with concepts" (ibidem, 188).⁶ Indeed, art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art cannot be derived from determinate rules, that is, from rules "which can be learned and which must be precisely followed" (ibidem, 191).⁷ Nevertheless, that does not entail that determinate rules cannot play any role in art production and appreciation—they can, and they do.

Restrictions

There is something of a historical nature in the rules I have discussed in the previous section. In the remainder of my paper, I shall be concerned with presenting this historical nature and giving an account of the role it plays in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art.

In §44, Kant holds that "for beautiful art [...] much science is required" (ibidem, 184). By science he means historical sciences—"e.g., acquaintance with ancient languages, wide reading of those authors considered to be clas-

beauty to works of art. In any case, although Allison's view might conflict with Dutton's, both agree that restrictions not only occur at the level of the category of objects, they also stem from the mechanisms and rules that works of art are supposed to follow as works of art of such and such a kind.

⁶ It must be remembered that genius "is a *talent* for producing that for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition of skill for that which can be learned in accordance with some rule" (ibidem, 186).

⁷ As Kant reiterates, "[t]here is [no] science of the beautiful" (ibidem, 184), "there cannot be any science of the beautiful" (ibidem, 228).

sical, history, acquaintance with antiquities, etc.” (ibidem, 184). According to Kant, “these historical sciences [...] constitute the necessary preparation and foundation for beautiful art” (ibidem, 184). Why is this so? What does he mean by assigning a necessary status to the historical sciences—that is, claiming that the preparation and foundation they constitute is necessary for artistic beauty? Why does aesthetically worthy art necessarily need, say, the history of art as its preparation and foundation?

Before answering these questions, I shall clarify what I take historical sciences to be.⁸ In my understanding, historical sciences constitute a corpus of knowledge, part of which involves knowledge of objects that instantiate the rules of art, including the rules which works of art are supposed to follow as artworks of such and such a kind. In a way, such a corpus might be called ‘taste,’ if by taste one means that which “will go its way in the future, as in the past” in its “formation and culture,” even without a critique of the aesthetic power of judgment (ibidem, 58). Naturally, this is not “the faculty of taste, as the aesthetic power of judgment” itself (ibidem, 57-58).⁹

In §48, Kant elaborates on how an artist finds the right form for his artwork. Kant claims that the artist does so “after he has practiced and corrected” his taste—that is, his aesthetic power of judgment, his faculty of aesthetic appreciation—“by means of various examples of art or nature” (ibidem, 191). The first thing to observe here is that finding the right form is not “as it were a matter of inspiration or a free swing of the mental powers;” rather, it is something “laborious,” that is, “a slow and indeed painstaking improvement” (ibidem, 191).¹⁰ Nevertheless, what should be stressed is that

⁸ A thorough (and necessarily long) description of what Kant means by that would require another paper, which would have to mention “those prior forms of knowledge that are called *humaniora*” and the relation between them and “the culture of the mental powers” in which “[t]he propaedeutic for all beautiful art [...] seems to lie” (ibidem, 229). In §44, Kant asserts that “[b]eautiful art [...] promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication” (ibidem, 185).

⁹ I mention the former understanding of ‘taste’ in my ‘From Beautiful Art to Taste,’ where I also consider Allison’s view that constraints related to taste are of an aesthetic kind (see Lemos 2017). For some instances in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* where Kant relates taste to mechanisms and rules, see also Zammito 1992, 145 and 381.

¹⁰ In §47, Kant criticized those ‘superficial minds’ that believe “they cannot show that they are blossoming geniuses any better than by pronouncing themselves free of the academic constraints of all rules, and [...] that one parades around better on a horse with the staggers than one that is properly trained” (ibidem, 189). Although we tend to associate the products of genius with the freedom of imagination, there is something in them that “is to be ascribed [...] to possible learning or schooling” (ibidem, 195).

the faculty of aesthetic appreciation is practiced and corrected using examples. That is how the laborious, slow, painstaking process mentioned by Kant develops into an improvement. Artists are first guided by examples.¹¹

What does this have to do with the status and role of historical sciences? In answering this question, I will also uncover the first key to understanding the role of historical sciences in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art. Fortunately, the answer is easily provided, as it lies in the content of historical sciences themselves.

Historical sciences constitute the necessary preparation and foundation for aesthetically worthy art insofar as one finds exemplary art objects within them, that is, the examples that guide artists. Such objects exemplify the rules of art, or indeed, the rules of the arts. These are the rules that students learn and depend on to guide them through the laborious process of practice and correction, as they make slow, painstaking improvement as producers of art objects.

The same rules must be considered when one aesthetically appreciates a work of art. Once these rules are considered, our imagination is restricted. Historical sciences thus play a restrictive role in the aesthetic appreciation of art.

However, two issues arise from this description of the role of historical sciences in art production and appreciation. First, if restricting imagination is the sole role that historical sciences play in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art, then they only play a negative role. Second, if the rules which works of art are supposed to follow as works of art of such and such a kind are exemplified or instantiated by exemplary objects from the history of art, then artists would seem to be condemned to follow the same rules forever and ever. The history of art would be the history of sameness.

First, I will start with the issue of whether the role played by historical sciences is only a negative one. Admittedly, the connotations of 'to restrict' are mostly negative. Restrictions are usually associated with limits or confinements.¹² They suggest a decrease in freedom. They refer to what is prohibited, forbidden, or what one cannot do. So, the claim that historical sciences place restrictions both in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art amounts to saying that they limit something that human beings

¹¹ Indeed, despite setting imagination free, the art of poetry is "guided [...] by precept or example" (ibidem, 203).

¹² It is not lightly that commentators also speak of 'constraints' (see Guyer 1997; Allison 2001) and 'circumscriptions' (see Kalar 2006).

highly praise. Since within Kant's framework aesthetic pleasure takes place only if imagination moves freely, it might be said that historical sciences—their rules and mechanisms—prevent such pleasure from taking place.

Enabling Conditions

And yet, far from preventing aesthetic pleasure, historical sciences have a positive influence both in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art. To fully understand the role that historical sciences play, we need to acknowledge not only the negative aspect discussed in the previous sections but also a positive aspect. This is the second key to understanding the role that such sciences play. I will discuss it in what follows.

Kant uses another name for adherent beauty: 'conditioned beauty.'¹³ The applied judgment of taste, that is, the judgment of adherent beauty, is also called 'logically conditioned aesthetic judgment.'¹⁴ What is more, many interpreters use the phrase 'dependent beauty.'¹⁵ Adherent beauty not only adheres to a concept of what the object ought to be, of what it should represent; it also depends on such a concept in order to be ascribed, recognized, felt. If the object is of an artistic sort, and so adherent beauty is to be ascribed to a work of art, it depends on an additional factor: that the object follows the rules it is supposed to follow as an art object of such and such a kind, genre, or form of art.

Now, we have seen that those rules are instantiated by the exemplary objects that are part of the content of historical sciences. Artistic beauty is therefore dependent on knowledge of the latter. On Kant's account, aesthetic appreciation of art is not possible without considering the content of historical sciences.

Denis Dutton gives an insightful account of the conditions of the production of aesthetically worthy works of art. Rather than stressing the restrictive character of what he describes as "the structures, norms, and conventional expectations" of an art and its history (Dutton 1994, 232), he calls them "*enabling conditions*" of beauty (ibidem, 233). His point is that those conditions make it possible for an art to happen.¹⁶ Without them, artistic

¹³ It is as "conditioned beauty" that adherent beauty is "ascribed to objects that stand under the concept of a particular end" (Kant 2008a, 114).

¹⁴ See ibidem, 190.

¹⁵ That is indeed the way J.C. Meredith translates 'anhängende' (see Kant 2008b, 60).

¹⁶ Dutton also calls them 'the underlying conditions of an art' (see ibidem, 233). Giving the example of music, and referring specifically to Kant's aesthetic theory, he asserts:

creative freedom would not be possible at all, and neither would the free play of the imagination with the understanding—the free play which (or the feeling of which) is the ground of aesthetic approval of an object. As Dutton succinctly comments, “there can be no play without rules” (ibidem, 237).

In line with Dutton, Henry E. Allison claims that knowledge of the rules which artworks are supposed to follow as artworks of a particular kind is what enables one even to recognize what is going on in a given work of art: “without *some* knowledge of this sort, which in many cases might be fairly minimal, one cannot begin to appreciate a work of art because one is not aware of what the artist is trying to do” (Allison 2001, 295).¹⁷

Yet, such knowledge has advantages that go far beyond informing us about the artist’s intentions. It makes a difference when it comes to recognizing features of the objects that would otherwise pass unnoticed. Focusing on the case of music, Christopher Janaway asserts that “[m]any general features such as balances, contrasts and discontinuities [...] can be perceived only by a listener able to identify distinct musical voices, modulation, antiphony, theme and variations, cadences, sonata form, and so on” (Janaway 1997, 476). What is more, the fact that one can perceive those and other features broadens the range of possibilities of experiencing aesthetic pleasure, both

“These very structures make it possible for music to happen; they condition music and are presupposed by it. Music as an intelligible art form depends on them: what they give back in return for their ‘restrictions’ is, as Kant says, that they enable the *art* of music to be ‘possible in the first place’” (ibidem, 234).

¹⁷ In fact, even in the case of the ascription, recognition, or feeling of natural beauty it is apparent that differences in background may result in differences in aesthetic appreciation. As Ruth Lorand states, “[a] tulip is a tulip in every context, and no comparison affects the degree of its ‘tulipness’; but the same tulip may look more beautiful against a given background than another” (Lorand 1992, 252). Lorand states this despite claiming that there is only one kind of beauty, namely, free beauty. On the opposite extreme, Philip Mallaband argues for the possibility that an object may be judged to be adherently beautiful without being judged to be freely beautiful. Nevertheless, Mallaband is in line with Lorand in holding that knowledge may change aesthetic appreciation: “[t]he mayfly is a small insect. It cannot fly far, and is a weak flier; many live only for less than a day, so that often they die before producing any offspring. Without these considerations, one would not be inclined to judge these insects as beautiful: they have dull colorations, are small, and are barely distinguishable by the layman from countless other insects. However, when in possession of these cognitions about the mayfly, one might perceive the insect to possess a rare fragility, and thus judge it to be aesthetically valuable in virtue of this. So the mayfly could be considered to possess a property that is a bad-making property for insects (extremely short lifespan), but which is the ground for the good-making aesthetic property (rare fragility) which grounds a positive aesthetic judgement” (Mallaband 2002, 74-75).

concerning its objects and the intensity of the pleasure. As Janaway concludes, “[s]uperior conceptualization opens vistas of musical form, enables one to listen at greater degrees of accuracy and complexity, enlarges the scope of what can be experienced with pleasure, and deepens the pleasure itself” (ibidem, 476).

To sum up, acquaintance with historical sciences, including knowledge of the historical mechanisms and rules of art, not only restricts (limits, confine, constraints, circumscribes) imagination. It also plays a positive role in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art: in the final analysis, art production and appreciation depend on knowledge of the historical mechanisms and rules of art, the latter are the enabling conditions of the former. Moreover, such knowledge enables one to notice features of the art objects one would not otherwise notice. As a result, the spectrum of the possibilities of pleasure gets wider: the objects of pleasure are, say, multiplied; and the pleasure itself can become more intense. In many cases, such knowledge makes the difference between ascribing, recognizing, or feeling the aesthetic value of an object, and giving it aesthetic approval, or not doing so at all.

Incitements

It has now been made evident that the role played by historical sciences in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art has a twofold nature. I will now show that the negative and the positive characters of the role of such sciences in art production and appreciation are inseparable from each other. In light of this, I will deny that the history of art might be seen as the history of sameness.

The risk is that historical sciences, namely the history of art, may be seen as the history of sameness. This comes from the fact that exemplary objects within it instantiate the rules which artworks of art should follow as works of art of a particular kind. If all that artists do is follow those rules, then the history of art is nothing but the history of what Kant calls ‘blockheads,’ who “can never do more than merely learn and imitate” (Kant 2008a, 187), or, even worse, the history of what he calls ‘aping,’ which is what imitation becomes “if the student *copies* everything” (ibidem, 196).

And yet, from Homer to Wieland, and from Wordsworth to Mickiewicz, we appreciate much more than imitations or copies of what has been done before, to say the least. I shall therefore move to the second issue that arose from the description of the role of historical sciences in art production and appreciation I had provided at the outset of my paper: is the history of art the history of sameness?

Immediately following §49, Kant asserts that the example of genius “for other good minds gives rise to a school, i.e., a methodical instruction in accordance with rules” and that “for these beautiful art is to that extent imitation” (ibidem, 196). This passage might give the impression that there is nothing new in the history of art.¹⁸

However, we should also be reminded that, according to Kant, “genius is entirely opposed to the *spirit of imitation*” (ibidem, 187). The product of genius is not an example “for imitation (for then that which is genius in it and constitutes the spirit of the work would be lost)” (ibidem, 195).¹⁹

To make sense of this, one just needs to regard the negative and the positive characters of the role played by historical sciences as two sides of the same coin. This is the third and last key to understanding the role such sciences play in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art.

Commenting on imaginative productivity, Hans-Georg Gadamer remarks that it “is not the richest where it is merely free [...] but rather in a field of play where the understanding’s desire for unity does not so much confine it as suggests incitements to play” (Gadamer 2006, 41).²⁰ The point here is that restrictions (confinements, limits) cannot be separated from incitements to go beyond them. The rules instantiated by exemplary art objects stand in historical sciences as the historical background not only within but also against which artists create.

To this extent, then, we can say that rules are not only there to be followed, but also to be tested and ultimately broken. This is per Kant’s assertions that “the rule must be abstracted from [...] the product, against which

¹⁸ This impression is strengthened by Kant’s claim that for geniuses “art somewhere comes to a halt, because a limit is set for it beyond which it cannot go, which presumably has also long since been reached and cannot be extended any more” (ibidem, 188), as well as the fondness Kant shows for “unalterable rules” in a footnote to §17, which discusses the models of taste concerning the arts of discourse (ibidem, 116).

¹⁹ In line with this, Kant adds in §60 that “the universal rules under which [the master] ultimately brings his procedure can serve rather to bring its principal elements to mind as occasion requires than to prescribe them to [the student]” (ibidem, 229).

²⁰ In line with Gadamer, Dutton adds that Kant “recognized the ability of rules not just to limit, but to incite the free imagination and provide it with material” (Dutton 1994, 234). Dutton’s examples are worth mentioning: “the freedom of the portrait artist is the freedom to imaginatively recreate a human face, but it will be both incited and limited by the portrait subject; the poet’s imaginative creativity may be relatively unbounded, but even it is played out against the background of the vocabulary, grammar, syntax, conventions, associations, and history of language. A composer’s creativity consists in making a musical work within the forms and genres of a tradition; a musical performer’s creativity consists in imaginatively recreating the notes of the score” (ibidem, 235).

others may test their own talent" (Kant 2008a, 188) and that "the product of genius [...] is an example [...] for emulation by another genius, who is thereby awakened to the feeling of his own originality, to exercise freedom from coercion in his art in such a way that the latter thereby itself acquires a new rule" (ibidem, 195-196).

Now, this entails the consideration of a distinction. As I mentioned above, aesthetically worthy art objects might give rise to what Kant calls 'a methodical instruction in accordance with rules.' When it comes to those good minds who, nonetheless, lack genius, beautiful art is imitation. The case of genius is different in kind.²¹ It is rather a matter of emulation, succession.²² What matters in succession is the manner, the way. Accordingly, when discussing the two ways of putting thoughts together in a presentation, Kant asserts that the one which is valid for beautiful art is the "*manner (modus aestheticus)*," the standard of which is "the *feeling* of unity in the presentation" (ibidem, 196).²³ Even so, "[t]he master must demonstrate what the student is to do and how he should accomplish it," but also prevent his demonstrations "from being immediately taken by him as prototypes and models for imitation" (ibidem, 229).

I shall now move to the aesthetic appreciation of art. We have seen that taste, that is, the aesthetic power of judgment is practiced and corrected using examples. Although I have focused on geniuses and art production,

²¹ A genius is "someone who is gifted by nature for beautiful art" (ibidem, 188). Geniuses are "those favorites of nature with respect to their talent for beautiful art" (ibidem, 188). Kant also refers to genius as a 'talent', a 'natural gift', an 'inborn faculty', an 'inborn predisposition of the mind' (see ibidem, 186), or a 'skill' (see ibidem, 188). To be sure, it consists in a "proportion of the mental powers" that is extraordinary (ibidem, 188): only "in a certain relation" does the "union" of imagination and understanding constitute genius (ibidem, 194). It is by means of such a relation that nature in the subject gives the rule to art: "nature in the subject (and by means of the disposition of its faculties) must give the rule to art" (ibidem, 186).

²² How such phenomenon occurs is not something that Kant spells out within the sections of his third *Critique* devoted to art. As he himself acknowledges, "[h]ow this is possible is difficult to explain" (ibidem, 188). In any case, in §32 we can see that "the correct expression for any influence that the products of an exemplary author can have on others" is "[s]uccession, related to a precedent, not imitation" (ibidem, 164). The word at play is 'Nachfolge', which here Guyer translates as 'succession.' Interestingly, the word that he translates as 'emulation', following §49, is also 'Nachfolge' (see ibidem, 195). What this means is "to create from the same sources from which the [exemplary author] created, and to learn from one's predecessor only the manner of conducting oneself in so doing" (ibidem, 164).

²³ What is at play in succession, Kant stresses it, is "a *manner (modus)*", whereas in the case of those good minds who lack genius there is "a *way of teaching*", that is, a "*methodus*" (ibidem, 229).

the same applies to the aesthetic appreciation of art.²⁴ Exemplary objects instantiate the rules of art, and there is something of a historical nature in those rules. The objects that instantiate them are part of the content of the corpus of knowledge Kant calls 'historical sciences.'

We have seen that historical sciences play a negative, restrictive role in the aesthetic appreciation of art. The rules of art must be considered, and once they are, our imagination is restricted—we appreciate within limits and confinements. However, we have also seen that restricting is just one aspect, indeed a negative one, of the role played by historical sciences in art appreciation. Awareness of the rules also enables one to recognize some of the features of works of art. Without this recognition, there would be no play between imagination and understanding. This amounts to saying that if rules were not considered, there would be no feeling of pleasure and thus no ascription of aesthetic value. To this extent, historical sciences function as the enabling conditions of the aesthetic appreciation of art.

As for the question of whether historical sciences also function as incitements to test and ultimately break the rules, it might be argued that it only makes sense to ask it for art production. When it comes to the aesthetic appreciation of art, there seems to be no historical background of rules that appreciators would be incited to break. And yet, I can only recognize whether and how rules are being tested and broken if I have an acquaintance with the history of art and am familiar with the rules that exemplary objects instantiate and that artworks are supposed to follow as members of a particular kind. To this extent, then, historical sciences function as incitements for appreciators to see artists testing and breaking the rules of art—and accordingly, to ascribe aesthetic value to works of art through which this is done.

Although rules must be taken into account, they may be broken;²⁵ and yet, although they may be broken, they must be taken into account.²⁶ The positive and the negative characters of the role played by historical sci-

²⁴ It should be remembered that the aesthetic power of judgment is not a rare talent. As Kant remarks, in §39, "the proportion of [the] cognitive faculties that is required for taste is also requisite for the common and healthy understanding that one may presuppose in everyone" (*ibidem*, 173).

²⁵ As Rachel Zuckert stresses "[a]rt production is in part conceptually determined (aimed at making a work of a certain kind), but, unlike technical production, is significantly underdetermined by such conceptual intentions" (Zuckert 2007, 211).

²⁶ As Dutton remarks, not even a performer such as Glenn Gould—who was not interested in joining the Beethovenian performing tradition carried on by Backhaus, Kempff, and Schnabel—could have ignored Beethoven's musical score, for otherwise Gould's performances "would not be performances of Beethoven" (Dutton 1994, 238).

ences in art production and the aesthetic appreciation of art are inseparable from each other. Restrictions, confinements, and limits, on the one hand, and incitements, on the other, are two sides of the same coin. They are the rules that a work of art is supposed to follow as a work of art of such and such a kind and which are instantiated by the exemplary art objects found within historical sciences. Knowledge of such rules also incites artists to break them and appreciators to see them being broken.

To be sure, this historical process of revisiting old rules and disclosing new ones never comes to an end: “art [...] acquires a new rule, by which the talent shows itself as exemplary” (Kant 2008a, 196). Old rules are replaced by new ones that are instantiated by art objects that become exemplary works of art and therefore part of the content of the historical sciences. They will be necessarily considered in future art production and appreciation and will restrict, enable, and incite our imagination.

Let me finish with the example of Krzysztof Wodiczko’s ‘Abraham Lincoln: War Veterans Project.’ In producing this work, Wodiczko presumably had to take into account the rules of art, the rules of historical statuary, memorials, or monumental sculpture (or maybe of a video projection on sculpture), and the rules of the representation of Abraham Lincoln (or maybe of the artistic expression of memories and experiences of war). However, such rules did not conceptually overdetermine Wodiczko’s work. Instead, they incited Wodiczko’s imagination, with some rules being broken, and new ones being disclosed. ‘Abraham Lincoln: War Veterans Project’ may be taken as an exemplary object. The new rules it discloses are now included in the rules of art, the rules of sculpture, and the rules of the artistic expression of memories and experiences of war. They have become part of the content of the history of art. Same story, but not the history of sameness.

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Enea Bianchi*

In Praise of a Strategic Beauty. Mario Perniola's Aesthetics between Stoicism, the Baroque and the Avant-Gardes

Abstract

Several scholars (Bartoloni 2019, Bukdahl 2017, Vogt 2019) focused on Mario Perniola's perspective on art, post-human sexuality and political theory. Yet little has been written on the philosophical and literary sources—specifically Stoicism, the Baroque and the Avant-Gardes—which influenced his standpoint. The objective of this paper is to develop Perniola's conception of a *strategically oriented beauty*, which implies a connection between the aesthetic element and the political-effectual one.

Keywords

Mario Perniola, Stoicism, Baroque, Avant-Gardes, Strategic Beauty

Introduction

Mario Perniola has always avoided defining his philosophy within a set formula. One of the fundamental characteristics of philosophers—according to him—is their atopy or placelessness, that is, their being singular, unusual, and unclassifiable figures. The philosopher, instead of trying to provide a definite personal image, a clear identity (if not a mythology), should try to dissolve their ego in order to elaborate a closer connection with society: “To read, to think and to write is not expressing a subjectivity or realizing oneself, it is rather to lose oneself, to turn oneself into a medium, a passage,

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a transit of something different and extraneous" (Perniola 1995, 48). Nonetheless, Perniola identifies three main sources that influenced his reflections: "my work can be considered as a form of Baroque neo-Stoicism that went through the experience of literary and artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century" (Perniola 2014, 9). This paper will explore this statement, which represents a unique passage that helps the reader in better understanding Perniola's aesthetic conception. As Farris Wahbeh noticed: "In his quest to find intersections between contemporary and ancient thought, his *mélange* of references reaches all the way back to Heraclitus and the Stoics, mixing his text with Jean-François Lyotard, Walter Benjamin, and a dash of phenomenology" (2006, 493). Perniola's aesthetic conception is at odd with the objectivist tradition. According to this tradition, which—starting from Pythagoras and Plato—went on to heavily influence Western culture, beauty is defined in terms of objectivity. In other words, beauty is considered as a quality inherent to objects which display harmony and proportion. Besides this major perspective on beauty, a less widespread theory focused on subjectivity—elaborated first by the Sophists. For this tradition the beauty of something depends on the subject perceiving it as such. Alongside these two theories a third one emerged within Stoicism which considers beautiful something that is "appropriate," or "convenient" (*to prepon* in Greek and *decorum* in Latin). The *to prepon* implies that beauty depends on occasions, circumstances, on transitory combinations of elements that are relative to a given context. Furthermore, it conveys an idea of beauty which does not emerge within a harmonic discourse, grounded upon aesthetic objectivity and unity of parts. On the contrary, beauty is seen as the consequence of conflict and contingency. This theory, for which beauty is action, will clarify in what terms Perniola holds together heterogeneous philosophies and perspectives such as Stoicism, the Baroque, post-Renaissance Catholicism, and the Situationist avant-garde. Perniola places his thought within a strategically oriented beauty, which implies a close connection between the aesthetic element and the political one, between beauty on one side and effectuality on the other.

I. Stoicism or Beauty as Action

Before exploring Perniola's interpretation, I will provide some brief philosophical coordinates on Stoicism. The first great assumption that differentiates Greek (and late Roman) Stoicism from Platonism is a monistic view of reality. Where Plato elaborates a dualism between the earthly world and

the ideal world, where the former is an imperfect copy of the latter, Zeno, the founding father of Stoicism, affirms that the whole world is permeated by the *logos* (reason), and therefore the true good, harmony and beauty, are traceable in the world itself (and not in the hyperuranium). As Gianni Carchia points out, the Stoics abolish the distinction between form and content: since there is no place to be, so to speak, for ideas within the Stoic theory, the material world is not seen as a copy or as a residue of something greater than itself (Carchia 2006, 139). The ordering principle that governs reality (*logos*), therefore, is not something distant or detached from the world, but is itself present everywhere in everything. In other words, Stoic philosophy is founded on the physical universality of the *logos* (not a meta-physical Platonic universality). Moreover, since the *logos*—according to the Stoics—is the best ruler, the things of the world necessarily happen the way they happen; that is to say, they are as they ought to be, and cannot be otherwise. For the Stoics, ultimately, there is a universal reason that directs the universal order of the cosmos.

Since the world is given to individuals in its necessity, does this mean that they are enslaved to destiny? That they do not possess freedom and live within a contemplative fatalism? On the contrary, for the Stoics the ultimate goal is to live following virtue (Sherman 2007) by accepting the *logos* and distinguishing what falls under the control of the sage from what does not pertain to them. Epictetus, one of the most influential representatives of Roman Late Stoicism (together with Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Cicero) exemplifies this attitude in this way:

Some things are up to us and some are not up to us. Our opinions are up to us, and our impulses, desires, aversions—in short, whatever is our own doing. Our bodies are not up to us, nor are our possessions, our reputations, or our public offices, or that is, whatever is not our own doing [...] And if it is about one of the things that is not up to us, be ready to say, “You are nothing in relation to me” (Epictetus 1983, § 1).

Epictetus suggests that we should be able to monitor our actions and thoughts by distinguishing what is “up to us” from what is “not up to us.” In spite of our unknown and uncertain circumstances, what we are capable of doing is—for Epictetus—mastering our judgements on external things in order not to be affected by them.

It might seem contradictory to argue that our emotions, impulses and desires are under our control. But, as Nancy Sherman notes on her volume on Stoicism and the military mind, the “Stoics hold that an ordinary emotion

such as fear or distress is not primarily a sensation or feeling but rather an opinion or cognition that something bad is happening and a second opinion that a certain course of action is to be taken or avoided" (Sherman 2007, 9). In other words, emotions would be a matter of judgement and will and are thus under our power. Stoic's suspicious attitude towards emotions is based on their belief that ordinary emotions involve false opinions or misguided applications of reason: "emotions, then, are assents to a mistaken conception of what is good and evil" (Sherman 2007, 81). In contrast, "good emotions" (*eupatheiai*) result from the education and the transformation of the sage and consist of a different feeling repertoire grounded upon—as will shortly be clarified—the acceptance of one's own destiny: the *amor fati*.

The first objective of the Stoic practice is, therefore, to identify the causes of human unhappiness. For the Stoics, human misery is caused by looking for goods that are difficult to obtain (or destined to disappear) or trying to avoid an evil (which is often inevitable).

The Stoics, in addition, take a further step: it is not only a matter of accepting what is necessary, but also of loving it. "Why love? Because nature loves itself, and events are the result of the necessary concatenation of the causes which together constitute Fate, Destiny" (Hadot 1988, 143). Loving one's own fate echoes Perniola's considerations on Ignatius of Loyola. Like Ignatius, Stoics' "exercises" are oriented towards experiencing a joyful and comforting disposition through one's life's events (see also Bukdahl 2017). The Stoics, alongside other Greek schools of thought (such as the Epicureans and the Sceptics), but also together with several exponents of the post-Renaissance Catholic thought (as Loyola and Gracián), develop theories on how to behave well in the world. In other words, they teach ways of life, through exercises, meditations, and attitudes.

Stoic philosophy, although explicitly oriented towards ethics and actions, is not oblivious to aesthetics. The key term through which the Stoics designate beauty is *to prepon* (in Greek context) and *decorum* (in Roman culture). Firstly, *to prepon* means "the appropriate". For instance, according to classical rhetorical theory, a speech can be defined as *prepon* if it is appropriate for the context in which it is given, that is, if it conforms both the occasion and the public. Perniola provided this definition of the concept of *prepon*: "that particular type of beauty which adapts, which is convenient, and is therefore opposed precisely in virtue of the relation with respect to that which constitutes it, to the absolute and universal conception of beauty, implicit in the canon" (Perniola 1985, 190).

This quotation contains some essential elements for understanding the influence of Stoicism on Perniola. To begin with, Perniola, by interpreting the concept of *to prepon* as “the beauty which adapts,” emphasizes its difference from the ideal beauty proper to objectivism. An ideal beauty does not adapt to reality, but rather does the opposite. This is why, for Perniola, an objectivist theory of beauty is stuck within a passive contemplation and does not have any connection to reality and its events. Perniola thus privileges the concept of beauty elaborated within Stoicism precisely because its main feature (the *to prepon*), does not forget, so to speak, reality—that is, it does not forget its relationship to history and to particular situations.

Another element taken from the previous quotation is worth investigation. Beauty is in fact linked with the concept of “opposition”. If beauty adapts itself—that is to say, it depends on several factors within contextual circumstances—that means that it is produced in *o p p o s i t i o n* to something else, because it is caused, generated, by an alterity through which it emerges. In this passage we can begin to see the position of Perniola on beauty: the beautiful is not that which is in itself perfect and complete, but what, placed in front of reality and its manifestations, is able to adapt to it, to have a pragmatic relationship of effectiveness with it.

It is no coincidence that Perniola in his volume *Transiti*, before dwelling on the ritual without myth in ancient Rome and on the role of the ceremony (1985, 189–204), anchors his discussion on Cicero’s notion of *decorum* (translatable as “seemliness”). The Roman *decorum* is in fact the transposition of the Greek *to prepon*. *Decorum*, specifically, emphasizes a unity between behavior and effectiveness. It is associated with being “seemly” towards deities or, for an orator—as Cicero was—towards audiences. It means therefore to possess an exterior *habitus* made of gestures, words, rhetorical styles and rituals that are convenient, suitable, and decorous with respect to the particular circumstances and to one’s various roles in life. The link between beauty and decorum is highlighted by Cicero himself: “for just as the eye is aroused by the beauty of a body [...] so this seemliness [*decorum*], shining out in one’s life, arouses the approval of one’s fellows, because of the order and constancy and moderation of every word and action” (1991, I, 98).

Stoics believe that what is external to us is not up to us, and thus should be considered “indifferent”. It is a *cliché* to consider Stoicism only as a moralistic asceticism based on virtuous discipline. Instead, the *nihil admirari* (translatable as “do not let yourself be astonished by anything”) of the Stoics is a desubjection not to be confused with a self-annihilation. In fact, the disappearance of one’s self is pursued in order to act more effectively in the world. As Nancy Sherman writes:

It is tempting to read Epictetus as urging complacency in his listeners or at least a retreat to a narrow circle of safety. But this is not the message. We are to continue to meet challenges, take risks, and stretch the limits of our mastery. [...] In this sense, the message is one of empowerment. But at the same time, we are to cultivate greater strength and equanimity in the face of what we truly can't change. We must learn where our mastery begins, but also where it ends (2007, 3).

It is not a coincidence that Stoic philosophy has been practiced by emperors (such as Marcus Aurelius) and slaves (such as Epictetus), by politicians (such as Cicero) to contemporary soldiers (such as Stockdale¹).

Nonetheless Perniola's philosophy does not wish to replicate Stoicism in its entirety in the contemporary world. What Perniola leaves behind of traditional Stoicism is the focus on the moral element on the one hand and, on the other, the search for harmony between the individual and the world. As will be clear from the following section, the Italian philosopher praises a "polemological" attitude rather than a harmonic one. In other words, philosophy as the identification and the exploration of conflicts and oppositions rather than philosophy as the theorization of a conciliated worldview. The theme of conflict is precisely what characterizes the second theoretical figure taken into account in this paper: after neo-Stoicism, Baroque thought.

II. Gracián or Beauty as a Blade

This section will show the theoretical roots of Perniola's position on the Baroque, focusing particularly on Baltasar Gracián, to whom, together with Ignatius of Loyola, the Italian philosopher has dedicated a careful attention in his writings. Perniola's interpretation of Gracián allows this paper to clarify the concept of beauty developed by Perniola.

Gracián, born in Belmonte (Aragon) in 1601, entered the Jesus Order as a young man. He spent his life within the ecclesiastical hierarchies, teaching Latin grammar, moral theology, and philosophy in various colleges between Lérida, Gandia, Huesca, Zaragoza, and Madrid. At the same time, he knew well Madrid's court environments, having been confessor of the viceroy of Navarre. He published most of his writings, such as *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1647), *The Hero* (1637), *The Complete Gentleman* (1646), *The Critic*

¹ Interestingly enough, James Bond Stockdale (1923-2005) a US Navy admiral and aviator, stated that he managed to survive seven years of imprisonment and tortures during the Vietnam War thanks to Stoic philosophy and Epictetus' *Handbook*. See Sherman 2007, 1-17.

(1651), and *Wit and the Art of Inventiveness* (1648), under a pseudonym and, therefore, without the approval of the Order. His proximity both to court circles and to some politicians of the time, such as Don Vincenzo Giovanni of Lastanosa, caused him internal enmities within the Society of Jesus. Eventually, in 1651, Gracián lost the Chair of Sacred Scriptures in Zaragoza (the most coveted within ecclesiastical studies) and was transferred to Graus. Almost exiled, away from supporters and friends, he died December 6, 1658, in Terragona.

Perniola focuses mainly on two works by the Spanish priest: *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* and *Wit and the Art of Inventiveness*. The first contains a “biotechnique” (Tatarkiewicz 1979, 484), that is, an art of living well. The second is considered to be the most important text Gracián left on aesthetic theory. This section will deal with Perniola’s interpretation of Gracián’s theories and will underline in what ways his thought has been influenced by them. Specifically, Perniola focuses on three main notions emerging from Gracián’s works, namely *agudeza* (literally “acuteness”, translated as “wit”), *ingenium* (translated with “inventiveness” and “ingenuity”) and *concepto* (“concept”).

Agudeza is presented in a variety of attitudes—a subtle comment, a witty remark, a seductive silence, and so on. *Agudeza* has roots in treatises on courtesy such as *The Book of the Courtier* (published in 1528) by Baldassarre Castiglione, and Giovanni Della Casa’s *Galateo* (1558). Gracián shares with these late-Renaissance writers the attention to subtlety, *sprezzatura*, *je ne sais quoi*—attitudes and behaviors not understood as empty forms but at the crossroads between seduction, politics, and art.

Agudeza implies an aesthetic conception of existence in which “what glitters and what succeeds, form and action, ornament and substance” are closely joined (Perniola 1995, 113). Here the connection between the conception of beauty of Gracián’s literary mannerism and the Greek *to prepon* and the Roman *decorum* emerge. In Gracián’s works, beauty is not unfolded by a proportionate and harmonious object; it does not depend on an eternal canon or measure; it is not essentially spherical, soft, round, and it is not an object of contemplation. On the contrary, beauty is the result of a challenge between manners and circumstances. I emphasize the word challenge precisely to stress the attention Perniola’s interpretation pays to Gracián’s works. Being witty means behaving like something acute, pungent, sharp, pointed (like a needle or a sword) which penetrates the things of the world: “Wit, ‘acuteness,’ belong within a semantic field in which speech, gesture, and even silence, are understood as a weapon and the literate per-

son as a combatant, a warrior, a hero" (Perniola 1995, 113). Thus, wit is that particular notion which holds together the dimensions of aesthetics and existence, beauty and effectiveness, art and strategy, opportunity and seduction.

Although the concept of beauty has always been present within the Western tradition, aesthetic principles started to be studied systematically with eighteenth century thinkers like Baumgarten, Burke, and Kant. In fact, these figures put aesthetics side by side with ethics and logics and researched the conditions of possibility of beauty, taste, pleasure, and so on. A question might arise at this stage. Why does Perniola write frequently on aesthetics—devoting several monographs (see 2013a; 2017) to contemporary worldwide aesthetics, while being at the same time suspicious towards the discipline of aesthetics, paradoxically since the precise period it was founded?

Philosophical aesthetics is oriented, according to Perniola, towards dissecting the various notions and experiences belonging to the realm of feeling. The main objective is in fact producing a new typology of knowledge around *aisthesis*, the perceptions of the senses. In doing so, aesthetics became a distinct and particular discipline with its own rules and principles. The aesthetics of the eighteenth century onwards, in other words, has produced above all treatises on feeling, in which the main aim has been to systematize it, catalogue it, and grasp its properties. In doing so, beauty ended up being separate if not isolated from everyday attitudes. On the contrary, by combining rock art (2009), Egyptian architecture (1995), Roman and post-Renaissance rituals (2001), Stoicism, and Baroque, Perniola emphasizes the idea of an aesthetic which includes a global vision of the individual. To put it briefly: aesthetics and action as two sides of the same coin. This is the reason why a notion like *agudeza*, Perniola suggests, does not "speak" easily to the experience of the contemporary person. *Agudeza* still belongs to the ideal of a person in which will, attitudes, tastes are inseparable from one another.

The second notion explored by Gracián and discussed by Perniola is *ingenium*. The meanings with which Gracián characterizes ingenuity are far from the use made of traditional aesthetics of the same concept. In fact, *ingenium* is connected, in the aesthetic field, to the figure of the genius. On the other hand, ingenious, in common language, does not relate to art and aesthetics but rather to the practical realization of something, especially in the field of technology and mechanics. As Perniola points out, in fact, modern aesthetics "on the one hand ties ingenuity to a practical and mechanical ef-

fectiveness, on the other isolates genius in a poetic and formal purity" (1995, 116). The ingenuity conceived by Gracián, instead, far from being solely spiritual or merely functional, is closer to the conception that Francis Bacon has of the imagination (and which Perniola borrows in order to define the influence that the Baroque has had on his philosophy), which consists in making unlawful matches and divorces among things (Perniola 2008, 4).

In order to clarify an ingenious attitude, Perniola highlights (1995, 116) a series of aphorisms within Gracián's work. The varieties of operations produced by ingenuity can be summarized in the ability to transform nature into culture and make this transformation seem natural. Ingenuity can be produced by forming paradoxes, concealing criticism through praise, setting enigmas, alluding, discovering affinities between distant things, and so on. In other words, it implies the ability to move, dislocate, and transform with art the data given in their immediacy. The goal of this attitude is to transform a mere fact, event, encounter, into a prism of surprising possibilities. *Ingenium* is thus an act of subtle artifice concerned specifically with beauty: "*ingenium* cannot content itself only with truth, like judgement, but aspires to beauty" (Gracián 1967, 241). And, in addition: "[ingenuity] is an act of understanding which expresses existing and present correspondence between objects" (Gracián 1967, 236). Gracián writes of "existing and present" relationships between objects, in order to underline that with this "metaphorical comparison," *ingenium* is not addressed to creativity but to the development of something that is already present. As Hidalgo Serna and Oliver Olson note: "*ingenium* counterposes two separate things over against each other and with images objectifies relationships or similarities between them which are already present" (Serna *et al.* 1980, 253).

Finally, the third pivotal notion of Gracián's aesthetics: the *concepto*. A "concept" is usually defined as an idea that collects the essential elements of a given reality or phenomenon. A concept, so to speak, "grasps," "grabs," "seizes" its objects. In order to explain Gracián's notion of *concepto*, Perniola leaves behind this interpretation and comes back to the Latin etymology of the word concept, which is *conceptus*, derived from *con-cipio*. *Con-cipio* means "to take" in the sense of "welcoming" or "gathering in" something: "to conceive [*concepire*] does not mean therefore to appropriate anything, but rather to make room for it" (Perniola 1995, 122). In other words, a concept would imply not so much an activity of the subject towards an object as a disposition of the subject, a welcoming attitude, willing to receive what comes from the outside. Indeed, as Emilio Hidalgo Serna writes, commenting on the notion of *concepto* in Gracián:

The Gracián concept is not demonstrative. The logic of the ingenious concept cannot be formal or rational. Its concepts cannot express logical relationships, but always only new, real relationships, which constitute the unique essence of things. Gracián attempts to show, not to demonstrate. Concepts therefore must be a re-representation of reality... (Serna *et al* 1980, 252).

The “ingenious concept” is thus a method for displaying and showing original correspondences between things, combining them in a new language outside rational and logical structures. *Ingenium*, in this case, is considered by Serna and Perniola as a faculty capable of creating a “conceptual attitude” by drawing out relationships between images and objects.

In this context another theme shared by the traditions explored returns: that of a benevolent and affirmative disposition towards the events, towards what is independent and cannot be controlled by the individual. It implies becoming-nothing, downsizing oneself, remaining in a state of suspension which ultimately allows the individual to being open to the world and its uncanny and ever-changing manifestations. However, since *agudeza*, *ingenio*, and *concepto* are not three separate moments but should be understood as a fundamental triad for the art of living well, gathering in what comes from outside does not mean passively receiving anything. On the contrary, it implies using ingenuity, discerning, having discretion, knowing how to move in concrete circumstances, on occasions that arise from time to time. This conception is what Perniola praises as “strategic beauty,” in which aesthetics and manners are never oblivious to the practical element.

To conclude, Gracián grounded his aesthetic theory upon the notions of *agudeza*, *ingenium* and *concepto*. *Agudeza*, as suggested, has the characteristics of something pointed, close to a needle or a sword. The dimension of penetrating, piercing, and “becoming” sharp is essential to Gracián’s theory. The Baroque wise man is close to an elegant warrior, who uses words, gesture, silences, and witty remarks as blades. Gracián therefore places the element of conflict and challenge at the core of an aesthetic attitude which does not necessarily result in a final harmony. Indeed, it is precisely the disharmonic or discordant element, as Tatarkiewicz points out, that is crucial for Baroque theory:

The most desirable themes for an artist or a thinker—writes Tatarkiewicz—consist precisely in what is disharmonic, dissonant, disproportionate, paradoxical, incoherent, incommensurable, in *disparidad*, in difficulties, in contradictions, in mystery, in enigmas, in hyperboles, in the imaginative, in the ambiguous, in the unclear etc. All these are the ideal subjects for *agudeza* and constitutes the true essence of Mannerist aesthetics (Tatarkiewicz 1980, 485-486).

Agudeza is highlighted in this passage as that ability which enables one to perceive the conflict that animates the relations between the things of the world without consequently bringing it back to a final unity or conciliation. Its peculiarity, and at the same time its paradoxicality, is that of being on one hand close to Stoic discretion and prudence, and, on the other hand, to a Heraclitean conception of life. In fact, Heraclitus can be considered an outsider among the aesthetics theorists explored so far. His philosophy cannot be traced back either to the objectivistic theory of beauty, nor to the subjectivist theory, nor to that of the Stoics. For Heraclitus beauty emerges from *enantiodromia*, namely the tension between each thing and its opposite. The originality of this perspective lies in the fact that opposition is never overcome by a greater harmony: the state of ambivalence that characterizes everything remains.

III. Debord or Beauty as Displacement

Beyond neo-Stoicism and Baroque tradition, the third theoretical figure, so to speak, which influenced Perniola's work is that of the avant-garde. Specifically, at the end of the Sixties he was close to the Situationist International (1957–1972), a revolutionary movement founded by the French philosopher Guy Debord. Although Perniola continued to research for his whole life the significance of this movement, to which he also refers as “the last avant-garde of the XXth century” (2013b, 19), he did never define himself as a Situationist. As it is known, the Situationist International grounded its revolutionary project on the creation of new types of “situations”, which criticize the existing order and open up the possibility to a re-appropriation of everyday life. Against the repetition of pre-existing lifestyles, loyal to the capitalist apparatus, Debord elaborated practices for this re-appropriation from several points of view (urban, architectural, artistic, political, and so on). For example, the “drift” (*dérive*), considered a “rapid passage technique through various environments” (Debord 1958, 19). Ordinarily, one moves around in a city to go from point A to point B, that is, approaching the urban space only in a function-oriented manner. The Situationists rethink the very relationship between subjects and their urban environment through *drifts*, an urban practice which isn't related to neither strolling nor walking. A drift consists in the creation of a qualitatively alternative situation—different from the exclusively functionalist approach, which conveys a merely quantitative idea of space and considers the urban setting only as an obstacle to be traversed. This practice is part of a broad

field of study which is defined as “psychogeography,” or the study of the “precise effects that the geographical environment, consciously ordered or not, exerts directly on the affective behavior of individuals” (Perniola 2005, 16). A drift thus implies a theoretical study of the emotional aspects that it produces on a psychological level. The drift is an example of a situation, that is, of the deliberate construction of a creative experience against (but within) the “society of the spectacle.”

Another practice that attempts to instantiate a qualitatively different situation from the *status quo* is the so-called *détournement*. This term can be translated as “rerouting,” “hijacking,” “displacement,” and consists in the attribution of a new aesthetic value to pre-existing elements. For example, images belonging to the capitalist world, as advertising, comics and posters are no longer used for the purpose for which they were produced: their original context is transformed into a revolutionary perspective. To give an example, the image of a smiling couple next to a refrigerator, which, according to the advertising logic of the market conveys an idea of happiness linked to consumption, is completely subverted by the Situationists. Instead of a bubble where the couple express its satisfaction with the purchase, the Situationists inserted statements such as: “my thoughts have been replaced by moving images” or, “I didn’t go to work today; I don’t think I’ll go tomorrow. Let’s take control of our lives and live for pleasure not pain.” In short, the Situationists sought to reorganize the meaning of a certain object by transforming its context and purposes. In this sense, the *détournement* is a critical and aesthetical weapon against the spectacle. According to Perniola, a *détournement* has two main aspects: “the loss of importance of the original meaning of each individual autonomous element and the organization of another significant group, which gives each element a new end” (2005, 22-23). The *détournement*, as Anselm Jappe notes (1999, 61), is a practice that allows us to understand an essential characteristic of the concept of society according to the Situationists. In fact, the construction of situations—such as those brought by drifts, *détournement*, and so on—does not imply any utopianism, in the sense of a search for the revolutionary moment in a future that is yet to come. On the contrary, the premises for the revolution are all present, they are already *ready-made*—to borrow a notion typical of Dadaist avant-garde—that is to say, it is a matter of recombining the present, to “reassemble” it in order to open up new possible experiences and ways of existence. The situation, therefore, implies a choice in favor of the present and its not-yet-uncovered possibilities, which awaits practices and exemplary actions to be elaborated and developed. The idea of fullness

of the present will never be dismissed by Perniola, and precisely in the Situationist *détournement* lies the common thread between neo-Stoicism, Baroque thought, and avant-garde practices.

Conclusion

Perniola's main contributions to aesthetics and contemporary thinking, such as his ideas of the "simulacrum," "ritual without myth," "transit," "the sex appeal of the inorganic," and "artistic shadow," can be understood—according to this paper—if we take them into account alongside the theoretical thread which unites heterogeneous traditions and world views. This thread can go under the name of "strategic beauty," borrowing several pivotal elements from Stoicism, Baroque, and avant-gardism. Against objectivist and subjectivist aesthetic theories, Perniola praises the connection between aesthetics, forms, and rituals on the one hand, and effectuality, tangible results, tactics, on the other. This peculiar conception of beauty is characterized by two main theoretical attributes. Firstly, a strategic beauty implies the suspension of one's own subjectivity in order to experience reality without a pre-existent ideology or doctrine. Indifference is seen as a key attitude to accept and love one's own destiny. This does not imply a neutralization of feeling, but, on the contrary, a welcoming disposition, namely, the possibility of gathering in what comes from outside. Secondly, a strategic beauty is not grounded upon eternal canons or mathematical proportions. It is rather the result of circumstances, peculiar conditions and accidents, an *effectual oriented beauty* which is plastic towards the enigmatic and ever-changing combinations of events. Contrary to narrow specialism, Perniola's re-evaluation of Stoicism and Baroque within the contemporary world, I would argue, should be understood as an effort to bring back together aesthetics and politics, manners and lifestyles, form and effectuality in one comprehensive dimension.

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Lukáš Makky*

(Re)construction, (Re)evaluation, or (Re)interpretation of the Past: What Happens When the Past Meets with the Present?¹

Abstract

The image of the ancient past represents just a fragment. When we stand in front of such an image, we are standing in front of time. This text reflects the possibilities of aesthetic evaluation of ancient artifacts with the emphasis on the contextual perception of received phenomena. The defining concept of context is based on Jan Mukařovsky's approach. The aim of the paper is also to present aesthetic interpretation as a regular method of verifying prehistoric artifacts.

Keywords

Context, Archaeo-Context, Evaluation of the Past, Aesthetic Interpretation, Possible Worlds

Archaeology is a science that examines the oldest or most fragmented and “shattered” past of humankind. What is less well-known is that archaeologists also study the recent past. It can complete some already known facts. Furthermore, it can be (as Foucault illustrated) understood as a methodology of theoretical thinking, or research. Bearing all this in mind, this paper is more interested in deep history to which we only have access to some blurry and crumbled picture of our past. I would also like to use some of the inter-

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nal mechanisms of archaeology, not just the science itself, in showing some possible approaches toward the past and past objects that are almost exclusively categorized as examples of the oldest art. There is also the possibility to interconnect the past with the present and to evaluate already existing relations between them and explore some new connections. A great example is, as I will illustrate, the exhibition *Ice Art Age: The Arrival of the Modern Mind* (hereinafter IAA exhibition) which was organized in 2013 by The British Museum in London, where it was an exhibition of a productive and contemporary reinterpretation of prehistoric art from the perspective of artistic modernism. Let us start, however, at the beginning, with an aesthetic examination of the oldest past, which is challenging since past facts are alien to us.

The main requirements for exploring and aesthetically identifying, or categorizing, past phenomena, objects, and content that are preserved only in a fragmentary form are: (1) an acceptance of the communicative (and receptive) relationship between the past and the present, and; (2) a willingness to admit that past facts are legible and also beneficial in their fragmentary and partial form, which in the end; (3) can provide us with sufficient indications to outline the image of our past or the aesthetic form of our ancestors. However, the situation is much more complicated. A contemporary recipient, theoretician, critic, or researcher is influenced by phenomena that come from their cultural tradition,² education, and social situation, so if they identify past facts they naturally look at situations through their view. At opposite ends, there is the past and the present and also the person of the past and the person of the present, who are not identical. Whitney Davis (2017) pointed out brilliantly in this respect the empirical difference that we somehow miss. He was convinced that if an image resembled something, it might not automatically depict it. Nelson Goodman (1968, 5) supports Davis' belief by saying: "The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference. Nor is resemblance necessary for reference; almost anything may stand for anything else." They both denounce the system of representation, but not the principle on its own, but our ability to identify the correct (or original) meaning of some image, or depiction.

² Kateřyna Dytrtová (2018) leans towards this differentiation and often argues that we cannot mix up both standpoints. She also emphasizes that there is always some We and They in the process of evaluation and that it's often just the choice of the objectifying or subjectivizing viewpoint (Dytrtová 2019).

Contrary to this, the identification of the shape (Gestalt) of any visual form is an established way of archaeological evaluation (even the IAA exhibition was installed in this manner), including assessing the site, dating found artifacts, identifying formal features and lines of the artifact and then looking within the culturally determined schemes for similarities between the found fragment and existing ideas, symbols, or artistic productions. As part of the work of an archaeologist and the effort to incorporate the discovered artifacts into a culture, or possibly to identify the place of production, it is a regular, and even necessary step, but Davis, supported by Goodman, urges theorists to exercise caution, skepticism, and (to some extent even deconstruction) careful verification, where we do not integrate things into a certain framework but identify them in their own structure.

The aim of the submitted analysis is not to deconstruct historical knowledge and to question any possibility of exploring past phenomena, although the consequences of the Derridean approach are still present. The real intention of the paper is to explore the mechanisms, possibilities, and concepts that will make possible to overcome the paradox of time and distance and allow us (no matter how positivistic it sounds) to approach more objectively prehistoric (or otherwise ancient) facts that may be aesthetically interesting, and maybe in some sense also contemporary. I will try to illustrate that in the reception and examination of the past, we are always creating/reconstructing only a possible version of everything that we are interfering with. It is possible only by coming to terms with the paradox of time, when nobody can truly meet with the mind, or ideas of prehistoric people, but needs to initiate a communication with them. All this is possible thanks to the notion of context, and the fact that every identifiable element of the past can be also the holder of some information, which is the evidence (in the case of decoding) of cross-historical connections. Nevertheless, the main question might be: How can we approach the past?

An Image in/of the Time or Time in/of the Image

When we stand in front of an image, we stand in front of time which is, as George Didi-Huberman claimed (2006, 10, 19, 48), alive, variable, and appears and reappears, regroups, and soaks into the image: we stand in front of the arrow of time. An image can be understood as an element capturing a certain moment or event of the human past, but also as a sample and residue of a certain story (Panofsky 1981), or as a cluster of times and layering of narratives. An image, as a visual representation or a moment of

processed facts, is in true essence an elementary form of our perception, in which reality appears, and at the same time a form through which we communicate (See Baudrillard 2007; Virilio 2002) and through which we acquire reality (Cassirer 1944). Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) for instance understands the image in a much more classical way, as something that has its own meaning even across one historical period and probably even across different cultural contexts. This notion of meaning which can be passed on in the form of (some) information from one culture to another, or from one time to another, is the foundation of subsequent examination when archaeology and its methodology is crucial also for the aesthetic approach.

In this broader sense, an image is not only a privilege of fine art or art in general, but rather a common and universal form, or even a way of existence, perception, and interaction. Besides, Didi-Huberman says that art history (but perhaps not only art, but culture too) “consists of images and not stories” (2006, 129); after all, stories are formed by a cluster of images. In essence, it is the basic (not the smallest) form that carries the most fundamental meanings and thus requires, or enforces, a combination with other images and facts.

In reaction to several authors (especially Aldhouse-Green 2004; Didi-Huberman 2006), there is a possibility to think of any cultural object, even a prehistoric/ancient artifact, as a somewhat limited image; a specific image of its time, but at the same time a self-referent and self-sufficient entity that can enter into aesthetic interaction with the recipient. The appeal of Walter Benjamin (according to Didi-Huberman 2006) to become *antiquarians and collectors* of our past and its documents is a motivation and a way that enables the conceptual extension of the notion of image and more accurate perception of various fragments and ‘small’ objects of our past, or their (axiologically) adequate inclusion in the scheme and structure of our knowledge. It is precisely the relicts of the primeval past, which we often evaluate only intuitively, respecting the schema of knowledge, which are suitable examples of isolated ‘images’ and their ‘fragments,’ which need to be recombined together and somehow interconnected. An image in terms of a human creation (or the framework of our perception of reality) could therefore also be understood as an object that we approach with aesthetic interest and which refers to something outside itself, outside its borders. At the semiotic/reference or the communication level, it is an image as a denotational mechanism that is dependent on the possibility of reference, even when it needed to be constantly questioned (Davis 2017). This determines an image and its ontic nature (Goodman 1968). ‘Ordinary’ and ‘every-

day' objects cannot compete with works of art or artifacts that were created to fulfill a referential function (denotation, symbolization, expression, exemplification), at least in the number and intensity of referential relations. The aim is not to make this comparison, but only to show its existence and importance. Exceptions may be again prehistoric (even ancient and generally old-time) artifacts that compensate for the absence of (preserved and decodable) meaning and reference layers by the 'number' of returns of different productions of time and their reintegration or discovery in other situations and realities in different contexts.

An image, by which we can imagine anything, represents a means (but also a source) of confronting and meeting two times. An image is essentially a breaking point in time: the time of the origin and the life (Aldhouse-Green 2004, xvi; Benjamin 2013) of a work of art/artifact (its ontological and existential nature) with a recipient who carries their cultural, social, and experienced time. Both times are two separate worlds that come together and collide in the process of interaction, which raises the question of adequate aesthetic evaluation or assessment of aesthetic interaction and possible reconstruction, interpretation, and contextualization of the past world.³ The IAA exhibition was a curious example of this breaking point. The curiosity lies in the fact that this confrontation of times was intentional, and at the same time, three different times were colliding during the exhibition: a) the original time of prehistoric art; b) the original time of modern paintings, and; c) the different times of the recipients. Visitors to the gallery were interacting and rather confused because they were trying to reach for all three times and were trying to connect each artwork based on the possible depiction, and manufactured relations. Jonathan Jones (2013) from *The Guardian* comments on the concept of the exhibition as follows: "I am looking at women with floppy breasts, massive hips, and eyeless faces. Their bodies are deeply alien—disturbing in their total lack of what the modern world sees as desirable. Nearby, the British Museum has installed two nudes by Matisse, in one of many attempts in this exhibition to draw parallels between the earliest art and that of our era. But this comparison just adds to the unease." In some sense, it was a functional proof of Davies' (1997) thoughts, which does not disqualify this kind of approach, but shows the flaws in the historical examination of prehistoric art from today's perspective, and requires some functional, and more structured, change in approach.

³ This also happens in different fields of analysis (Migašová, 2019b). For example, moral philosophy repeatedly tries to reconstruct, interpret, and contextualize the past to understand the present. Today cannot be adequately explained without the past (Kalajtšidis 2019).

From Context to Archaeo-Context and Back to the Past

When explaining, understanding, and aesthetically evaluating, these artifacts-images, it is necessary to find the form and type of referential relationship that links the past and the present and can work as a starting point at the same time. From a methodological point of view, the position of 21st-century humans researching the distant past is decisive. Although we can look into the past and try to simulate or reconstruct the 'original facts,' in the end, our interaction with the work and our evaluation of the circumstances of its reception will necessarily be transformative (and maybe also destructive) to past meanings. The ideal would, therefore, be the position of the *Archimedean point*, implicitly required by Erwin Panofsky (1981), in which the recipient is not influenced by any external effect and can (mentally) exist outside temporal realities, and therefore be objective. However, as Ján Bakoš (2000a, 310-311) correctly notes in the critique of Panofsky's approach: "He naively believes that it is possible to find principles by which to analyze and interpret the works of all periods and cultures, regardless of the opinion of the historian." It is an illusory point that works productively only in its ideal form, which is not practically possible, especially if it is a stable point and the theoretician and the recipient always 'shift' places.

Therefore, any evaluation (including aesthetic interpretation) of past works always necessarily takes place between two poles:

(1) *Upper border*: it is based on an effort to interpret an object, phenomenon, item, activity, or idea based on the abilities, skills, and empirical, cultural, and social experience of the perceiving subject. The investigated phenomena are explained through our point of view.⁴

(2) *Lower border*: represents the exact opposite pole, or the tendency to explore. It is an effort to express our thoughts adequately about the period under review and to examine how the object, item, or phenomenon could be presented to the society or community for which it was created and with the intentions of the ideas of which it was formed (Makky 2012, 399-400).

⁴ Jana Migašová (2019a) reminds us that the contemporary percipient's point of view is influenced by the modernist preference for the primitive, or so called primitivism, which is still actively present in the viewer's gaze, in spite of its post-colonial critique. This we can see more than elsewhere in the perception of the IAA exhibition, although in Migašová's conception, it's more just like a reminder of the change of perceptive abilities of the recipient over time.

This polarization of our approach and also some substitutability of each position was already to some extent revealed by Gadamer (1976, 97) “[...] a work of art, which comes out of a past or alien life-world and is transferred into our historically educated world, becomes a mere object of aesthetic-historical enjoyment and says nothing more of what it originally had to say.” What, then, does it tell us about the IAA exhibition? In both examples, the recipients were trying to shift from one pole (e.g. what was the prehistoric person thinking when they created these small sculptures and for what function) to another (e.g. how do I feel, or what do I think about these small pieces), and from one period (the late Palaeolithic) to another (Modernity), and didn’t gain any answer about the relationship of both periods. I cannot say this outcome is undesirable. On the other hand, this exhibition was a correct answer to creating and answering new questions and also a provocative way of showing some ‘cross-cultural’ or ‘intertemporal’ principles of art.

Eddy M. Zemach brings, in this regard, a strong theoretical position to the issue, insisting “[...] that no work of art cannot be understood beyond its context”⁵ (2010, 229). If an experience with artwork is an encounter with the world (Gadamer 2004), maybe, just some fragment of the world, there’s no other choice but to work with, or follow, the context. Context is an element that reveals the functionality, purposefulness, and overall place of any object in the physical, mental, and ideological reality and sets the pace of our interpretation. By revealing the place of every artistic production or aesthetic object within culture and society, we discover what made the phenomenon specific and what made it exceptional: if such a criterion and differentiation exists. Here, it shows the peculiarity and distinctiveness of artistic production, which would otherwise lose the ties that stabilize it in society and culture and would be a flexible reality that could be incorporated into ‘anything’ based on some intuition. Context can, therefore, also be understood as a filter correcting conclusions, understandings, and findings (Ricoeur 1993, 196), which is necessary both in the assessment and in the interpretation of the work of art.

Context is a stable and intrinsically invariable constant that helps to identify and evaluate a particular phase of the integral structure development present in the work (Fořt 2006). “It is a sequence of semantic units [...], a sequence which cannot be displaced without changing the whole, in which meaning gradually accumulates [...]. Only at the moment of termination of

⁵ According to Dytrtová (2018), context is the crucial frame of evaluating and interpreting artworks from any period.

the context does the entity and each of the individual parts of meanings acquire a definite relation to reality [...]” (Mukařovský 2007, 42). Regarding this understanding of context, any artifact of an unknown culture can be treated as a circumscribed part of cultural reality that is in some way firmly related to the overall and dynamically changing structure. On the one hand, each artifact has a fixed place that determines the context, on the other hand, it can be flexible and adapt to the nature of the general structure of which it is only a small part. The whole is dependent on each individual component and the relocation of this fact, this reality in the overall structure, may mean the transformation of the whole and its decontextualization. Inadequate integration or evaluation of an artifact that is part of the whole can thus lead to inadequate evaluation of the structure and thus a real misunderstanding of a particular culture or artistic activity.

An artifact is always part of a context that gives us an idea of how we can approach that artistic fact, but which we can only reveal by studying archaeological material, given that we do not have access to the original context in the true sense. We only know its fragments. Identifying the mutual links and relationships of the individual components of the structure (within the context) is crucial. Since it is a terminated sequence of meaning units, it is a construction of meaning “happening in time [...]” (Chvatík 1994, 63) and dependent on time. Context is by no means a separate thing. It is a summary of facts that are connected to each other and only after some time a coherent meaning is created. It becomes a determinant and generator of other meanings and relationships. The context is completed and therefore retrospectively identifiable for us only when the meaning of individual facts has stabilized at a given time and is not transformed anymore. In historical identification, we look for this stable moment and understand the found facts as decisive and determinative.

However, in archaeological practice and the evaluation of findings and relics, we do not reconstruct only the original context, which can clarify the original place and value (meaning) of the artifact-image, and thus the context of the time when the artifact originated. By creating an archaeological map, assigning artifacts to a cultural territory, comparing them with each other, and finding parallels between them, we build, step-by-step, the context of archaeological research or archaeological findings. It determines and at the same time verifies the new life of the artifact within which it is currently beginning to function, and this second context: the archaeo-context becomes structurally superior (because of better accessibility) to the original context, which, although undergoing reconstruction, remains only a par-

tial position. Prehistoric artifacts thus live a double life. They have: 1) their original meaning within a certain context, which we are still trying to discover and; 2) in different ways and at different levels they enter into contemporary culture, thus updating their existence and reincarnating to a new form (Makky 2017). The second life of prehistoric artifacts was clearly shown at the IAA exhibition, where every contextualized piece of information combined in creating some image of the prehistoric mind, which was confronted with the much more familiar mind of modern people. This connection resulted in the creation of a world where some elements of thought were possibly the same, or a visitor to the gallery could think so at least, therefore maybe the subtitle in the name of the exhibition: *Arrival of the modern mind*, but I would have preferred a question mark at the end.

Although the structure that we gradually discover in the learning of the original context is incomplete and intrinsically dependent on our capabilities and abilities to identify it, the context cannot be integral until the archaeological research is structured and hence the archaeo-context is fully known (or discovered) to us. Without this sequence, the original meanings and connections cannot be traced. The relationship between the archaeo-context and the (original) context is, thus, cyclically intertwined and revealed at the same time. In other words, we can say that there is a proportional relationship between context and archaeo-context, but it is not absolute, nor arbitrary, not even stable, but rather flexible and dynamic. However, what if the concept of archaeo-context, or context in the historical meaning, is not sufficient for the analysis of prehistoric art?

Tools of Aesthetic Reconstruction

A suitable strategy seems to be the application of the thoughts of Jan Mukařovský (1966), who worked with a specific triad: aesthetic function, norm, and value, which can be regarded as the tools of the aesthetic contextualization of past phenomena. For a thorough understanding of his approach, it is necessary to start talking about aesthetic function, which is an essential element of the definition of aesthetic reality. Already in 1936, Mukařovský first broke established aesthetic boundaries and wrote; “Any object and any action (whether natural or human) can become a bearer of an aesthetic function” (1966a, 18) which is “[...] the ‘evoker’ of what is called aesthetic pleasure” (Mukařovský 2008, 9). An aesthetic function always stands at the birth of aesthetic experience, at the beginning of aesthetic reception, and that is what arouses the recipient’s interest.

An aesthetic function can isolate, or rather separate, the object it carries (Sládek 2015) to make it exceptional. What makes aesthetic function and its identification—in other words, what determines its place in the perception of the recipient, one of the dominant elements of revealing the original context—is its relationship to other functions. The very place of aesthetic function among other functions is an indication of reading and revealing meaning but also the social and cultural context of any artifact and any culture. The dynamics and also intensity of a dialectical relationship of functions that signals every internal change in culture, every change in perception and evaluation of any artifact, as well as every change in an object's status, is a 'guaranteed' way of revealing connections and intracultural relationships that are key to determining the context.

Květoslav Chvatík (2001, 65) understands the function of a structural entity as a unifying relationship of partial processes. Aesthetic function unites the manifestations of prehistoric creativity into a culture with identity and specific outcomes, and one could say that in examining ancient manifestations and verifying the perspective of the chosen aesthetic methodology we look for these central 'binders,' which show this connection also on the semantic and aesthetic level. The power of the aesthetic function consists in the ability to attract and draw attention to itself, to awaken the attention of the recipient, but also to bring together aesthetic phenomena. The aesthetic function is a thin line, a fine binder that, from our perspective, identifies aesthetic phenomena across history, but also within a single cultural period. Examining prehistoric artifacts and aesthetic facts of long-lost and forgotten cultures must therefore imply the identification and observation of an aesthetic function, which determines the direction of our examination by its ability to interconnect and unify aesthetic aspects. Walking along the path defined by the aesthetic function, we can identify aesthetic facts on a case-by-case basis and see the connections between them. Therefore, the form of contextualization and the structuring of the past and past phenomena through aesthetic function must be the dominant form of identification of areas where aesthetic function prevailed in the past or the search for intensity and ways of executing aesthetic function.

Another instrument that helps to identify the context is aesthetic value: its recognition is usually one of the main steps of assessing, interpreting, and evaluating an aesthetically perceived object. It is mostly associated with artistic production, but artifacts of art are not the only type of objects aesthetically assessed. Aesthetic value cannot be understood as an objective property of an object, activity, or phenomenon and cannot be approached as

an uncritical and mechanical subject. It is not an arbitrator and a real feature of the object. As with function, this is also an aspect of the relationship between a human and the world (Chvatík 2001). "For structural aesthetics, the aesthetic value is not merely a set of formal 'procedures', nor any particular substance transcending people and their social being, but structural unity and the integrity of the non-aesthetic values and significance of the work. [...] The aesthetic value is qualitatively a new rearrangement of elements into a whole in the process of reception work [...]" (Chvatík 2001, 86).

Mukařovský's approach, representing the aesthetic norm as the third central constant of structuralist perception and exploration, in essence, leads to the paradoxical denial of normative aesthetics: the hidden violation of the norm is constantly present. Chvatík (2001) points out that by complete stabilization, the norm would transform into law and the development of art would cease. This is one of the reasons why Mukařovský himself speaks of the "seeming illusion of aesthetic norm" (2014, 28) and Peter Michalovič adds that aesthetic norm is "a typical example of the loosest regulatory power" (1997, 19). Mukařovský's definition of the aesthetic norm as a rule (only) seeking universal validity, which cannot be achieved. Therefore, it dynamically transforms itself and repeatedly creates new rules. This rule is for art a sufficient measure of obligation, which on the one hand directs it, but on the other hand, does not bind it in any way. It is even a so-called 'law' that satisfactorily explains the historical transformation of art and the alternation of individual styles with certain rules (valid for a while), but with reasonable freedom for rules to be abandoned when a sufficiently progressive work of art arrives from previous developments. The norm wants to be substituted, updated, or rather replaced by its transformed and innovative form.

The aesthetic norm is primarily a means of regulating and stabilizing the aesthetic effect of the object adhering to it (Michalovič, Zuska 2009). However, it does not determine the presence of aesthetic function. The aesthetic norm is dependent on the aesthetic function and at the same time, it is inherently dependent on aesthetic value. In art, value is the element that determines the form of the aesthetic norm. Outside of art, this relationship is the opposite. The aesthetic norm created by the original work is dynamic energy determining or prescribing aesthetic value.

How do we use these tools to contextualize prehistoric artifacts, and find a proper way of evaluation? In short, we use the aesthetic function to identify the area of aesthetic effect (again we tend to use our position, but in the end, we move between the upper and lower border of evaluation) and

look for stabilization. Then we look for the aesthetic value and the extent of its realization, which helps us to identify the hierarchy of aesthetic reality, and finally, by the reconstruction of the aesthetic norm, we reveal the desired forms of aesthetic objects and the taboos of each era. Of course, the process of contextualization needs broader material, illustrating the cultural picture, not just one area of aesthetic achievement.

The Thin Line of the Possible Interpretation of Past Images

Examination and reconstruction of the past aesthetic form is in essence a gradual decoding of the reality that the past offers us through artifacts. Based on the identification of certain (mostly formal) signs, their understanding, and subsequent evaluation, it is possible to gain some knowledge and arrive at some understanding. This process of acquirement is on the border of reconstruction, interpretation, examination, and re-evaluation. Although interpretation is the key and perhaps, in the final evaluation, the most important step in exploring old and thus foreign cultures. However, some doubts about interpretations in historical research is understandable. It may arise from the fact that if it is the starting point of research in a non-contextualized form, it is historically incorrect, individual, and subjective. However, the correct setting of interpretative processes can reveal many new connections and discoveries, especially if it follows the findings and follows the (acquired) intuition of the theorist. It is important, above all, that two foreign worlds (ours and theirs) meet one another somewhere and do not confront each other; confrontation and comparison can never give rise to mutual understanding, productive dialogue, or new knowledge, but only one-sided criticism and one-sided preference.

Interpretation is one of the basic processes of knowing the recipient reality offering mainly empirical findings, which we realize daily: it is directly an elementary method. Ján Bakoš (2000b) conditions the understanding of a work of art precisely by interpretation. He (2000b, 13-14) considers the interpretation of a particular artwork to be “the foundation stone (assumption) and the starting point of the entire architecture of historical image of art [...] it is also seen as the goal of research in it—the ultimate value of research: providing the inner content of the work of art to the layman, bringing it closer, and thus multiplying its impact”. The interpretation illuminates all the context and facts that are being examined and is therefore irreplaceable in clarifying the fragments of the past. We decode and resolve the mes-

sage intended for decoding: there is a need to know the code. Thus, we find ourselves in semiotics, which understands any communication and interaction (in its most basic form) as the transferring of information from one place to another. The reading of this information is possible only (at least partially) by successful decoding/translation of the transmitted information. H.-G. Gadamer (2004) explains the translation in the relation of understanding, and decomposing one medium into another medium, without losing or changing any meaning, and therefore as one conclusive explanation of interpretation, which is useful in the context of prehistoric art. In short, in the process of interpreting prehistoric artifacts (for example, a sculpture of a woman with line patterns), the perceived object is a medium of some information, and we are decoding or translating it, through another medium (words) into mutual understanding: understanding between prehistoric and modern humans. The change in medium (the original medium is foreign to us and is also to some extent destructed) usually results in misunderstanding and incomplete translation. The participant in this dialogue is paradoxically enough only as a recipient leading or rather initiating the dialogue with the object (and the cultural background behind it). By asking appropriate questions, the recipient penetrates the surface of the received object and, due to the dialogical nature of the interaction, receives the desired answers, for the reading of which knowledge of the code is necessary. The absence of a full code, to which the dialogue with prehistoric art and artifacts is sentenced, complicates this conversation and therefore cannot take place without context and archaeo-context.

The theory of possible worlds offers an interesting perspective on how to understand ascertained and anticipated facts. A possible world determines possible situations of our reality even if they may not always be exactly distinguishable from the reality in which we live. Alvin Plantinga understands possible worlds as states of things that: (1) do not violate the law of logic in the broader sense of the word, and (2) are maximum or complete (Pavel 2012). Every theoretical construct is, basically, only one version of the (possible) world we are trying to reconstruct. When we talk about it in this sense, every historian reconstructs only one alternative of the past, only one image that is not an image of the whole world and therefore reconstructs only one possible world. The curator of the IAA exhibition decided to reconstruct that version of the world, where the potential of modern art and the modern mind in the biological sense (as a genetically existing condition⁶) arrived in

⁶ Even if this subtitle of the exhibition and present conclusions are more of a metaphor, Colin Renfrew (2008) speaks in this sense about the paradox of intelligence, or the

Europe in the year 40 000 BCE, and in some way waited a long time for fulfillment. Any interpretation can thus reveal new contours of a possible past. The sum of these diverse findings then results in parallel and intersecting alternations. Until the situation of conflicting worlds occurs, all parallels are possible alternative and possible worlds within the analyzed discourse. Our research is, therefore, a review of structural functionality and at the same time creates possible worlds that are modular images of our past. To conclude on possible worlds, I would add that “[P]ossible worlds are based on a logic of ramification determining the range of possibilities that emerge from an actual state of affairs [...]” (Ronen 1994, 8).

Concluding Remarks

Even if the main principle in a successful aesthetic evaluation of prehistoric phenomena, artifacts, and cultures is to reduce expectations about possible findings and resign from absolute knowledge, this process of evaluation is not unnecessary. Although objective findings are an illusion, we should not give up and dissolve past aesthetic phenomena in the field of subjectivity or resign from the possibilities of research and settle for the receptive side of the evaluation of prehistoric objects (which also has its benefits but always, although not completely, tends to the upper borders of interpretation). In the receptive evaluation of prehistoric art, there is a tendency to analyze only the second life of artifacts, not the contextual facts; therefore, the recipient and contemporary mind of humans, is in the scope of the examination.

Also, as I tried to show, the meeting of two periods may not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle, but as an opportunity for a creative dialogue that can reveal new and unexpected circumstances at the same time. The IAA exhibition was a good example of a productive reinterpretation of prehistoric art from the perspective of the present time, where both sides (all three of them) of this communicative relation affect each other and created aesthetically interesting work. Although at the same time, we see an example of decontextualization, where it seems like only the receptive aspects are desired. It is almost as if the context was violated: the context of prehistoric art and also the context of modern art. To conclude, this ‘provocation’ created an open laboratory of contextualized and decontextualized perceptions of art and proves the existence of upper and lower borders of interpretation.

so called *sapient paradox*, which refers to the developmental gap (hiatus), where the already existing features of a species *Homo sapiens* needed some time to take effect.

In a theoretical endeavor it is enough to concentrate on the context and those aesthetic constants (function, norm, value) that allow us to reconstruct the primordial aesthetic world, or to create a possible world of our ancestors and to this extent be satisfied with it. It is important to accept that we will never be able to translate what one thought in ancient times or what one thought was aesthetically valuable. The most appropriate starting point, but also the aim of aesthetic reflection of past phenomena, should be based on the contextualization, which allows us to assemble at least a fragment of an existing 'mosaic,' supplemented with interpretative findings, while the theoretician should never leave the hypothetical level of his construction of meanings. Any theoretical evaluation of our past is a theoretical construction and a possible version of what the past looked like and how it worked, without the possibility of verifying conclusions in any way. Every new discovered 'version' of a past world offers some new chance to review the current state of knowledge and challenge it.

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Judit Bartha*

Olimpia Revisited. Variations on a Theme by E. T. A. Hoffmann in 20th Century Avant-Garde Art

Abstract

The long reception of the doll Olimpia in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandmann* represents the change of the ideologies concerning androids. The paper focuses on three transformations of the Romantic creature in 20th century Avant-garde art, namely, in works by Max Ernst, Oskar Schlemmer, and Cindy Sherman. It is aimed at showing how the machine myth of the 18th and 19th centuries, closely related to Gothic Romanticism, could become an important part of 20th century art.

Keywords

Romanticism, Gothic Fiction, Android, Avant-Garde, Fine Arts

The production of human-shaped automata for scientific purposes became popular in the 18th century, during the First Industrial Revolution, but it was not until the 19th century that they gained ground in literature. In *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* (1853), Karl Rosenkranz names the arch-parents of the artificial humans figuring in the short stories of the age: Mary Shelley, Heinrich von Kleist, Jean Paul, Achim von Arnim, E. T. A. Hoffmann. But Rosenkranz regards the trend represented by these authors as a deformation of Romanticism, where “the most grotesque insanity counted as ingeniousness” (Rosenkranz 1990, 280). This leads him to the conclusion that their fictitious androids do not deserve a deeper inquiry.

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The works of the above authors that Rosenkranz calls “spookish” (Rosenkranz 1990, 280) belong to the tradition of Gothic literature, which has emerged in England in the late 18th century. Regarding the earliest programmatic works—such as the novels of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Matthew Lewis—the term “Gothic” refers primarily to the wild, dark, uncontrolled Middle Ages. The locations are spookish castles, abandoned monasteries, scary jails, or midnight graveyards. The plots are frequently centered around tragic mistakes, sexual aberrations, and savage crimes. A further feature of the genre is that, besides terror and horror, fate and mystics play an important role, too. But already in the most successful of the early works, the supernatural is mostly but an interlude, so that the dread overcoming man can come to the surface. The English Gothic tradition arrives in Germany, under the name of *Schauerroman*, at the end of the 18th century, brought in by the generation that grew up on *Sturm und Drang* literature, then it spread elsewhere in Europe and America (Steinecke 1988, 558-562). Over time, a tendentious change makes itself visible within the broad genre of Gothic fiction (and across the variety of sub-genres): a marked shift from “torture chambers” to “the chambers of the human heart and brain” (Spooner 2006, 18). As a result, the individual who experiences their own psychological and existential limits becomes the real source of mystique.

In Rosenkranz’s view, artificial humans (puppets, nutcrackers, automata, wax figures) are not essential to what he calls “spookish” fiction (Rosenkranz 1990, 280). He pays no attention to the profound cause of the thrill induced by the artificial humans, namely, to the belief that human beings are only mechanical puppets in the hand of God or blind fate, or to the then already existing ideology that humans will one day be replaced by these “humanoid machines” which they create in a rivalry with God (*cf.* Sauer 1990, 287-306).

The machine as an anti-human object supplanting humans was a frequent theme in Romanticism even though the actual production of androids had lost much of its popularity by the early 19th century. This happened because the technical know-how of the age was not sufficient to improve the existing devices. The more practical mentality demanded the production of artificial body parts and sense organs rather than artificial humans. It was only after World War I that the first primitive humanoid robots fulfilling the ideal android were created. The more sophisticated versions came with the turn in science and technology after World War II, with the military inventions of the Cold War. But these early robots were more work tools than artificial humans. The very word “robot” stems from Czech *robota*,

“forced labor”, which was first used as a term for artificial humans by Karel Čapek in his 1921 play *R.U.R. Rossum’s Universal Robots* (Magyar 1992, 147-151).

The high tech descendants of the Enlightenment’s androids appeared with the computing revolution of the 1970s, while the most advanced cyborgs that abolish the borders between humans and animals, living organisms and machines, body and non-body are the microelectronic and biological inventions of the 1980s, spiced with a great deal of sci-fi and ideas about gender.

It is in the light of this arc of development that the “protagonist” of my paper, the fictitious android or mechanic doll called Olimpia in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* (*Der Sandmann*, 1816) and her history of reception, will be interpreted. In what follows, I will first analyze the short story by focusing on the figure of Olimpia (1). Then I will take a look at some transformations of her in the 20th-century Avant-garde, namely, in works by Max Ernst (2), Oskar Schlemmer (3), and Cindy Sherman (4), who rediscover the importance of the relationship of the human and machines. My paper is not meant as anything like a systematic approach to how the female android of the 18th and 19th centuries is represented in 20th-century art. I only would like to pinpoint a link between Romanticism and Avant-garde. I will try to show how the change of the attitude towards artificial humans is reflected in some prominent works of Avant-garde art, as well as to point out that these works still use some elements of the literary tradition of Gothic Romanticism.

I

The German writer, composer, conductor, and lawyer E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776–1822) was both a child of the Enlightenment and a key figure of Romanticism. While believing in technical progress, he also experienced the skepticism about it. *The Sandman* and his other short stories about human-shaped automata—*The Automaton* (*Die Automate*, 1814), *Nutcracker and Mouse King* (*Nussknacker und Mausekönig*, 1816), *The Mysterious Child* (*Das fremde Kind*, 1817)—owe much to this duality (Meteling 2009, 484-487).

Hoffmann was interested in the trendy automata of the age already in his youth. In 1803 he read Johann Christian Wiegleb’s *Natural Magic* (*Die natürliche Magie*, 1789), a popularized version of Johann Nikolaus Martius’s *Instructions in Natural Magic* (*Unterricht in der natürlichen Magie*). From this

book, he learned about the works of the Hungarian polyhistor Farkas Kempelen, *The Turkish Chess Player* (1769), and *The Speaking Machine* (around 1790). He also knew the most famous automata of the French inventor Jacques de Vaucanson, *The Flute Player* (1738) and *The Digesting Duck* (1739), the three humanoid automata created by Pierre Jaquet-Droz and Henri-Louis Jaquet-Droz, *The Writer*, *The Musician*, and *The Draughtsman* (1768–1774), as well as *The Trumpet Player* (1810) by Johann Gottfried Kaufmann (Hilscher 1992, 20). Yet Hoffmann felt a kind of distrust towards these soulless machines, which was a general attitude at that time, but in his case, it was amplified by his interest in psychology.

It was during his stay in Bamberg from 1808 to 1814 that Hoffmann received the strongest impulses in this regard. There he got acquainted with Adalbert Friedrich Marcus, the founder and director of the Bamberg hospital and lunatic asylum. As an important figure of Romantic medicine, Marcus was an acknowledged authority in Germany. His broad circle of friends included Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, the Schlegel brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich, and Gottfried Heinrich von Schubert. Marcus introduced Hoffmann to physicians and made him acquainted with the working of the hospital, researches, and scientific works. He advised Hoffmann to read two books by Schubert, *Views from the Night Side of Natural Science* (*Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaft*, 1808), and *Symbolism of Dreams* (*Die Symbolik des Traumes*, 1814). These two books revealed to Hoffmann the dark aspects of science and the relation between Mesmerian magnetism and poetic inspiration. The natural philosophy of the German Romantic medical circle gave Hoffmann a background for his Gothic short stories (Segebrecht 1996, 61–90). These include the two-volume *Night Pieces* (*Nachtstücke*, 1816–1817), beginning with *The Sandman*, a work made famous some hundred years later by Sigmund Freud's study *The Uncanny* (*Das Unheimliche*, 1919).

The very title of the collection indicates its relation to Gothic Romanticism. Up to the middle of the 18th century, the term *Nachtstück* was used in Germany almost exclusively as a category of painting: it referred to a "picture depicting a night scene." In the second half of the century, however, it becomes widespread in literature, a change which reflects the adoption of the English "night piece." This term was originally used, in connection with Gothic fiction, to denote contents related to death, thrill, dread, and threat. As night becomes a key notion of Romanticism, it assumes a wider meaning in different compounds. Hoffmann's use of the word *Nachtsück* refers back to painting, for he wants to achieve a literary translation, as it were, of the

technique of pictorial depiction, and in so doing, he draws on the Gothic novel, too. There is a crucial difference, however: whereas in early English Gothic novels the cause of the mystic-demonic events usually unravels in the end, in Hoffmann the unveiling often leads to a further thrilling mystery, and the reader gets no clue whatsoever as to how to explain it (Steinecke 1985, 951-960). We have a very important criterion here, namely, that the reader must be able to perceive, and the author must be able to make perceivable, the thrillingness of the world. H. P. Lovecraft aptly summarizes that in the notion of "atmosphere," which he identifies as the most essential feature of Gothic stories: „Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation. [...] The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers" (Lovecraft 2009).

The Sandman, in which the career of the doll Olimpia begins, testifies to Hoffmann's enthusiasm both for Enlightenment automata and for Romantic Gothic stories. It is a Romantic machine myth in that it reveals, through the character of an android, the early 19th-century attitude towards artificial humans. And it is Gothic Romanticism in that it describes a mystic process in which a psychically unstable poet goes crazy and commits suicide in the end. The fact that it has been interpreted in so various ways is largely due to the unsettling narrative strategy that Hoffmann employs so masterfully. It leaves completely undecided whether the night sandman taking shape as Coppelius/Coppola is a real being within the fiction or just a vision of the psychically unstable poet. Likewise, it remains an open question whether Olimpia is a lifeless machine, a product of pure science, or a demonic being that has been created with the help of supernatural powers, and in which the features of man and machine are amalgamated. The intertwining of the machine myth and the Gothic shows itself as a complicated interrelation between creator and creature. Olimpia has two fathers: Coppelius/Coppola and Spalanzani. The lawyer Coppelius and the barometer vendor Coppola are two versions of the sandman, a sinister character of European folklore who steals the eyes and souls of children. It is Coppelius who inserts the eyes stolen from Nathanael into Olimpia. The mechanical structure of the doll is designed by Professor Spalanzani, who is a fictitious descendant of the Italian priest and scientist Lazzaro Spallanzani (1729–1799), a forerunner of manipulation in molecular biology, the first to perform *in vitro* fertilization. The name Spal(l)anzani does not sound good in this context, since what he achieved relates backward to the homunculus experiments of the alchemists and forwards to today's genetic engineering.

Getting involved in this demonic-mechanical world of the two creators/fathers, the flesh and blood poet goes through a process of mechanization, becoming more and more alienated from life. The first phase of this comes already in his childhood, when the lawyer Coppelius, in making alchemistic experiments together with Nathanael's father, wants to rob the boy's eyes and wriggles his body parts as if they were the faulty components of a mechanical toy (Hoffmann 1982, 188). Nathanael enters the second phase as a university student: under the influence of Coppola, who reminds him of Coppelius, he realizes that man is but a mechanical puppet, put at the mercy of higher powers both in everyday life and in art (Hoffmann 1982, 197-198). In the third phase, the living world is replaced by the lifeless (puppet-like, mechanical) world and *vice versa*. First, Nathanael's living bride, Clara, appears to him as a "lifeless automaton" (Hoffmann 1982, 200), then the lifeless automaton, Olimpia, as a living woman (Hoffmann 1982, 203-205). After the dismantling scene, he realizes that Olimpia is an "inanimate puppet" (Hoffmann 1982, 210). The peak of this phase is the tower scene, in which Nathanael, looking through the spyglass, sees his real bride, Clara, as a "wooden doll" and tries to hurl her from the steeple (Hoffmann 1982, 214). As he finds Coppola's spyglass again, the only possibility left to him is to commit suicide. In the fourth phase, Nathanael, having leaped from the tower, presumably falls apart into components and becomes thereby identical with Olimpia.

Olimpia, standing at the end of the road of mechanization (which at the same time is the path of perfection desired by Nathanael), is an artificial being, yet her design is so lifelike that her appearance matches that of a real 19th-century saloon lady:

We think she is [...] singularly statuesque and soulless. Her figure is regular, and so are her features, that can't be gainsaid; and if her eyes were not so utterly devoid of life, I may say, of the power of vision, she might pass for a beauty. She is strangely measured in her movements, they all seem as if they were dependent upon some wound-up clockwork. Her playing and singing have the disagreeably perfect, but insensitive timing of a singing machine, and her dancing is the same. We felt quite afraid of this Olimpia, and did not like to have anything to do with her; she seemed to us to be only acting like a living creature, and as if there was some secret at the bottom of it all (Hoffmann 1982, 208).

Sigmund, speaking here as an outside observer, cannot find any fault in Olimpia's look. The only things he dislikes and sharply criticizes are her empty gaze, mechanized movement, dance, and singing. Thus, the only way

to diminish the suspicious perfection of the doll is to debunk its hidden mechanism, i.e., to dismantle (mutilate) her. As Sarah Kofman aptly puts it: "Perfection is thus the sign that one is dealing with a machine which is mimicking life; an apparent perfection which both masks and reveals its connection with the powers of darkness, with the rigidity and coldness of death" (Kofman 1991, 148).

What makes Olimpia so elusive is that she has no clear identity even within the fictitious story. Due to the unsettling narration, the combination of the mechanical (lifeless) and the organic (living) can be regarded in different ways: as a manipulation of the human soul that can be explained rationally; as the result of a laboratory operation resorting to supernatural powers; as the real implantation of an organ (the eyes) into a mechanical structure; and as a mere symbolic construction. The intellectual uncertainty generated by this ambiguity—an important characteristic of Gothic fiction—opens various interpretative possibilities for the 20th-century artists to be discussed below.

II

The art movements emerging in the early 20th century (Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Expressionism) transcended the Romantic fear of the machine by trying to prove that the scientifically founded alliance of humans and machines can effectively advance the development of the world. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Carlo Carrà, Giorgio de Chirico, Hannah Höch, Max Ernst, and Oskar Schlemmer are some of the artists who believed in this effort.

The German painter, graphic artist, sculptor, and poet Max Ernst (1891–1976) became acquainted with Metaphysical Painting in his Dadaist period in Cologne. It was there that he created the series of lithographs *Fiat modes pereat ars* (*Let There Be Fashion, Down with Art*, 1919). The mannequin of the stone prints resembles the works of de Chirico, Carrà, and Francis Picabia. Ernst discovered some works by them depicting mannequins in the Italian periodical *Valori Plastici* in 1919 (Reisenfeld 1997; Spies 1991, 48–49). Some motifs of *Fiat modes pereat ars* evoke the atmosphere of metaphysical paintings, such as the tennis-court-like floor of the tailor's shop, the giant prosthetic limb, the calipers, the unusual shadows, or the floating dress (Benkő 2011, 212). Yet Ernst's mannequin is not surrounded by the metaphysical mystique so characteristic of the similar figures in the paintings of de Chirico, who was his role model at that time. Werner Spies even

talks about the grotesque transformation of de Chirico's motifs by Ernst (Spies 1991, 50). This grotesque approach fundamentally changes the mood of the events in the tailor's shop, too. A male figure performs a series of mechanical operations (undressing and mutilation) on a mannequin unable to resist, a passive, reified female figure, which can arouse a bad feeling in the beholder.

In the very choice of the topic, Ernst was inspired by Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, which was one of his favorite books. The first three lithographs might evoke the scene of the short story in which Nathanael enters Spalanzani's home and realizes that Olimpia, now torn by his quarreling creators, is only a void puppet or automaton. Ernst was particularly interested in the motifs of the laboratory and the artificial creatures on the verge between the human and the mechanical, which return in different forms in his collages. He also liked several Gothic works in which the creation of human beings plays a central role, such as Achim von Arnim's *Isabella of Egypt* (*Isabella von Ägypten*, 1812), Prosper Mérimée's *The Venus of Ille* (*La Venus d'Ille*, 1837), and Paul Wegener's movie *The Golem* (*Der Golem*, 1915) (Spies 1991, 228).

Ernst was largely influenced by Sigmund Freud, too. He learned Freud's theory of psychoanalysis before World War I, as a university student, when he read *The Interpretation of Dreams* (*Die Traumdeutung*, 1900) and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*, 1905) (Spies 1991, 49). *Fiat modes pereat ars* might also have been inspired by Freud's *The Uncanny*, though this is an uncertain assumption because Freud's essay was published in the autumn of the same year, 1919. The essay relies on Hoffmann's short story in explaining and justifying the notion of the uncanny, but it focusses on Nathanael rather than on Olimpia. Ernst utilizes an important motif that Freud ignores when dealing with the problem. Freud claims that the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) is caused by the unexpected and frightening recurrence of something that was once familiar (*heimlich*). He relies on Schelling's definition, according to which "unheimlich nennt man alles, was im Geheimnis, im Verborgnen, in der Latenz bleiben sollte und hervorgetreten ist" ("everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light") (Schelling 1857, 649; Freud 1976, 623). In his exposition of the experience of the uncanny, Freud identifies two different but not separable sources thereof: repressed childhood complexes and primitive beliefs thought to be overcome. Towards the end of the essay, Freud unites these two types in a single conclusion: "Our conclusion could then be stated thus: an uncanny experience

occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (Freud 1976, 639). In effect, Freud detects a clear example of this dual experience in Hoffmann's short story. On the one hand, Nathanael's primitive beliefs about the sandman are thought to be overcome, yet they become confirmed again, while on the other hand, his fear of losing his eyes expresses a childhood castration fear caused by the punishing father.

Much has already been written about the significance as well as the shortcomings and distortions of Freud's famous interpretation (Masschelein 2011). What is important here is that Freud deliberately pushes the figure of Olimpia into the background so that he can ignore the uncanny that stems from the intellectual uncertainty induced by wax dolls and humanoid automata. His Vienna colleague Ernst Jentsch gave a detailed analysis of this phenomenon in his 1906 paper *Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen* (Jentsch 1906, 195-198, 203-205). Freud rejects Jentsch's view at the beginning of his essay (Freud 1976, 624-625, 627), for it does not fit his universal conception of the *Unheimlich*, meant to underpin the role of the unconscious (Kofman 1991, 128-132). He disregards the fact that Hoffmann's narration indirectly questions the overall concept of the human, too, in that it generates intellectual uncertainty as to where the border lies between the real and the imaginary, as well as between the animate and the inanimate (Kofman 1991, 132-141, 141-144). Remarkably, in another passage of the essay, Freud himself mentions the blurring of the boundary between reality and imagination as one of the uncanny motifs (Freud 1976, 636).

Apart from the question of whether or not *Fiat modes pereat ars* could have been directly inspired by *The Uncanny*, Ernst's Dadaist works show the influence of some Freudian notions, which Freud develops in his earlier writings, too, such as the fear of death, the repetition compulsion, the repression of sexual desires, narcissistic love, etc. These, however, are phenomena that all appeared in early Gothic fiction, mostly as fantastic motifs. Freud was the first to remove these problems from the realm of the fantastic, to subject them to scientific investigation in his theory of psychoanalysis, and to demonstrate that they are part of everyday life (Todorov 1973, 160-161). It can be said, then, that Surrealism, Gothic fiction, and psychoanalysis each had an impact on Ernst's work.

Fiat modes pereat ars, consisting of a title page (Fig. 1) and eight plates, appeared first as a complete series at Schlömling Verlag in Cologne (in 1920 the individual prints came out separately). Its title, which praises fashion

as against art, can only be interpreted as irony, since the prints definitely do not put mode on a pedestal, nor do they show the stereotypical ideal of a woman. On the contrary, the tailor's dismountable mannequin destroys this ideal and deprives it of its characteristic attributes. The face, the body, and the clothing lack any plasticity, we see abstract geometric forms instead. Composed of such forms, the mannequin is a torso already in its initial state of perfection and finishes as a collection of disjointed trunk and limbs in an angular, bottomless, empty form imitating a box.

It is the first three lithographs that show the dismantling of Olympia. The strongly geometric plates depict two figures in a tailor's shop: a fully dressed tailor with his tools (yarn, calipers, clothes box) and a female-shaped mannequin and its components (clothes, shoes, detachable limbs, screws). On Plate I, the tailor removes the mannequin's right arm, destroying its abstract perfection (Fig. 2). On Plate II, he takes off the clothes, thereby annihilating the femininity of the mannequin and transforming it into an abstract, impersonal, substitutable object (Fig. 3). On Plate III, titled as *Letzte kresktion*, the completely truncated and dismembered mannequin of the already absent tailor is about to get into the box (Fig. 4).

This kind of destruction can be interpreted in different ways. First, it fits the Dadaist idea of demolishing art: the artist, appearing here in the mask of the tailor, destroys both the human and craftsmanship, but this is a creative process at the same time (Reisenfeld 1997). Second, the deprivation of the mannequin of its feminine, indeed, human, attributes can indicate the rejection of mode and the stereotypes associated with it (Benkő 2011, 212). Third, the reification and truncation of the human body might refer to aberrant sexual desires and death, and in this sense, the destruction can be linked back both to Gothic literary tradition and to Freudian psychoanalysis.

III

The German painter, sculptor, stage designer, and choreographer Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943) was a prominent member of the Bauhaus school. His mechanic "art figures" are abstract entities representing the forms of human behavior. They also express Schlemmer's own experiences of several art movements such as Futurism, Constructivism, Dadaism, and Metaphysical Painting (Benkő 2011, 223). In his attempt to create an ideal type of person, Schlemmer wants to combine these movements with German Romanticism. He draws inspiration from several authors who became important

representatives of Gothic Romanticism with their artificial human figures (among other things): Kleist, Jean Paul, Brentano, and Hoffmann (Wick 2000, 263). He develops his idea of the “art figure” in the essay *Man and Art Figure* (*Mensch und Kunstfigur*, 1925). The term itself is borrowed from Brentano’s short story *The Tale of Gockel, Hinkel, and Gackeliah* (*Märchen von Gockel, Hinkel, und Gackeleia*, 1838), in which *Kunstfigur* refers to a mechanically moved puppet (Schober 1993, 343). But the essay highlights the importance of Kleist’s marionette and Hoffmann’s automaton as well:

The endeavor to free man from his physical bondage and to heighten his freedom of movement beyond his native potential resulted in substituting for the organism the mechanical human figure (*Kunstfigur*): the automaton and the marionette. E. T. A. Hoffmann extolled the first of these, Heinrich von Kleist the second. [...] Possibilities are extraordinary in light of today’s technological advancements: precision machinery, scientific apparatus of glass and metal, the artificial limbs developed by surgery, the fantastic costumes of the deep-sea diver and the modern soldier, and so forth. [...] The artificial human figure (*Kunstfigur*) permits any kind of movement and any kind of position for as long time as desired. [...] An equally significant aspect of this is the possibility of relating the figure of natural “naked” Man to the abstract figure, both of which experience, through this confrontation, an intensification of their peculiar natures (Schlemmer 1987, 33-35).

Though the passage might suggest that Kleist’s marionette and Hoffmann’s automaton are equally significant for Schlemmer, his conception is closer to Kleist’s. In *The Sandman*, the doll strikes Sigmund, the external observer, as frightful or scary with the markedly uncanny qualities of its shape and movement: it is “statuesque,” “soulless,” “strangely measured,” “disagreeably perfect,” a “singing [and dancing] machine” (Hoffmann 1982, 208). In Kleist’s essay *On the Marionette Theatre* (*Über das Marionetten-theater*, 1810), however, Herr C... finds the ideal form of human movement in that of a marionette that “would never be self-conscious” and is “antigrav”. He discovers “grace” in the dance of the lifeless puppet as well as in the dance performed by “unfortunate” people having “mechanical legs” (Kleist 2012).

Accordingly, in Schlemmer’s total theatre the actors and actresses are not characters with feelings and emotions but mechanic instruments wearing metallic masks and surrounded by a mechanically structured space with abstract, moveable scenic elements. As a result, stage action becomes an automatic process void of any narration.

Schlemmer's piece *The Figural Cabinet* (*Das figurale Kabinett*) is based on Hoffmann's *The Sandman*. First performed in 1922 (Schlemmer 1987, 48-50), it enacts an abstract metaphysical painting, a grotesque vision figuring Master Spalanzani as a tempter and the doll Olympia in the form of a female-shaped barometer (Fig. 5). The metaphysical "laboratory" is a large, bizarre amalgam, in which various body parts living their own lives are mingled with machine components. The world presented here is of dual character: its elements are material and conceptual, concrete and abstract, natural and artificial, visual, and acoustic. As Schlemmer himself puts it in his commentary: "Half shooting gallery—half *metaphysicum abstractum*. Medley, i.e., variety of sense and nonsense, methodized by Color, Form, Nature, and Art; Man and Machine, Acoustics and Mechanics." (Schlemmer 1987, 48) Also, he makes clear references to Hoffmann's Olympia with the motifs of the eyes and the clockwork: "the rainbow eye lights up," "an eye glows electrically," "ball becomes pendulum; pendulum swings; clock runs" (Schlemmer 1987, 48). Like in *The Sandman*, the action points towards a bad outcome, complete madness and suicide, but this version is different from the Romantic story because now it is Spalanzani who must die. The metaphysical Master commits suicide, "shooting himself in the head, and dying a thousand deaths from worry about the function of the functional" (Schlemmer 1987, 49). That is, he voluntarily kills himself as he realizes that he cannot meet the criteria of perfect mechanisticness. All in all, however, it would be wrong to evaluate the 20th-century technical activity of an automaton-maker coming from Romanticism as the triumph of mechanics. Rather, as Thomas Schober points out, it has to do with the debate between the two schools within the Bauhaus, the sacral-expressionist and the functionalist, a debate in which Schlemmer takes a middle position. With the bizarre, technicized amalgam of *The Figural Cabinet*, Schlemmer, on the one hand, gets rid of the demonic idea of the machine that belongs to Romanticism. He does not share the technical euphoria, on the other hand, since the technical miracle ends with the Master's death (Schober 1991, 348-350).

IV

American contemporary photo artist and film director Cindy Sherman (1954–) became renowned for her fictitious self-portraits in the early 1980s, as a member of the post-conceptual generation of artists. In her photo series, she poses in the most extreme female roles and characters, using different settings, makeups, wigs, prostheses, and clothes, which give the pictures an erotic, horroristic, or art historic charge.

Sherman's art can be related to the type of the late Avant-garde which draws inspiration from the tradition of Gothic fiction. According to Catherine Spooner, "contemporary artists working in what could be described as a Gothic idiom, including Cindy Sherman, Rachel Whiteread, Douglas Gordon, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Jane and Louise Wilson, and Gregory Crewdson, are concerned not with spiritual transcendence and historical nostalgia, but with the themes of haunting and imprisonment found in the Gothic novel" (Spooner 2006, 16). Specifically, to Sherman, Spooner claims that her works "play on the characteristic Gothic tension between bodily disgust and its displacement into surface 'trappings'" (Spooner 2006, 16). At the same time, it can be said that Sherman also likes to re-create the typical frightening elements of Gothic fiction grotesquely, emphasizing the plain materiality of the real or fake human body and body parts in horrifying scenarios.

In her untitled, numbered photos published from the early 1990s, Sherman increasingly disappears from the pictures and represents role plays by using various Gothic elements: deformed dolls and medical mannequins in horroristic spaces, terrifying masks, body paints, and body prostheses. She combines the image of the traditional play dolls with the drastic destruction of the conventional attributes of femininity. Her dolls express the fear of losing individuality and getting reified and have their own narratives that enable them to withstand the stereotypization generated by the media.

Sherman's grotesque dolls spectacularly mediate between the Gothic living dead doll of the Romantic tradition and the postmodern cyborg, which is a fusion of the machine and the living organism. The "Gothic mechanisms" make their gender largely uncertain. Living dead dolls always have some feminine traits, yet they cannot be unmistakably identified as girls or women, while cyborgs proclaim that gender roles are a matter of choice, interchangeable, or even completely neutral. It is not by chance that both have their backgrounds in queer theory, which, due to its transgender nature, stands against fashion, definition, and the politics of identity (Jagose 2003).

Sherman's *Untitled #302*, made in 1994, is one of her works that can be interpreted as a late Avant-garde variation on the story of Olimpia (Fig. 6). The print, which suggests biological manipulation, depicts a living dead doll with horror movie makeup, twisted limbs, and the head of another living dead woman in its empty, organless chest. *#344* from 1999 shows the very act of violence in the vision of a man with a hammer in his hand (Fig. 7). The doll is fabricated of pieces, and between its legs there lies the bloody

torso of a just-born or slain baby. This is a grotesque allusion to the parallel between womb and grave, for both dolls go down in the toilet bowl during the brutal act (Sturz 2000). #342, published in the same year, displays the result of the truncation: body parts scattered on the ground (Fig. 8). The photos raise serious moral questions, even though it is clear that, however horrifying they might be, they depict only skillfully jointed and painted medical mannequins.

Sherman's dolls, proclaiming the interchangeability or neutrality of gender roles, induce a feeling that cannot be described by the Freudian concept of the *Unheimlich*, for it is impossible to interpret it in terms of the dualisms nature/culture, male/female, living/dead, uncanny/familiar. A much more appropriate concept is the one introduced by Julia Kristeva, *abjection*. Stemming from Latin *abiectus*, it refers to everything that is socially unacceptable, to that which strikes us as disapproved, repellent, abominable, squalid. As Kristeva puts it: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva 1982, 4) The abject is repulsive because it is something that is on the border between being and nonbeing and whose content is so abhorrent that we try to ban it from our thoughts. Kristeva also explains the distinction between abjection and *Unheimlichkeit*: "Essentially different from 'uncanniness,' more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (Kristeva 1982, 5). The abject, then, can be any phenomenon that, by its hybrid nature, evokes the experience of repugnance on the border of identity and non-identity and serves as an expression of unbearable things, ideas, and emotions that we would like to remove from ourselves. But it is not simply disgusting; it is captivating, too. We cannot bear its sight, yet we are unable to get rid of it (Kelly 2007, 144).

The anatomical mannequins in Sherman's untitled photos refer back to the *unheimlich* world of *The Sandman* only indirectly, through the clichés of the Gothic tradition. An important difference is that whereas in Hoffmann the dualities resulting from a creative and destructive process can be explained with help of demonic science or psychology, Sherman's figures are completely void of demonic magic, but they draw on the achievements of contemporary medicine (plastic surgery, implantation, genetic manipulation). Due to their hybrid, intermediate character, Sherman's dolls unsettle the dualities natural/artificial, human/machine, living/dead, and push the normative limits to the extreme. By deliberately violating the notions of

identity and social order, they are often repugnant, disgusting, abhorring. The horrifying effect of Sherman's photos cannot be explained any longer by the Freudian *Unheimlich*, which presupposes something *Heimlich*. On the contrary, the scenes represented in these pictures are shockingly unbearable and provoke abjection, for they contradict our established system of knowledge and experience.

Conclusion

My analysis has shown how Hoffmann's Olympia has inspired works of the 20th-century Avant-garde artists. All these variations of Olympia feed on the dark, thrilling atmosphere of the tradition of Gothic fiction. Max Ernst, Oskar Schlemmer, and Cindy Sherman each use in an individual, grotesque approach one of the favorite topoi of 19th-century Gothic literature, the figure of an artificially made person, whose creation leads to terrible consequences. The reason why *The Sandman* can be so important for them is that, while it successfully combines Enlightenment beliefs about androids and the Romantic ideas concerning the creation of artificial humans, it also brings up psychological problems that point way beyond the fantastic, and would first be scientifically investigated by Freudian psychoanalysis: the past as a place of terror haunting the present, the return of childhood traumas leading to madness or death, human's being imprisoned in their own fears, or the phenomena of narcissistic love and aberrant sexuality (cf. Spooner 2006, 7-30).

The questions that the artists are mostly occupied by in looking at the figure of Olympia are those of the relation between creator and creature, machine and the human, the artificial and the organic. Yet there are sharp demarcation lines between the Romantic, early Avant-garde, and late Avant-garde interpretations of Olympia. In Romanticism, the human-machine results from a manipulation of science employing devilish practices. In the early Avant-garde, it represents top mechanics that questions the idealistic image of the human. In the late Avant-garde, it is the mechanical-biological construction of self-sufficient science and as such a forerunner of the trans-human era.

It is the metaphysical laboratory of Schlemmer's *The Figural Cabinet* that refers back most clearly to German Gothic Romanticism. But, for Schlemmer, the uncanny feeling generated by automata is pushed into the background by the delight in the victory of mechanisms, a delight that is far from unmarred, however. Apparently, Schlemmer is ambivalent towards the main

figures in his work, Spalanzani, the creator, and Olimpia, the creature. In the figure of Olimpia, grotesquely stylized to a barometer, he celebrates the perfection of a mechanical structure, perceiving it as the archetype of the players of the Bauhaus theatre. But he at the same time questions the unconditional trust in technics: what Spalanzani creates is a chaotic cabinet, and the Master commits suicide in the end.

Ernst admittedly draws heavily on the tradition of Gothic fiction. His *Fiat modes pereat ars*, a work of his early Avant-garde period, evokes the dismantling scene of *The Sandman*. The mannequin in the print titled *Letzte kresktion* distorts Olimpia in a way that anticipates Sherman's horrifying medical mannequins. First, as the jubilation of mode ("fiat modes") turns into rejection, the dismantled mannequin becomes the critique of the plastic icon embodying the stereotypical ideal of womanhood. Second, the print implicitly suggests to today's beholder that not only dolls but human beings too can be reified, and the annihilation of sexual character and personal attributes leads to the destruction of human nature.

The grotesque and horrifying medical mannequins in Sherman's untitled photos evoke the figure of Olimpia through the associations offered by Gothic clichés and role-plays. Combining the organic and the mechanical, these mangled dolls are, on the one hand, reactions to the discomfort caused by media constructions mingling the natural and the artificial in the US of the early 1990s. On the other hand, they are the forerunners of transhumanism: with their hybrid character, they unsettle the well interpretable dualities and thereby trigger the Gothic experience, not of the *Unheimlich*, but abjection.

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Zoltán Somhegyi*

The Past as a Springboard for Understanding the Present. Classical Motifs in Contemporary Art through Examples from the MENA Region and Asia

Abstract

The re-emergence of classical forms, motifs, and media in contemporary art is an exciting field of research. In this paper, through a series of case studies, I focus on carpets, calligraphy, and photography in the oeuvre of artists working in or originating from countries with a predominantly Muslim aesthetic heritage, to see how these novel pieces can contribute to our present understanding of aesthetics and thus a better understanding of our present.

Keywords

Past Forms in Contemporary Art, MENA Region and Asia, Carpet, Calligraphy, Photography

Introduction

“Nothing is harder to predict than the past”—this seemingly paradoxical affirmation comes from a paper by Cornelius Holtorf (2013, 434) which scrutinizes the aesthetic quality of “pastness” with questions of authenticity. In our present context of investigation, however, this statement may also be used to describe another curious feature of the past, i.e. that past forms, motifs, expressions, techniques, and media have complex modes of survival, revival, effect, and influence. In this sense, their unpredictability refers to the myriad possible ways of how they can re-emerge and be used for

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the artistic purposes of contemporary creation; sometimes even abused for making ideologically or politically motivated pieces. Parallel to this, we can also observe that not only is the re-emergence of the past hard to predict, but so is the reception of it. In other words, artistic investigation of classical forms and motifs is often met with a lack of interest, doubts, harsh criticism, etc.—the palette is broad.

Based on this, we can say that working with previous art forms, classical motifs, canonized ways of expression, and traditional techniques is often regarded as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be truly inspiring for artists—both intellectually and aesthetically rewarding for the public—to create new pieces of art that somehow revisit and re-interpret earlier subjects, techniques, forms, or media. On the other hand, this can also become a source of criticizing their work, “accusing” them of merely relying on past achievements and/or previous artistic results as a sort of shortcut to immediate (economic) success in the global art market.

This dilemma and the difficulties arising from it seem perhaps even stronger in the oeuvre of artists who work with forms and elements that derive from or are connected to Islamic art and culture; or the artists who originate from and who often are still working in countries and regions dominated by Muslim cultural traditions; artists who investigate the possible roles art and its production may have, especially when encountered with creative processes and techniques that come from other cultural areas. Therefore, as we will soon see, in many cases in which artists survey traditional motifs, classical objects, previous art forms or media in and through their works, then—frequently and simultaneously—such cases also could be considered as a survey of the encounter of temporally and geographically different cultural entities.

In the following sections, I investigate some further aspects and instances of these exciting questions with a special focus on the possible modes as well as functions and the functioning of past forms which appear in the contemporary art production of the aforementioned cultural region, i.e. in countries with a predominantly Muslim heritage and the works of artists originally from these lands—where some of them still live, whereas others now reside in other places. Nevertheless, as we will see, this latter detail—that is, whether these artists still work in their home country or not, outside of their original cultural context—will not necessarily have a qualitative impact on the artists’ ability to investigate the strength of their traditions through the re-emergence of earlier forms, motifs, and media in contemporary art production. In other words, remaining in one’s original context is not an automatic guarantee for a “successful” result; in fact, even the contrary is

sometimes true: leaving one's original context and directly encountering another tradition (for example an artist from the Middle East living in Europe or the USA) can be beneficial in the process of capturing, comparing, and getting inspired by the essence of various cultural realities; hence, they gain a better understanding of their proper tradition. Thus, the physical location of the artist (i.e. located in Cairo or New York) or their belonging to, for example, the Egyptian or American art scene or community, does not necessarily lower their capacity of being an authentic voice in investigating what they consider as their heritage, especially in an ever more globalized world.

I would thus like to show—through and with the help of a few thrilling examples from the works of contemporary artists analyzed as case studies—what we can learn about the nature of the re-emergence of previous forms of traditional creation from these art pieces. In addition, I would like to show how they can help us better understand some of the many opportunities that may arise with the creative use and re-interpretation of the past, without naturally claiming that these considerations should be considered in terms of a blanket concept that could be automatically applied to any artist who is inspired by past forms in any way.

My chosen cultural and geographical area of investigation is motivated not only by personal interest. I study this topic also because not much of this segment of contemporary art production has been analyzed in academic discourses of aesthetics so far. Such a lack of analyses also explains—in a chicken-and-egg-situation—why we have relatively less scholarly literature analyzing or quoting these inspiring works, compared to, for example, the classical artworks or the productions of Western artists from the same period. The artists of the selected region, including many of those quoted in this paper themselves, are well-known, also due to the popularity of their works in biennials, art fairs, museums, and private collections. Their works are often reproduced in art magazines, websites, art catalogs and books (including popularizing publications) which focus on recent art production and the art history of the region. Despite all of this, the theoretical analyses and academic aesthetic assessment of many of these projects are still relatively scarce in the scholarly context of contemporary aesthetics. This also explains why the Reader may find fewer references or quotes than “usual” in such texts, including some contexts to previous academic discussions of the works and considerations of other scholars. Thus, the present paper—without claiming to be in any way an absolute pioneer in this field, nevertheless—aims to solicit more discussions and scholarly publications in this area of research.

I propose the examination of three cases to show not only different examples and artists from various countries, but also to show different aspects, each of which I will trace in the works of select artists. These three cases are all relevant to the aforementioned questions, and the cultural area and framework mentioned earlier. Hence, I propose the case study of an object (carpet), an art form (calligraphy), and a medium (photography) in the works of six artists. We will see not only the various ways in which they can inspire contemporary creators but also how the new pieces can be applied to shed new light on the embedded potentials of classical forms. Some may find that the choice of these case studies (in textile art, calligraphy, and photography) to be very “trendy.” Nevertheless, I chose them not because they are “hot topics,” but because I found the questions raised by these cases to be among the most interesting, since they are representative figures of the region’s contemporary art production. What’s more, the chosen examples of artists and pieces contain another fascinating aspect that makes their investigation much more complex: they do not only re-visit classical objects, forms, or media, but they also show us the meeting of different artistic traditions and visual languages, which we can define as “Western” and “Eastern,” although such a definition may seem to be an oversimplification.

The Carpet

Starting with the carpet, as it is known, it is one of the most essential products of applied arts in many societies in North Africa, the Near and Middle East, and Central Asia, and its use is not only limited to its everyday household functions. It is also used very often for hospitality and even more importantly in a religious context. For the latter two, it is sufficient to remember the importance of carpets in the majlis—the carefully designed space of homes where guests are received—and in mosque interiors. For the aforementioned cultural encounters between the “East” and “West” and their curious manifestations and consequences, we can also remember how “oriental” carpets were used in Europe when they started to arrive to satisfy an increasing demand due to their popularity. As we learn from Steven Parissien (2009, 27), Near Eastern carpets were used in the 17th and 18th centuries as symbols of wealth and status, and displayed more typically on tables and walls, rather than on floors. They were also elevated so as to maintain cleanliness. Taking into account differences in climate, such as wet weather and mud which could destroy the precious carpets, such a display would have been more typical for Europe than for the countries of origin.

Therefore, the polyvalent opportunities of use and appearance of the carpet include different approaches based on cultural context. In this way, it is thus not surprising that the carpet has special importance in the geographical areas from North Africa through the Near and Middle East to Central Asia in the everyday and religious practices, and at the same time, in other parts of the world. It is an object appreciated—even when taken out of its original, both literal and metaphorical context—for its timeless beauty, intricate patterns, and flawless craftsmanship. In other words, the carpet becomes an item of aesthetic curiosity and an iconic object. In certain ways, it represents or even metonymically symbolizes the aforementioned regions from where it originates.

How and why does a carpet become particularly interesting? It becomes interesting when artists from these very lands turn to this object. The long history of a carpet's craftsmanship is also noteworthy, not only in the context of a study of the tradition itself but also in the opportunities embodied by a carpet for the apprehension of the relevance of the tradition today. My first example in this regard is the Iranian artist Samira Alikhanzadeh. In her works, the carpet might appear as a mere background element or some sort of supporting medium at first; however, after a more careful observation, it emerges from its seemingly secondary role and becomes an integral part of the complex investigation pursued in and through her works. In a series titled "Persian Carpets," most of which were created in 2009–2010, we can see a traditional carpet embedded with a geometric pattern and a set of small and precisely placed fragments and shards of a mirror. But in front of it, there is another layer of plexiglass on which an old found family portrait photo is reproduced. Therefore, Alikhanzadeh's work is composed of three elements, two of which are already existing pieces of (applied) art: the traditional carpet and the family portrait, which in this case is printed on plexiglass. Nevertheless, these three elements will not only merge into one unique work of art, where the individual pieces lose their singularity like in a traditional collage. Despite being "melt" in one novel artwork, we may observe a curious countertendency: the elements mutually increase their distinct role, importance, and meaning. The art piece thus investigates various layers of memory, the act of remembrance, it also confronts these processes through various temporal layers represented by the singular compositional elements placed on different physical layers (Somhegyi 2014, 60–61). The "deepest"—i.e. background—layer is that of the carpet itself, which refers to and evokes the centuries-old cultural tradition of the region, even if they are not necessarily centuries-old carpets

themselves. The mid-20th century family photos naturally evoke the recent past. So, the evoked past confronts the third layer, contemporary reality, in several ways. First, this confrontation is manifested through the fact that the photos are not shown in their original materiality of the actual paper-print photographs, but reproduced in a typically contemporary material (plexiglass) and technology (the printing on it). Second, the confrontation of the present with the previous temporal layers is efficiently incentivized by the insertion of the mirror shreds that inescapably triggers an encounter with the (recent) past. At the same time, the encounter will necessarily be only partial—just like the understanding of the past—given the fragmented mirror that only reflects small mosaics of the visitor. Yet, the work has another aspect too, more social and political. As we learn from Linda Komaroff's catalog entry from an exhibition held in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the chosen photos from the mid-20th century depict the first generation of women who were free to be shown uncovered, i.e. without a hijab, in public spaces after the obligatory uncovering of women issued by Reza Shah Pahlavi (Komaroff 2015, 14). Thus, it is easily understandable why the placing of these images in the forefront—"forefront" in both senses of the word—may have particular relevance when a contemporary viewer looks at them and confronts various temporal realities.

For Samira Alikhanzadeh, the carpet served to provide a broader historic perspective, a "temporal" background evoking tradition in its contemporaneity. The traditional patterns appear on carpets created approximately during the same period as the photographs. It is relevant in our present contemporaneity to contextualize the main subject-matter of her artistic investigation. This will change in my second example in Faig Ahmed's series created mainly between the years 2007 and 2013. The elaboration and re-visitation of the carpet in itself will determine the modes in which the artist confronts various artistic traditions, urging the observer to reflect on how they can mutually shed light on each other's qualities and pertinence. Although not made as a combination of physically different elements, these special carpets will stand for several traditions. The Azerbaijani artist took his region's wonderful rugs as a departure point, but he inserted significant distortions, modifications, and additions in the genuine patterns in his creations. This way, the appearance of the carpet radically changes. From a distant view, it may even seem that an original and classical carpet was somehow overpainted with another motif. But from a closer viewpoint, we discover that all the novel elements are truly embedded in the work, i.e. created in the same way as the rest of the piece. For instance, in one work

from the series we can observe a large homogenous yellow spot flooding down from the top as if it were a piece of action painting. In another one, graffiti is over-imposed on the central part of the carpet. Meanwhile in a third carpet, only the original colors of the pattern remain, the forms are completely melted and float together as if it was an abstract expressionist work. Sometimes the work reflects a contemporary computer manipulation of images and the effects of digital technology, like in a piece of which approximately half of it is pixelated, i.e. the classical motif is hardly graspable as it is reduced to large-size pixels that allow only a very vague tracing of the pattern. In some cases, Faig Ahmed created proper three-dimensional installations by cutting a carpet with classical motifs according to the main elements of its patterns, and then these disassembled parts of the original carpet were carefully arranged in various places of the space, hence the motifs float and fill the great volume of the room. From this we can see that the artist is interested in pairing distant artistic traditions and forms of expressions: e.g. action painting includes—and even emphasizes—the role of randomness that is completely alien to the meticulously planned setting of the motifs of traditional carpets. Graffiti, with its focus on leaving a mark or a personal sign—including less respected examples, even those deprived of particular artistic values, made just for the sake of tagging—is again placed in strong antagonism with the essence of oriental carpets since their anonymous creators often focus on technical perfection. Similarly, the idea of digital image-manipulation and virtual worlds is not something the creators of carpets would need to use in their very material craftsmanship. And lastly, the strong three-dimensionality of the disassembled carpet that thus fills the space is also in conflict with the emphasis of the two-dimensionality of the carpet—not only as an object but also through its motif; it traditionally does not even aim for the illusion of spatial depth. As mentioned above, Faig Ahmed chooses to confront radically different art forms within one unique piece. At the same time, we would miss the core of the works if we thought of them as mere visual jokes or as cheap reflections on “cultural clashes” between the “West” and “East” or as between the individualistic and self-expression-driven Western culture and the modest and honest collective production of the Eastern lands. Instead of reducing the strengths of the works by stripping them to these simplified approaches, we should interpret them as critical evaluations and critical analyses, where “critical” does not mean a disapproving and negative judgment, but rather a profound investigation of the essence of the different traditions by demonstrating exactly how much the specific artforms are bound to the cultural context from

which they stem. It is not a superficial anti-globalist lament, but a complex aesthetic project demonstrating and supporting the idea that foreign and/or exotic influences cannot be automatically and uncritically accustomed in other contexts.

Calligraphy

My next two examples in which calligraphy plays a crucial role are quite similar to what we have seen before, that is to the use and role of carpets in the creation of contemporary works, as well as in the ways a carpet appeared and what references it could establish. Hence, the pattern of my investigation will be parallel. Just like the carpets above, calligraphy is not only a well-known and fascinating art form but also one that is often primarily associated with the art production of countries with a predominantly Muslim heritage—although naturally, calligraphy plays a fundamental role in other cultures too, such as China and Japan. Analogously to carpets, its application is very broad, and we can find examples of its use in a religious context (holy inscriptions in mosque interiors) as well as in secular functions (e.g. the imperial *tughra*, i.e. an official calligraphic signature of the emperor) again. Its popularity can be illustrated, among others, by the fact that in the 19th century Historic Arabic letters or forms that resembled Arabic script were randomly added to decorative glassworks as elements of ornament, of which some of the best-known examples come from the workshops of Philippe-Joseph Brocard in Paris and of Lobmeyr in Vienna.

In many of the works by the globally renowned Shirin Neshat, a leading artist originally from Iran but living in the USA, calligraphic inscription is a fundamental element. In different series, the recurrent areas of her artistic investigation include convoluted issues in her country of origin and the Muslim world in general related to women, society, and religion as well as questions of personal and cultural identity, belonging, strength, and determination. In most cases, she also challenges the often superficial and prejudice-driven notions and partial understandings of the intricate realities of these countries and the people living in them. So, her works depict, question, criticize, and also call for change, although these are all equally directed towards her “Eastern” and “Western” audiences. Or, as we can read in Saeb Eigner’s description of an earlier piece by the artist titled “Speechless”: “Neshat is challenging the constraints imposed on women in her native Iran, while also playing on Western fears and preconceptions about Islam” (Eigner 2015, 178). In many cases, the departure point is a large-scale black and white

photograph of a human figure emerging from an undefined and deep dark background, where uncovered body parts are densely overwritten with beautiful calligraphic writing. The written text can have different sources, including poetry or the personal reflections of the model. The portrait photo itself can feature only certain parts of the face, focus on the body through a close-up, or can show either the entire or only the upper half of the body—like in her series titled “The home of my eyes,” first shown in the YARAT Contemporary Art Centre in Baku, Azerbaijan, in its inaugural exhibition in 2015. This very series in Baku had some particularities that make it especially noteworthy for our present investigation: the more than fifty people portrayed in the works represented the diversity of the population in her country, people aged from two to eighty-years-old and who come from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. However, instead of simply showing them one by one, next to each other as in a classical exhibition display, a large part of the series was arranged on an 11-meter high wall, thus becoming not merely a presentation of individual pieces but something that is considerable and enjoyable as one unique installation. Their coherence was evident not only through the way they were displayed but also through the recurrent pictorial and compositional solutions at the level of the singular works themselves. The portrayed figures all held their hands closed in front of them, though this gesture did not appear forced or as a disturbingly repetitive pose. Rather, it appeared more like a common connecting point between the otherwise very varied models. This focus on gesture and its emphasized visual role can also be explained by the classical influences on the artist. For instance, El Greco’s iconic figures and their expressive posture is often quoted as a source of inspiration for the impressive portraits by Shirin Neshat and the process of composing their posture. Coming back to the calligraphic text, however, the artist interviewed her models and asked them what the concept “home” meant to them, as well as about their ideas on their cultural identity. Their answers were then written over the pictures. This also explains the observation that we can read in the artist statement by Shirin Neshat in the catalog of the exhibition: “[...] recently I have come to discover how my portrait tend to expand beyond simply conveying an individual’s emotional state, and often function as visual narratives of a culture” (Nasser-Khadiivi, Ismail 2015, 45). Therefore, akin to what we saw in our previous examples by Samira Alikhanzadeh, the works have various elements merged into one: the original portrait—this time created by an artist of her contemporaries—the calligraphic inscription, and the (even if indirect) classical sources of inspiration for the figures, their postures, and their

arrangement. Although they compose the elements, none of them is separable from the final work without harming its integrity. Calligraphy does then not simply complete but truly does complement the work—given the differences in the nature of visual and textual media. What is not expressible through the mere photograph can be further articulated through writing.

As anticipated above, the variety of the modes of influence and application of carpets in contemporary art has a similar range to that of calligraphy, i.e. the spectrum spans from being an essential and indispensable component, like in the cases of Samira Alikhanzadeh and Shirin Neshat, to becoming a unique element that stands in itself and that nevertheless confronts traditions and examines their modes of expressions, like in the works by Faig Ahmed. Likewise, my other example, Simeen Farhat, the Pakistani artist living in the USA and working predominantly with letters, has a similar approach, focusing on the pure art form in itself. She chooses poems and texts that inspire her from various languages, including English, German, Urdu, and Farsi, and then “translates” the text into a dynamically whirling set of letters cast in resin. The words become hard or impossible to read since the calligraphy is transformed by the “translation” into an independent sculpture of its own. The text thus expands into space. Through a change of form and media, we can also observe a shift of status: “the art of writing” (calligraphy) or beautiful writing (*kallos* + *graphein*) will become something different: a novel art created through the means of the classical “art of writing,” i.e. in this change of dimensions a decorative visual form turns into a piece of fine arts. In other words, it becomes an artwork of inspiring ambiguity, because the formerly readable and decipherable motifs turn into an abstract ensemble that visualizes the strength of the beauty of writing; it also refers to the power of the content of the chosen text. The powerful and sometimes even almost “exploding” appearance of the artworks only reinforces our perception of them as pieces that aim to highlight the power of thought—recorded and mediated through the text—instead of merely focusing on the classical beauty or beautification of the letters and writing. This latter aspect, the visual dynamization of the text is crucial also when we learn that many of the original writings—the ones that are transformed into the sculptures—themselves often describe strong feelings, emotional turbulences, and issues related to the freedom of thought and speech. When in her artistic statement we read, “my modest attempt is to translate their (*i.e. of the original texts*) poetic dynamism into visual energy” (Farhat, no date), we can interpret this attempt as a re-visitation of the potentials of the classical forms of calligraphy. Extending the calligraphic inscriptions into space

and transforming them into novel artworks becomes at the same time an expansion and re-interpretation of the category and form of calligraphy itself.

Photography

Compared to the previous two cases—carpet and calligraphy—the patterns of investigation as well as the use and re-emergence of my third example, that of photography, will be now a bit different, partly because this technique and the artistic medium does not stem from the wider region's tradition. Photography can be therefore definitely considered an external influence. It can be defined as a Western invention, but not only since it was physically invented in Western Europe, but also because it is in a way a sort of culmination of the strive for a reality that motivated Western artists since the late Middle Ages in great part. Despite this however photography arrived relatively quickly and early in North Africa, in the Near East, and the Middle East, mainly through the early documentary photographers, both semi-amateur travelers-discoverers and professional artists-photographers who, for example, produced series of landscapes, cityscapes, and renderings of classical ruins and monuments of particular art and architecture of historical value for the interested commissioners and "Western" public in general. Naturally, soon after the first "visiting" photographers, some started to stay longer and open studios in the larger cities; locally born and trained photographers followed their example too. Among the first commissions, besides the aforementioned documentary landscapes and cityscapes, one of the often recurring tasks were taking portraits, of which the most popular and up until today perhaps the most fascinating ones are the hand-painted photographs and the series of staged portraits, i.e. that shows the model in richly elaborated settings, in front of a painted background and with additional elements.

It is thus not surprising that contemporary photographers in or originally from the region often refer to the history of the medium in their works, and not only in general but also in particular to the regional and local history and studio practices of it. We can compare two forms of this case in my last two examples. The first example is Youssef Nabil, who was born in Egypt but lives in the USA. He started to show his hand-painted photographs in the late 1990s. They have soon secured international fame for him as well as popularity among specialized collectors and those generally interested in art too. Curiously in his case, the reference to and engagement with the past is mani-

fested not only in the choice of topics or at the level of revisiting previous topics and motifs, but the past is also pursued through the revoking of a not-much-in-use-anymore technique: the coloring of photographs by hand. The classical technique was often used not only on regular photographs but also for the creation of movie posters made from film stills, especially during the peak of Egyptian cinema in the 1950s—a period and a cinematic world that fascinates the artist, which we can read about on his profile in the Barjeel Art Foundation’s website, for example (Barjeel Art Foundation, no date). The somehow timeless and idealized appearance of celebrities of that era provides an ideal opportunity to investigate our present period, and not simply in comparing today’s celebrities to earlier ones but also in the ways we celebrate and commemorate fame today. From this point of view a curious example is the portrait of Omar Sharif from 2006, the renowned Egyptian actor who connects eras and cinematic worlds throughout his career. However, as mentioned above, what inspires the observer of Youssef Nabil’s works is not only his choice of subjects—that naturally reveals much of his interest and preferences—but also the additional and subtle references to the history of art in general and of the medium in particular, of which one of the most intriguing examples is his work titled “My Frida” (1996). The photo is a re-staging of the well-known self-portrait by the Mexican artist, except the model is the artist Ghada Amer. Through the complex relation and the aesthetic link established between the three artists (Nabil, Kahlo, and Amer) Nabil manages to pay homage to not only the two women but also to the often forgotten or anonymous photographers of the classical technique who nevertheless immortalized thousands of individuals (in early family photographs from the first decades of the medium) and also the stars of cinema. It is just an extra twist and both an intellectually and aesthetically inspiring feature that the works oscillate between the media and techniques, or as the artist said in a 2012 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist: “[...] I decided to hand color my black-and-white photographs using the same old photography technique, which would still keep this old cinematic feeling that I liked in the black and white. I also wanted my work to be seen as paintings” (Obrist 2014). He expressed this duality regarding the media in another statement: “It is not the photography, but the paintings that attract me. I paint with my photographs” (Amirsadeghi *et al.* 2009, 228). This oscillation then adds further layers for the interpretation of the pieces.

“My work is not for the intellectuals”—claims the London-based Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj, in whose works we can see a different direction of engaging with the (recent) past of the medium of photography. Hajjaj

wanted to refer to the fact that through his fascinating, visually mesmerizing and brightly colorful, works he aims at reaching out to everyone, and not only to those specialized in contemporary art—a modest affirmation, which we can also interpret as an anti-art-establishment proclamation, one that we can listen to in a recent video interview with the artist (Hajjaj, 2020). When observing his works, we can understand how and why it is easy to get entangled by the pieces and why many can relate to them, on different levels: the artist blends various cultural and artistic influences, motifs, and elements in a visually captivating image that takes its inspiration from traditional Islamic artistic heritage as well as Western forms and movements of art, especially that of Pop Art and popular culture. However, exactly because of the multiple references and the multiple ways of re-using these references (even if in some cases indirectly), his works are a curious subject also for “intellectuals”—despite his opinion above—who are eager to trace these influences. The portraits show his friends, colleagues, musicians, and artists dressed in harsh-colored dresses or—as we can read in a recent text on the website of the Yossi Milo Gallery that represents him—“in outfits with colors, patterns and shapes that evoke the vibrancy of Moroccan souks with contemporary detailing more common to east London’s hipsters or south London’s fashionable crowd” (Yossi Milo Gallery, 2020). When we add to this that the photographs are often shown in a special frame designed by the artist that is filled with products including canned food, we can easily understand that he aims to revive and also critically examine a series of legacies: (1) his home country’s vibrant colors, (2) the repetitive patterns, abstract forms and stylized organic motifs of Islamic art and design, the different periods of Western art history including (3) Orientalism and (4) Pop Art, and also—and here we have a similar tendency of paying tribute to the craftsmanship as we saw in the case of Youssef Nabil—(5) the tradition of staged studio photography that was, and in certain cities still is, very common and popular, even if less and less practiced because of the spread of digital technology. All this is pursued however in a form that is “accessible” for a possibly very broad audience, given the multiple levels, i.e. on one level, we could enjoy only the sheer visuality of the images, on others we could focus on the satirical signs pointing at the ambiguities of globalization, while again other levels engage with the implicit complexities of references embedded in the works. One can thus decide which registers to apply and identify with, to interpret and enjoy the works. The pieces undeniably and actively use various forms and manifestations of traditions and thus contextualize their relevance and examine their actuality.

Concluding Remarks

Earlier I used the metaphor of a “double-edged sword” with regards to the fact that the re-visitation and elaboration of previous topics, motifs, media, and techniques may be problematic for some observers. It can be not only a source of inspiration but also a source of criticism. The artists need to prove and demonstrate their original contribution to the visual heritage that they are elaborating and re-interpreting. At the same time, however, after having seen the above examples, we can perhaps convert the metaphor and add further meaning to it by claiming that artists are sometimes even *required* to use a double-edged sword as they are “fighting” in two directions. On the one hand, they often need to persuade critics that their choice is “legitimate,” i.e. by showing that their pieces are not simply about a superficial reference to past motifs, elements, objects, forms of expressions, or media just for financial gain, achieved by exploiting the previous merit and/or the “exotic” lure of certain forms and appearances. On the other hand—and this is especially interesting if we think it over—in their works, artists demonstrate exactly the contemporary relevance of traditional forms through the aesthetic confrontation of temporally and culturally different elements. This is what explains, as we could also see above, that artists—inspired by earlier motifs and media and by investigating their possible ways of re-emergence; critical in great part as a result of these investigations—are often critical of the current state of culture, society, and politics, as well as with art and its infrastructure, and not necessarily only of their home land or in their country of origin, but on a global scale.

In this way the constant interest in and re-interpretation of the past will become an investigation of our own time too, or as Jale Erzen claimed: “The past, which is an unstable, unfixed, nonlinear accumulation of mnemonic traces is the foundation on which we build our identities; it is the clay with which we mold ourselves according to how we inhabit time and space. Our present is also a point in constant back and forth movement” (Erzen 2017, 199). Therefore, as anticipated at the beginning of this paper, the aesthetic re-visitation of the past and classical forms may lead to many inspiring questions regarding the nature of this inspiration and the re-emergence that artists examine through their works. At the same time, we saw through the analyses of different examples that these artistic investigations are very often not limited to the mere analyses of the past forms themselves but become intellectually and aesthetically thrilling attempts to

grasp their relevance in the present. Therefore, when focusing on our current state in the creation of novel works—that are, at least in part, inspired by the past as a springboard—such pieces of art will contribute to our present understanding and to the better understanding of our present.

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