

Review

by Prof. DSc Angel Valentinov Angelov

for the dissertation “Art and Poiesis: Philosophy of the Image and Philosophical Figurology. Attempts at epistemology on the foundations of art theory” with author
Assoc. Prof. PhD Boyan Manchev

Assoc. Prof. PhD Boyan Manchev applies to acquire the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” in the doctoral program “Art and Visual Studies”, in professional direction 8.1. Theory of art. The dissertation consists of an introduction, two sections, each of which has three parts, an appendix with images, and a bibliography with the total volume of 390 pp. The bibliography is composed of an almost equal number of titles in Cyrillic and Latin. The applicant fulfills the minimum of the national requirements. The dissertation with which he received the scientific degree “Doctor of Philology”, 1999, and the habilitation work from 2012 are not part of the present work.

The proposed work discusses the relationship between philosophy and art. The author sets himself the goal of creating an epistemology of foundations, which should refer both to the initial formation of culturally specific practices and to the concepts related to them. Such an epistemology is possible because these practices and concepts function as creative and at the same time distinguishing characteristics of the respective activity and reflection, of philosophy and of art, which are at the center of his research attention. The analysis used is of a structural-genetic type.

After analyzing the initial formation of cultural practices and the concepts through which they become meaningful, B. Manchev traces how the meanings that are involved into the concepts of art and philosophy are created and transformed during modernity. At the same time, he explores the changes in the way practices designated as art function and become distinct. Manchev puts the two sides – philosophical concepts and artistic practices, into interaction, indicating how philosophical concepts manifest their effect in artistic works and what is the role of philosophical concepts when determining what art is. At the same time, he explores the impact of artistic models on the construction of a reflection that has come to be defined as “philosophy”.

In the first part of the first section “Art and Poiesis. General Poetics and Theory of Art” Manchev traces how the modern concept of art is formed from the point of view

of the category of creativity. In “The Change of the World. For a Radical Aesthetic” the author analyzes how the anthropological and psychological origins of visual representation are understood. Based on the analysis, B. Manchev proposes a critical phenomenology or, as he defines it, aesthetics. “The new Atanor. Beginnings of Philosophical Fiction” (second part of second section) presents the author’s concept of a philosophical figurology. The concept is a continuation of the author’s previous studies on philosophy of the image, which he substantiates in two monographic works.

The first part of the work poses the question: what is the historical significance of the concept of poiesis for artistic creation and art, respectively, and how this concept structures the idea of art. Boyan Manchev’s attention is primarily focused on the contributions of Immanuel Kant and the German romanticists from Jena, among them the theoretical views of Novalis being the most important for Manchev’s concept. He justifies why the views of Kant, of the romanticists of Jena and especially of Novalis are at the basis of the modern understanding of art and of philosophy.

The second part of the dissertation, called “Elaborations”, substantiates what the philosophical figurology consists of, it being a continuation and transformation of the philosophy of the visual image. B. Manchev shows a lasting interest in the philosophy of the image. The first result of his research interest is “The Unimaginable. Experiments on the Philosophy of the Image”, 2003. Regarding the present study, I would mark its transdisciplinary nature, bringing into interaction philosophical, art historical and cultural-historical approaches. For Manchev, the visual image is an agent that structures the field of knowledge, incites to a transforming understanding of the world, creating what the author defines as an “image-of-the-world”. The latter for him is tantamount to philosophy. I share his belief that none of the disciplines that have the visual image as their research object can independently explore its complexity, which is the reason for a pursuit of a synthetic or transdisciplinary approach as the most appropriate.

The image, Manchev believes, is decisive for the modern idea that artistic creativity is an autonomous field and that the image and the concept of representation, which he perceives as a continuation of the image, is the basis of the aesthetic regime of art.

B. Manchev pays special attention to the concept of the origin of visual representation by Georges Bataille. Manchev analyzes how formulations of Bataille’s

contemporary anthropology and phenomenology acquire radicality by relating them to the artistic practices of the avant-gardes of the early 20th century and to psychoanalysis. It is exactly by analyzing Bataille's notion of *altération*, which he interprets as change, but also as damage, that Manchev arrives at his concept of phenomenological aesthetics. Aesthetics is Manchev's theoretical attempt to combine the phenomenology of sensory perception with aesthetics understood as a philosophy of artistic practice.

A separate part of the work is devoted to philosophical *figurology*, to justify the essence of the proposed dissertation. Philosophical *figurology* explores the creation of enduring images and figures that possess "pro-ontological status, and in this sense structure both philosophical language and artistic practice".

In the final part of the dissertation, Manchev discusses in historical and structural terms how experience and ideas about the world are organized through a system of images. I want to emphasize the essential conclusion of the study: images not only represent and structure the available world, but they are also the basis of experimentation with unavailable but potential worlds. Manchev reached this conclusion by analyzing the concepts of image, figure and concept.

I would point out a few more of the main conclusions of the work:

Manchev justifies that his philosophy of the image introduces the perspective of a common poetics, which means that the philosophical practice contains an artistic beginning. The manner in which poesis manifests itself, its autonomizing power, turns it into an agent of philosophical activity. Through this statement, Manchev strives to unite philosophy and art studies as knowledge about the image and/or the figure. General poetics, philosophy of the image, and philosophical *figurology* explore conceptually the becoming of art without neglecting the historical perspective, namely how art manifests itself in historically conditioned artistic phenomena. That is why the author rightly defines the methodology of his research as "historical ontology of the image and of art".

Boyan Manchev is aware of the extreme difficulty faced by such a research – to conceptualize both the historical dynamics of the practices that can be included in the concept of art, and the idea of art itself. But it is precisely the drive to explore the complexity of the history of the idea of art that lends both persuasiveness and historicity to his study itself.

The hypothesis he puts forward as the beginning of his philosophical-historical reflection is that “art appears through philosophy, it is because art is rediscovered as philosophy”. Art and philosophy are understood as a form of creativity, of natural creative power and of natural magic. It is about an artistic power that manifests itself as a new form of philosophy as art and of art as philosophy. According to Manchev, this took place during the Renaissance. Then, he believes, a new idea of creativity is formed – of a moving and changing world, which opens up the possibility of imaginatively creating new worlds. I consider it indicative of Manchev’s philosophical concept that he strives to substantiate his idea as an ontology, attracting for analysis above all the writings of Nicholas of Cusa and of Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Paracelsus. According to him, the Renaissance rediscovered the idea of a real, of natural creativity, the idea of the autopoietic power of nature. This is accomplished through new techniques that are both art and philosophy. His conclusion is that the Renaissance set one of the lines of modern anthropotechnics, according to which “man is a being that transcends himself, that overcomes his own (pre)determination”.

Investigating the relationship between the dynamic ontology and the ontology of creativity, B. Manchev insists that it is necessary to reconstruct the meaning of “revolutionary for their time concepts”, such as the concepts of beauty and harmony. To restore their conceptual value, he offers texts such as the writings of Marsilio Ficino, to be interpreted through relations that are participation, that are “epistemic mimesis”. Following Baxandall’s formulation of 1972, Manchev tries to reconstruct the heuristic value of fifteenth-century concepts in order to discover the condition that makes possible the operation of an ontology of change. The latter is essential for the concept of Manchev himself, since it helps him reach the conclusion that “the idea of creativity, of creation, becomes possible only in the context of a dynamic ontology, where transformations are the norm, and concrete things, with clear semantic and functional outlines and identities, are only their ‘cuts’ or ‘syntheses”’. This general conclusion makes it possible to claim that art becomes a field of dynamic philosophical experimentation. An example is the work of Leonardo, whose art of form is precisely a field of dynamic philosophical experimentation.

“Sensory Change and the Philosophy of the Image” is devoted to the analysis of a short text by Georges Bataille. This is a review of the book “Primitive Art”, 1930, by Georges-Henri Luquet. The review is published in the same year. According to

Manchev, this text by Bataille is programmatic for a future theory on the emergence of pictorial representation. The basic concept of pictorial representation is “alteration”, and accordingly, Bataille defines “the art which is called primitive only by virtue of an abuse” as the alteration of available forms. Manchev distinguishes three uses of the term “change” in Bataille’s text. His conclusion is: “the operational value of the concept of change allows it to be laid down as a power axis of Bataille’s hypercritical thought”. According to Manchev, change is a regulative concept for Bataille, but it is also important for Manchev’s concept, and that is why he devotes considerable attention to it, as simultaneously with the analysis, he assimilates the concept for his philosophical figurology. The altering gesture, Manchev believes, following Bataille, creates a new object that is not only “deformed” but also transformed. This is possible because of the different attitude towards presence. Manchev associates presence with invention, which is the result of chance; it follows that there is no external model for the origin of representation. Added to this is the thesis that change is a continuous and multiple activity, from which it follows that the image cannot be an established and static element. “The image is a dynamic mode of what exists”, concludes Manchev. He points out that Bataille’s concept of change is closely related to the concept of destruction, but also to the concept of production. Placing it in relation to Aristotle’s concept of *aloyosis*, Manchev concludes that Bataille radicalized Aristotle, not to reject him, but to affirm him.

In “Principles of Philosophical Figurology”, Manchev explores the genesis and historical semantics of the idea of a figure. According to him, the idea of a figure reveals the historical horizon and structural genealogy of the concept of interpretation; it is in relation to the idea of history, eschatology and narration. “The figure participates in the very *form* of the becoming of the meaning”, summarizes Manchev. Here, too, he insists on the internal dynamics of the concept of “figure”. The idea of alteration is fundamental in Manchev’s concept. He would like to think not only the individual concepts as constantly changing, but also states that there is a possibility of dynamic conceptuality in general, through which dynamism concepts would structurally correspond to dynamic phenomena themselves.

In “Methodological Foundations of the Philosophical Figurology Project”, Manchev introduces the operational distinction between the figure-object and the figure-subject. The distinction is fundamental, because Manchev’s figurology unfolds precisely the figure-subject as a critical interpretive potential. The figure-object exists

in the work of art, while the figure-subject is a critical tool. In this function, the figure is an agent of interpretation and of the cognitive attitude itself. B. Manchev places his understanding of a figure among other philosophical concepts in which the concept of a figure is also present, indicating its proximity and distinction to them.

In the last part of his work, B. Manchev sets himself the goal of applying a certain historical-anthropological approach, but from the position of philosophical figurology. He achieves this by analyzing the conceptual potential and the historical relationships, which allow to reveal the complexity of the specific images and their field of influence. Such a re-functionalization of historical anthropology is possible because for Manchev it is a kind of “philosophical hermeneutics *in potentia* of the mythical-literary text”. And his philosophical figurology aims to actualize what he calls the pro-conceptual mode of mythical figures and their dynamization through narrative.

I emphasize the selection and interpretation of the images to the First Part of the First Section. They show a detailed knowledge about the presence of the images in a certain historical era, precisely the one that opened up the possibility of creating imaginary new worlds.

The contributions correspond to the content of the dissertation.

In conclusion: Assoc. Prof. PhD Boyan Manchev is the author of an original concept of philosophy and art. With complete conviction, I will vote for him to be conferred the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” in professional direction 8.1. Theory of art.

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