

Philosophers in Modern Fine Arts. Insights from a Teacher of Philosophy

Ana-Magdalena Petraru*

Cristina Talpan, *Reprezentarea filosofului în pictura epocii moderne/ The Representation of the Philosopher in Modern Fine Arts*, Ed. Pim, 2022, 276 pages, foreword by prof. univ. dr. Petru Bejan, cover: graphic concept by Ana Maria Alexoaie Conachi



As the prefacer Petru Bejan, full professor at the Faculty of Philosophy from UAIC argues, Cristina Talpan’s book pertains to a speculative register, at the crossroads of several fields, competencies, and methodologies. The author aims at bringing together philosophy and visual arts, with data from art history, aesthetics, and semiotics, focusing on the 17th-19th centuries, inciting the viewer to adopt the perspective of Umberto Eco in *Opera aperta* and contribute to the visual text’s array of significance.

In her motivation, Cristina Talpan mentions that the Age of Reason, Enlightenment, the Age of Romanticism, and the Victorian Age are correlated with cynical philosophy represented by reputed figures of Antiquity, among others, that stirred the imagination of painters from the modern age (p. 3). In fact, the cover, a graphic concept designed by the artist Ana Maria Alexoaie Conachi was

* Ana-Magdalena Petraru, Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of Letters, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University from Iași, România; alina.petraru@gmail.com

created by using symbolic portraits of the philosophers mentioned in this work. In this cover, the artist tried to harmoniously grasp, both visually and semiotically, the essence of the book; as a result, she envisaged imagery from the ghostly portraits of philosophers, faces – statues – testimonies. Departing from the concept of awakening their shadows, she aimed at giving meaning to the pencilled forms of deeply cultural and historical ideas¹.

Drawing on theory (Charles Sanders Peirce's and Ferdinand de Saussure's foundations of semiotics) (p. 5), Edmund Husserl surrogates (p. 6), and Jean Chevalier's, Carl Gustav Jung's or Mircea Eliade's symbols (pp. 7-9), to name but a few, C. Talpan assesses that humanity has always turned into symbols everything that surrounded it, hence the already argued infinitive possibilities that a work of art brings (p. 11).

In the language of fine arts, the man of the modern age is known for three hypostases: autonomy, insecurity, and autarchy, possible due to the acknowledgement of reason as the only authority of knowledge, hence man's distancing from the Church and the State. The artist is 'unfaithful' in the attempt to create an identity between a project and the model used so s/he needs to find certainty (p. 12).

Symbolism in fine arts has been an expression of philosophical language since ancient times; thus, in Antiquity, fine arts were marked by the sublime and its relation to beauty, whereas Greek and Roman culture reversed the rapport. In the Middle Ages, priority of the sublime towards the beautiful was regained, while Renaissance stressed a harmonious rapport between the ideal and the spiritual, physical, and spiritual beauty. Finally, modern art, as M.J. Bartos also argues, "reevaluated the relation between aesthetics, art and non-artistic fields, bringing to the fore several unconventional categories such as the ugly and the ordinary, each artistic category drawing on a different category, based on its immediate interests and perspective."² (p.17) Artistic language, in its specificity, is presentational, non-discursive, ambiguous and self-reflexive at times as the work of art cannot be divided and decontextualized (p. 19). Philosophy and the philosopher's language are redefined in a pictural semiosis (p. 21) and

¹ Ana-Magdalena Petraru, text message with the artist, Ana Maria Alexoaie Conachi, September 25, 2023, translation ours.

² M.J. Bartos, *Compoziția în pictură*, Polirom, Iași, 2009, p. 56.

the author deals with the philosophers' portraits, overviewing their features in history, from ancient times to the 19th century (pp. 21-26).

Dealing with the philosopher between idea and representation in fine arts, the cynics have been subjected to the hexadic poles of pictural semiosis, i.e.: context, the portrait painter and the philosopher, the painting as work of art and its semantic codes and finality (p. 27). The historical context of modernity in fine arts is related to Schlegel's identification of anarchy and chaos in modern culture, the drive towards "interesting" and "a passing crisis of taste"³ (p. 28). The modern art style draws on Hegel's and Baudelaire's theories, the former speaking about the romantic artist's irony towards life, whilst the latter claiming that the artist lost the notions of righteous and beautiful (pp. 29-30). Moreover, the museum is regarded as a temple of art from the 18th century to become a palace of arts in the middle of the 19th century (p. 33). In a hermeneutical stance, since the 16th century the author pleads the case of a painting that aims at expressing the personality of the subject, a true mirror of the soul, not the faithful image of the model. It also expresses social category, in terms of influence or power so as to promote virtues in society. Rembrandt's *chiaroscuro* showed a philosopher in meditation, reading, or Aristotle with a bust of Homer. Rubens depicted the death of Seneca and several artists (e.g., Carracci, Velazquez, etc.) portrayed Heraclitus and Democritus between the 16th-17th centuries (pp. 34-35). Diogene was also picked for his desire to renew society which matched the spirit of the era, whereas St. Augustine was portrayed by Murillo and appreciated by aristocracy and bourgeoisie having faith in the power of Catholicism, the promotion of ascetism and one's giving up a life of pleasure (p. 37). Francis Bacon was favored at the beginning of the 18th cent. for his minute observation of nature, scientific knowledge based on inductive reasoning, his portrait being carried out by Paul von Somer and William Larkin (p. 38). David Hume who supported empiricism and promoted the ideas of Enlightenment was portrayed by the neoclassical Scottish painter Allan Ramsay and Leibniz by J.F. Wentzel and A. Karcher (p. 40). Joseph Wright of Derby was a painter marked by several scientific discoveries, passionate by alchemy, who drew the portrait of Charles Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin who had taken an interest in philosophy, medicine, physics and botany

³ Jakob Minor, Friederich Schlegel 1794-1802, p.112, *apud* Hans Sedlmayr, *Epoci și opere*, vol. II, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1991, p. 258.

(pp. 41-42). Romanticism, climaxing in fine arts between 1820-1850 renders the motive of strong affection between father and daughter in William Frederick Yeames's *Meeting of Sir Thomas More with His Daughter After His Sentence of Death*. Delacroix's paintings for the Senate library in Paris, today's Luxemburg Palace comprise a group of images entitled "Famous Greeks" and show Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Xenophon and Cicero; Regnault rendered Socrates and Alcibiades in two paintings that can now be admired in New York and Paris, respectively (p. 45). After the publication of Proudhon's *The Philosophy of Poverty* and two years later, Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, new portraits of philosophers tackling society marginalia occur by Gustave Courbet, E. Manet and others as a sign of rejection of neoclassical and romantic elements and adoption of realism that takes the shape of a rise against authority (p. 47).

As iconic text, a painting is analyzed from eight different criteria: according to the main directory (a personalized portrait or a private one, of friends, relatives, a self-portrait); according to the function attributed to the painting (an official portrait, a commemorative one, an allegorical portrait or an office one); according to the relations with other works (a couple's one, an individual portrait, a portrait inspired by another portrait, a copy or one to a lesser extent); according to the state of execution of a work (a study portrait, a preparatory sketch, an unfinished portrait, a painted portrait, a refined portrait); according to its topic (an individual portrait – self-portrait, a group portrait – family portrait, professional portrait); based on the part of the represented figure – a bust portrait, a half-length portrait, a three-quarter portrait, a full portrait; according to the position of the figure (a frontal portrait, a profile portrait, a three-quarter portrait) and according to posture (standing, sitting, leaning) (pp. 52-53).

As mirroring image and sign, the portrait replaces life and gives the model rendered in the image eternal life. Another human need publicly expressed is the will of power, acknowledgement of prestige, the ambition to be different from others, to symbolically underline a preeminent position, to expose a socially important role (p. 54). Philosophers are shown meditating (by Rembrandt), suggesting the duality between the earthly world and that of the spirit, active and passive, sky and earth, light and darkness (pp. 65-66). The stairs are a possible sign of transcendence and the ascending nature of contemplative thought (p. 67). Democritus meditating on human frailty

was represented by Salvator Rosa, the author arguing that the philosopher seems sad and is surrounded by death imagery; the symbols summarize the conception of the age on the existential universe and put forward an internal tension created by the painter implying rhetorical interrogation, showing despise towards man's artificial deeds and advocating a return to mankind's natural state (pp. 68-69). Goya's *Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* belongs to the same category, the author sharply criticizing the Spanish society of the era, rising against the tyrannical monarchy, the nobility, clergymen and taking the side of the people condemned to poverty (pp. 72-73).

The philosopher in dialogue, either with himself, a small group or a crowd was tackled by Rubens in *The Four Philosophers*. Seneca's bust was considered by critics to be a copy of an imaginary portrait of the Greek poet Hesiod. Tulips in a vase are supposed to symbolize the appurtenance to cynicism, the ones that were not depicted in bloom, testifying to the death of two of the characters at the time the painting was drawn (pp. 75-76). One of the most remarkable works from the end of the 19th cent., beginning of the 20th cent. is Jean Delville's *School of Plato*, the Greek philosopher resembling Christ; two groups of young people are positioned in a triangle, and along with other elements of representation, they form David's star, leading us to the Theosophical Society the painter was a member of (pp. 83-84). The disciples listen to the philosopher as the apostles to Christ, hence Plato's comparison to a prophet (p. 85).

The philosopher in action is analyzed from various perspectives, i.e., 'the philosophy of technology' focused not only on man's ability to contribute to technological progress, but also the impact of technology on human lives, artistic creation and the reflection it leads to in aesthetics and last, but not least, the theoretical and practical approach of moral action to guide our behavior or others' towards ethics and happiness (pp. 86-87). David Tenier's *Philosopher Laughing at Magick* (London, 1775) renders a 'philosopher' sitting at his desk, surrounded by objects specific to scientific study and experiment, a human skull which symbolizes space for thought, spirit and intelligence, the starting point of knowledge, whereas the glass reminds us of the recipient that contains the elixir of redemption. On the background, terrifying creatures fly, similar to night bats, a metaphor for supernatural forces associated to the alchemy and magic surrounding the philosopher, a reasonable human being reading a book; his whimsical smile is a sign of skepticism (pp. 94-95). Tenier's

Alchemist shows laboratories in which alchemy is practiced, alluding to philosophical meditation, the desire to become immortal and the spiritual preparation required (p. 96). Mathematicians such as Euclid, Archimedes and Pythagoras are portrayed by Ribera, all his philosophers expressing pragmatism, an innate wisdom resulting from a life of hardship which made them question existence and man's place in this world (p. 114). A new approach to philosophy can be encountered in William Blake's *Newton* (1795) which surprises through its natural state the simplicity of structure, order, symmetry, and balance of proportion. Challenging limits, as a total artist, Blake aimed at depicting the absolute in his prophesizing visions, reaching surrealism and romanticism in art history. His *Newton* is an expression of the innovatory power of science in man, rather than the spirit of creation and inspiration. The painter rendered an idealized essence, an idea-form of Newton which, in his perception, was left unanswered in his time through an imagination insufficiently accepted during his life. The deep blue ocean is a symbol of serenity and isolation of the scientist since it was a known fact that Newton aimed solitude and quietness and, for a long time, refused to publish his works (pp. 122-123).

The philosopher in his family is depicted by Jean-Victor Schnetz behind bars, the evening before his execution. His daughter and grandson came to say goodbye, lifting the latter to kiss his grandfather one last time, which suggests a strong bond between generations and the artist's intention to illustrate the controversies and spiritual torments of the age in which Boetius lived (p. 130). The artist also manages to grasp two ideas in Christian philosophy, the encounter of innocence with patriarchal authority after Jesus's calling, 'Let the children come to me', and the ideal of reaching happiness in the afterlife through acceptance of suffering in earthly life (pp. 130-131). In the representations included in C. Talpan's volume, the philosopher facing death is illustrated by paintings by Jacques Louis David (Socrates and Seneca), Rubens (Seneca) (pp. 139-140), yet the most representative one is Van Gogh's *Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette*, a vanitas or memento mori that meditates on a radical shift in the vision of the world in 19th cent., the period in which Nietzsche expressed his disapproval on the world dominated by dogma and fanaticism. Van Gogh attempted at avoiding the world of art dominated by academia, hence the interpretation of his painting as

satirical criticism to conservative academic practices and alignment to stoic philosophy reminding people of their mortality (p. 145).

The last part of the book overviews the image of the cynical philosopher from Antiquity to the modern era, contextualizing pictorial portrayal and focusing on Diogene as measure of philosophical cynicism with his representations in modern fine arts. Among the famous representations in painting, there are his encounters with Alexander the Great (depicted by Jacques Gamelin, Jean Baptiste Reginault and Sebastiano Ricci) (pp. 170-172), Plato (represented by Maria Pretti and an anonymous author of the European school in the 19th cent.) (p. 174). Other case studies are paintings of Diogene and his lamp, symbol of illumination and clarity of the spirit (p. 177), his face, cup and the position he held in the school of Athens.

C. Talpan concludes that cynicism as philosophy found echoes in the contemporary world through the writings of the American analyst William Chaloupka teaching at the University of Montana, in his *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America*. Herein, he suggests that the democratic regime may be to the liking of cynics as it provokes and undermines elites⁴. The Romanian author argues that, as opposed to the active cynicism of the ancients, as imprudent as arrogant as it had been, today's cynical manifestations are characterized by selfishness, mistrust, disappointment, reluctancy and detachment (p. 197). To summarize, the results of research show that the painting is a performance that resonates with the values promoted by the space of its existence, the author rejecting Victor Maşec's idea according to which only an educated public may receive a work of art (pp. 201-202). C. Talpan also noticed that the approach of classical topics by modern painters ensured a spiritual connection between the classical, modern and postmodern ages. Moreover, by analyzing the 'language-object', i.e., the painting, we advance in the development of philosophical 'methodology' though the application of the scheme of semiotic language to a specific situation which, in its turn, improves methodology, as well (*ibidem*).

⁴ William Chaloupka, *Cynicism, the Heuristic Pharmakon*, ESC, 38.2, 2012, pp. 4-7.