

REVIEW

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for acquiring the academic degree of *Doctor of Science* (D.Sc.)
in Professional Field 8.1 Theory of Arts

with a candidate
Prof. Dr. Boyan Krasimirov Manchev

Boyan Manchev is one of the best Bulgarian philosophers. He publishes in parallel in several languages and already has a serious international reputation. I know a significant part of his extremely extensive work - in fact, almost everything published in the Bulgarian language. The genre and disciplinary range of his works is also very wide: from general metaphysics (ontology) through political philosophy and philosophical anthropology to poetry and experimental theater. And all this is united in a common author's program, which is constantly further developed practically, experimentally it is unfolded in unexpected directions, but it is also concentrated anew as a complete philosophical project.

Within this competition, he enters with a specific corpus: his studies in art theory. Of course, they again fit into the overall project, unfolding it as a reflexive "poetic" and "aesthetic" praxis.

The dissertation "Art and Poiesis: Philosophy of the Image and Philosophical Figurology. Attempts at the epistemology of the foundations of the theory of art" is composed of three parts, each of which is an independent work: the study "The other origin of art" [« L'autre origine de l'art », 2021] and the books "The Alteration of the World . For a radical esthetics" [L'alteration du monde. Pour une esthétique radicale, 2009 / 2020] and "The New Athanor. Beginnings of Philosophical Fiction" (2020). In fact, the 206-page dissertation submitted for the competition is a synthetic – summarized – version of these works: in this synthetic version, the main points of the individual works are presented in a systematic interrelationship. The abstract accurately recreates this interrelationship, and the contributions are formulated completely correctly.

Due to personal limitations - I do not know French - here I will refer only to those parts of the dissertation that are in Bulgarian. On the other hand, I will have in mind

the entire book "The New Athanor", only a part of which is included in the text of the dissertation, as well as other works of Manchev.

Epistemology of foundations

Boyan Manchev makes a "theory of art" or "philosophy of art", but not in the form of a meta-reflection on some already given object (some present art), but through the mutual examination - including multiple mirror reversals of places - between philosophy /theory on the one hand and art on the other. "[B]eing an art historical study, this work is essentially philosophical; at the same time, even though it claims to be philosophical in its title, it is necessarily, according to its foundations, a piece of theory of art" (p. 12-13)

Manchev developed a specific approach called "epistemology of foundations". His general thesis is that philosophy and art have an intertwined and complex history of mutual influences and transformations, whereby philosophical concepts immanently operate in works of art, and artistic images and models in turn induce and potentiate the creation of philosophical concepts (p. 3). Moreover, in this movement of mutual influence, the two spheres - which are separated rather conditionally, according to the inertia of the traditional distinctions - according to Manchev, also have common "seed"-foundations. These are the classical concepts of "poiesis," "theme," "arsis," "image," "representation," "mimesis," "aesthesis," "figure," "form," and etc. They - taking into account the historical variations in their uses - are structure-determining for both fields (for art and philosophy), insofar as they constantly structure - rearrange anew and anew - the artistic and philosophical practices. Therefore, the first methodological step in the "epistemology of foundations" is the genealogy - the "structural-genetic analysis" - of these concepts. Indeed, in the course of the dissertation, Manchev makes respectful reconstructions of the contexts of their use, from antiquity to today.

But the project of an "epistemology of foundations" is even more ambitious. If I may use another vocabulary - that of the late Wittgenstein - the project of an "epistemology of foundations" tries to go deeper, beyond the "surface grammar" of concepts: beyond their routine, canonized and traditionally trivialized uses. Manchev admits that these concepts also have their own "deep grammar": according to him, they have their own "poetic core", "pro-conceptual aesthetic structure", i.e. he thinks "the image as an ontological matrix of the philosophical concept" (p. 10). So the second methodological step of the "epistemology of foundations" is to deconstruct - "to dis-organize" in Manchev's words - the secondary and tradition-hardened meanings of those classical concepts in order to expose behind them a primary

atavistic and unbridled image, a "figure-subject" that fertilizes and potentiates both artistic practices and philosophical concepts (p. 181). In its second step, "epistemology of foundations" has become "figurology."

In conclusion: "epistemology of foundations" is a complete and consistent authorial approach, i.e. it is itself a serious methodological contribution.

The poiesis

The first part of the dissertation "Art and poiesis. General poetics and theory of art" can be presented as an answer to the question: How can it be explained that during the Renaissance and then in modernity, the art has become "an autonomous field of realization of poetic power and creative activity" (p. 27). This question should also answer the question of the emergence of philosophy - of modern philosophy (p. 25). In fact, Manchev's question is inscribed in the critical philosophical tradition, which asks how the epochal turn (that defines modernity itself) is possible: as a transition from dogmatics to criticism (Kant), from objective to subjective spirit (Hegel), from traditional to post-traditional societies (Habermas), etc. Manchev's answer is through art and through one of his fundamental concepts – poiesis. Modernity appears as a (re)nascence of poiesis.

Indeed, the Renaissance revived a primordial semantic potential, an arch-image that was already detectable in Plato's and Aristotle's founding gestures in the use of this concept, but which remained obscured and muted in the subsequent tradition of their canonized scholastic readings. What must be peeled off, as one peels the scales of an onion, in order to reveal the "poetic core" of poiesis, are all those images canonized by tradition that bind it to *repetition of the same*: its association with the idea of *techne*, of a craft that follows a ready-made recipe or puts into a mold (form); with the idea of art as imitation (*mimesis*), which simply resembles nature; or with the idea of actualizing or realizing pre-given possibilities; etc. Manchev shows that already with Plato, but quite distinctly with Aristotle, art has the potential not only to imitate, but also "to complete what nature is not able to complete" (Arist., "Physics", 199a15; cit. according to Manchev, p. 31). I.e. art as poiesis is creativity, and not just creativity inherent in man, but "an immanent force of nature" (p. 34). Through it, man also transcends himself, i.e. humanism initially turns out to be transhumanism (p. 38).

According to Manchev, this primary is revived in the works of Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino and Nicholas of Cusa. According to him, it permeates all modernity – from Bacon through Kant, Fichte and the Romantics to Nietzsche, Marx, Bataille and Blanchot. In Manchev, poiesis as a transformative power is provocatively further strengthened as a conceptual image through the idea of the "natural magic" of the alchemist Paracelsus and Giordano Bruno. The alchemical metaphor is even more

expressively reinforced in those parts of the book "The New Athanor" that did not enter the corpus of the dissertation.

In conclusion: without a doubt, Manchev's over-intensified reading of "poiesis" as a natural transformative force is original, and it also has serious analytical potential - it allows for a typological reconstruction of the birth of modern art and philosophy: of modernity in a typological opposition to premodern times. This is also an indisputable scientific contribution.

Alteration and aesthesis

The second part, "The origin of art, or the becoming-other of the world" is essentially a further analytical dissection of poiesis: If creativity is an immanent transformative force, then what is the transformation - the *alteration* - that this force realizes? Through this question, another series of concepts, key to art studies and philosophy, are reconstructed, problematized and, to a large extent, overturned: (visual) representation, mimesis, image, sensory perception (aesthesis).

The term "alteration" was introduced through a detailed analysis of one of the works in which Georges Bataille problematizes visual representation: the review "Primitive Art" from 1930. From there, Manchev derives "a radical thesis [...]: the alteration, the altering gesture, is the origin of representation' (p. 53). Representation is not a simple repetition of some given model-object, it is not a reproduction, but it is alteration of the object from which the image emerges: its 1) deformation and 2) transformation.

The result is a completely new object, whose similarity - coincidence - with the original object is contingent (p. 54). Thus, in fact, the source object ceases to be a model - a specimen - for its image: "there is no model in the origin of the representation" (p. 55). "If we choose to be faithful to the logic of Bataille's claim, we must say that this 'original' is in fact secondary to the altering gesture: it is only one 'replica' of the emergent new object" (p. 56). But this is how the notion of imitation (mimesis) is reversed: mimesis is not a copying of some original, but a change from which an original new object emerges, which, conversely, refers to its origin as a copy of itself.

From here, the concept of image also changes: the image is no longer some static form, an *eidos*. The image turns out to be non-homogeneous, non-identical to itself, composite: "The **composite** image is a Leviathan, a monstrous machine: the individual form is a monster running wild" (p. 57). Because the form turns out to be a plastic mode in a field of forces, of intensities: "The dialectic of forms is a dynamic of intensity, where each form exceeds itself, deviates from itself, changes." (p. 62) "[T]he image is not an erasure of the formless, but its compaction..." (p. 64). The

image is a singular synthesis, a momentary declination (modus) of forces, which, before it settles and petrifies, is already changing.

In fact, here we also see the basic ontological axiomatics on which Manchev steps and which he derives from Bataille: "[S]ense experience is woven of sensory and affective forces, forces of the plan of presence, both dynamic and energetic. The operation of sensory change is the shuttle of this field of differential forces that condense energy zones and strengthen arrays, thus reorganizing the syntax of the field, giving rise to new forces' (p. 83). This dynamic ontology, the most basic premises of which I also share, is further developed in the books of Manchev *Freedom in spite of everything*. Volume 1 (Meteor: 2021), as well as in *Transcendental Philosophy and Modal Ontology* (NBU: in press). It is precisely this that allows him to redefine other basic concepts of art studies, such as, for example, that of "work": "[T]hat we call "work" is not a "formation" of matter, but a field of intensity and deployment of forces " (p. 78).

Aesthetics - the theory of art - in Manchev's text has slowly turned into an ontology, which, according to him, it has always been. It is inevitable in this direction of thinking to change the basic concept of "aesthesis", in the primary sense of sensation or sensory perception. If the "image", the "work", in fact every sensibly perceptible "thing" is an instantaneous mode of energy intensity, then the perception of the thing is not a passive copying, but an impact and modification of the thing: "Thesis: Alteration is an operation that takes place at the level of the immanence of the thing; namely "immanence of the thing" will be called the field of differential forces upon which the senses influence while reorganizing them, and which is therefore the field of the aesthetic operation itself" (p. 74). Manchev here introduces another very powerful conceptual image, which should perhaps be discursively developed a little more in the future: "The senses don't just have a limit - they are limits" (p. 72). Manchev clarifies: "The limit can be described not so much as a limit or an end, as a fixed point in Euclidean space, but rather as a dynamic edge [bord] where thickening, amplification and even contraction take place. An illustration of it would be a weather front." (ibid.). The conceptual image of the weather (meteorological) front is expressively developed in the book *Clouds* of Manchev (Meteor: 2017). However, I will allow myself a direct generalizing interpretation of this thesis: Every sensory perception (seeing, hearing, touch, ...) is an actual interaction of forces, in which the indexical focus "here and now" is the edge (the border, the board), of which the resistance of the thing directly opposes the action of the perceiver (in which they are *mutually altered*).

I don't know if Manchev would agree with this interpretation, but surely here one can see the most essential contribution of his work, as well as of his other works: His ability to cross the boundaries of the already established and conceivable and challenge us to imagine (so far) the unimaginable. Of course, all concrete revisions

and reversals of classical concepts of aesthetics in this part of his work are very specific contributions.

Philosophical Figuorology

The "philosophical figuorology" developed in the third part of the paper is the own methodological development of the epistemology of foundations sketched in the introduction. "Figure" is the author's term with which Manchev names those pro-concepts, those pre-conceptual plastic images, from which, according to him, the poetic core of every philosophical concept and every artistic image is woven. And "figuorology" is the methodical effort not just to capture and describe them, but also to critically liberate them: to take them out of their canonical readings and set them free, so that they unfold anew their potential in productive imagination.

Manchev derives the genealogy of his term "figure" from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where the Latin word *figura* is used instead of the Greek *morphe* - but here, unlike the other Latin word, *forma*, the *figura* is a form, but one in constant process of transformation - "[a]f we follow Ovid's semantic intuition, we would come to the conclusion that the concept of 'metamorphosis' in Latin should rather be translated as *transfiguration*" (p. 178). Manchev further condenses his concept of a figure, stepping on the works of Philippe Lacou-Labarte, who critically revises Heidegger's concept of Gestalt (p. 182), on the way Deleuze and Guattari interpret Nietzsche through "conceptual characters" (p. 183), as well as through other authors from the French scene of the second half of the twentieth century. In the end, Manchev managed to put at least two basic meanings in his term: 1) "[t]he the idea of dynamic forms, respectively dynamic concepts, possessing the plastic potential to express dynamic phenomena without reducing them" (p. 184); 2) the idea that the figure is a "reflexive agent", i.e. it is not simply a pre-concept that pre-frames the field of possibilities, but a pro-concept (p. 185) that is forward-looking and has the operative power to transfigure available possibilities. "The figure could therefore be thought of as a pre-concept, in a relation to the imaginative intuition, being at the same time a super-concept, that in a field of common intensity relates various conceptual vectors, not only subsuming them under a common denominator, but also and above all intensifying their action through their structural involvement and the dissolution of a common field of problematic and/or polemical actualization" (p. 189). In other words, it is precisely the dual status of the figures - that they are pre-concepts and have a pre-existing meaning, but at the same time they are active, capable of transformation and self-transformation - that turns them into "reflexive agents", into "figures-subjects", in "dynamic "unfrozen" actors", capable of "autopoiesis", in "fantastic concepts" or "alter-concepts", as Manchev also often says (p. 191).

Through an interesting sketch on Novalis and Kant, Boyan Manchev manages to further strengthen this pro-active creative side of his conception - Kant's "productive imagination" becomes even more productive when through Novalis it is stripped of its a priori conceptual frameworks and the difference between intuition and concept is overcome. "[For] Novalis it is fantasy that produces the ideas", it becomes a "miraculous sense", and "The poetic philosopher, *poetus philosophus*, is "in a state of absolute creativity" (p. 196). After this operation, "figurology" ceases to be a secondary genealogical reconstruction and becomes a "philosophical fiction" aimed at imagining the future. Moreover, to the extent that the difference between fiction and reality disappears, ontology becomes poetics: "It is a question, no more and no less, of a generalization of poetics as a general poetics: henceforth a practical program for the creation of the world, a program for a future world." (p. 198) And Novalis's poet has taken the place of Marx's worker: "The poet is an unalienated worker, a worker who has at his disposal both his productive power and the means of production: the techniques and tools he develops from his very senses and organs. The poet - *poetus philosophus* - is the model of the unalienated worker who changes the world." (p. 201)

Conclusion

As can be seen from everything that has been said so far, Manchev has developed an original and complete poetic-philosophical conception, which is also a program for action. Of course, like any new thing, it also raises critical questions. I will take the liberty here to briefly raise a few issues that seem important to me.

1) Does the over-intensification of the idea of "poiesis", also understood as radical "autopoiesis", risk the return of the romantic metaphysics of "genius"? After all, who is the subject of poiesis—the figure who unfolds his fictional power on his own, the man-poet, or something else? Manchev will probably answer that the subject - any subject - is only a mode (modus) of change. But do we not thus descend to a level of magma and metaphoricity of the statement, which risks becoming a hidden assumption of self-referentiality, of a meta-subject?

2) What are the political implications of his onto-poetics? From his book *Logic of the Political* (2013), we know that sovereignty is inevitably self-undermining, i.e. absolute power is impossible and unacceptable. However, the imperative for radical immanent transformation that guides his work, to what extent and in what sense is it a call for radical revolution? And to what extent can the terror in the Bolshevik revolution, say, be justified by it? How do creativity and violence even relate?

3) Doesn't the overemphasis on creativity deprive us of the possibility to make sustainable practical distinctions based on some - albeit temporary - criteria? How do we even distinguish routine, reproduction, exploitation from poiesis, creativity,

fantasy? After all, poiesis is the immanent principle of the world, i.e. of every action, even the most trivial?

Of course, these questions are too general and do not seek to find their answer within the framework of this procedure, but only trace the future of our long-standing theoretical conversation with Boyan Manchev.

However, within the framework of the procedure, I want to strongly emphasize:

The dissertation "Art and Poiesis: Philosophy of the Image and Philosophical Figurology. Attempts in epistemology on the foundations of the theory of art" by Boyan Manchev repeatedly exceeds all formal and informal criteria for scientific persuasiveness and innovation. Therefore, I wholeheartedly support awarding Assoc. Prof. Boyan Krasimirov Manchev the academic degree of Doctor of Science (D.Sc.) in Professional Field 8.1 Theory of Arts.

Primorsko
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Sincerely:
(Prof. Dr. Dimitar Vatsov)