
IVAN KOLEV*

ART AS PHENOMENON

Abstract

The *Philosophy of Art* class offers students an approach that intends to avoid the traditional limitation of students' attention to the work-author-viewer triad. Instead, students are offered a philosophical reflection on art in which the emphasis falls on explicating the 'perspectives' that are involved in the meaning constitution of a whole, which in this approach we call 'the phenomenal being of art'. Each perspective has a 'figure' representing it and its perspective is described phenomenologically, given that it is to explicate the meaningful contribution of this figure and its perspective in constituting the 'phenomenal being of art'. This approach has similarities with two other art's conceptions: the historical one of Paul Frankle and the institutional one of Arthur Danto and George Dickie.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Art; Education; Phenomenon; Philosophy of Art

The proposed approach is suitable for use in the teaching of *Philosophy*, *Philosophy of Art* and *Aesthetics* in the last two years of secondary education (students aged 17 to 19) and also in introductory philosophy courses for first year university students. Because the centering of attention on the status of the work and its perception is clearly evident in the existing curricula for high school and college students, the proposed approach greatly expands the range of perspectives from which art should be considered.

The art historian Paul Frankle (1878-1962), known for his research on the Gothic, was one of Heinrich Wölflin's most outstanding students. In his monumental work *Das System der Kunstwissenschaft* (1938²) Frankl developed a system of art history based on a «noology of meaning»¹. In the section *Die Psychologie der Kunstempfänglichen*², Paul Frankl discusses eleven perspectives on the work of art, which taken as a whole delineate the circle of the 'art public' (*Kunstpublikum*): Art lover (*Kunstlieberhaber*), Commissioner (*Besteller*), Patron (*Mäzen*), Collector (*Sammler*), Art Dealer (*Kunsthändler*), Connoisseur (*Kenner*), Art Preserver (*Kunsterbe*), Art Politician (*Kunstpolitiker*), art Critic (*Kunstkritiker*), Art Teacher (*Kunstpädagog*) and Art Historian (*Kunstwissenschaftler*).

The 'institutional theory of art' developed by Artur Danto³ and George Dickie⁴ does not directly refer to the ideas of Paul Frankl, but is a response to the challenges of ready-made and conceptualism. In Dickie's version, «the artwork is an artifact that is a candidate for evaluation by the art world». To describe the main perspectives from which the 'candidate for evaluation' is viewed is a task that can be seen as a phenomenology

* Sofia University – Bulgaria; kolev@phls.uni-sofia.bg

1 P. FRANKL, *Das System der Kunstwissenschaft*, Gebr. Mann Verlag, Berlin 1998.

2 *Ivi*, pp. 840-856.

3 A. DANTO, *The Artworld*, in «The Journal of Philosophy», 61, 19, 1964, pp. 571-584.

4 G. DICKIE, *Defining Art*, in «American Philosophical Quarterly», 6, 3, 1969, pp. 253-256.

of the art world. The consistent presentation of the main perspectives and their bearers (figures) helps students gain sensitivity to the multidimensionality of the art world and avoid reductions to one or a few perspectives⁵.

Author. The first perspective the student is introduced to is that of the author. It defines art as a sphere in which the authorial aspect is primordial and cannot be reduced. The authorial specificity of art is unconditional and cannot be relativized either by works with an unknown author or by cases where the author himself aims at anonymity (Banksy) or remains completely unknown (*graffiti*). The author position defines art as containing an ‘artifact of intentionality’, which distinguishes it from the accidental. For the sake of economy and clarity, the broad theme of the author is considered in a quadruple typology: the muse author (Homer), the explorer author (Leonardo and the representatives of European academism); the author as genius (in Romantic theory); in the perspective of the ‘death of the author’ (Roland Barthes).

Recipient. Unlike the natural phenomenon, which is ‘real-being-in-itself’, and the entity as mathematical entity, which is ‘ideal-being-in-itself’, the work of art is always ‘for-someone’, it is ‘being-for-perception’. The recipient is artistically marked, intensified, through multiple conventions. Unlike the natural piece of Penteli marble, which is ‘in itself’, the Parthenon is turned towards a viewer, which is specifically emphasized through the optical corrections that ‘deform’ the geometric regularity in view of the viewer’s perception. The painting has a horizon matching the horizon of the eyes, the poem has a title, the statue a pedestal, the symphony an introductory conductor’s pause. The spectrum of recipient statuses can be divided into: ritual spectator; mimetic spectator; reflective spectator and spectator-participant.

Patron. Kant’s distinction between the work of art and the work of craft has an analogy in his ethics to the distinction between dignity and price. The work of art has a self-value that is evidenced by the fact that its ‘appearance’ is often due not to the market but to the support of a patron. Patronage is a social gesture that shows that the work of art is not homogeneous in the market and is not a ‘logical’ part of it. The work ‘transcends’ both the fanciful outcomes of the profession as a routine activity and the determination by market demand.

5 For a general overview about understanding art see: J. HELD, N. SCHNEIDER, *Grundzüge der Kunstwissenschaft. Gegenstandsbereiche – Institutionen – Problemfelder*, Bölnau Verlag, Köln Weimar Wien 2007. I. KOLEV, *Being and Dwelling. Towards a philosophy of architecture*, East-West, Sofia 2013. [In Bulgarian: И. Колев, *Битие и обитаване. Към философия на архитектурата*, Изток-Запад, София 2013]. P. SPASOVA, *American analytic aesthetics: questions and more questions about unconventional artworks*, Ohridski University Press, St. Kliment 2007 [In Bulgarian: П. Спасова, *Американската аналитична естетика : Въпроси и пак въпроси около неконвенционалните произведения на изкуството*. Университетско издателство „Свети Климент Охридски“, 2007]. P. TSANEV, *Psychology of Art*, National Academy of Arts. 736 с., 2021 [In Bulgarian: П. Цанев, *Психология на изкуството*. Национална художествена академия. 736 с., 2021].

Art dealer. Art seeks to emancipate itself from the market, but the influence of the market on tastes and collections cannot be completely avoided. This influence can be negative, as in the case of Van Gogh, or positive, as in the case of the early Impressionists, for whom the picture dealer Paul Durand-Ruel (1831-1922) played an essential role in their recognition by not only buying their paintings, but organizing exhibitions and even publishing a magazine (*Art dans les deux mondes*, 1890) through which introducing the American public to modern French art, and especially that of the Impressionists. In the history of art we also find cases like that of Jan Vermeer, who was himself a dealer in paintings but did not sell his paintings.

Collector. To put it again in the spirit of Kant, a work of art is a thing free from natural processes. One aspect of this freedom is the aspiration of the ‘artistic will’ (to borrow this variation on Alois Riggler’s notion) to protect the work from the influence of nature and history and to preserve it ‘immutable and intact’ (*firmitas*) for the viewer. Spinoza’s metaphysical maxim «every existing thing strives to persist in its being» applies to the work as artistic being. This distinguishes the work of art from other ‘availabilities’ (Heidegger), which are usable and therefore expendable. The figure that embodies the moment of ‘preservation’ in the phenomenal being of art is the ‘Collector’, individual or institutional.

The collector ‘wrenches things from their primary relations’⁶ and, by protecting them from natural and historical influences, preserves them in another order that is freed from their primary context. The collector can be called a ‘second-order author’. With his taste, he creates an artistic meta-order – an order in which the beginnings, the sequence and the totality are entirely the work of the collector. For this order, the collector appears as a spokesperson who alone can answer questions about it. The works in a collection as a spatial whole are in the strict sense present. The collector protects them from outside influences by preserving them in a ‘being-one-with-another’.

Curator. We can distinguish two modules of the collection. One is the museum one, in which the leading element is isolated, static and immutable. The second module is dynamic, eventful, intensional – the collection in its expository aspect of ‘being-before-others’. The expository modus is related to the figure of the curator. The collector collects and the curator displays. Thanks to the curator, the collection turns from being-in-itself into being-for-us, in the language of Hegel. The collection ‘in itself’ has only one spectator – the collector as its ‘author’. As possessor, he has an ‘absolute point of view’ towards the collection, i.e. as it is ‘in itself’ as a collection. The curator, however, orients the collection towards the viewer and therefore ‘incorporates’ the presence of others, the sequence of observation, its rhythm and the ‘cadence’ of retrospective gaze and reminiscence at the end of the viewing.

6 W. BENJAMIN, *The Collector*, in *The Arkades Project*, trans. into Engl. by H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin, Belknap Press, Cambridge 1990, p. 109.

Connoisseur. The dealer, collector and curator need an authority to authenticate the work. The question that this authority and the figure presenting it must answer is whether the artistic phenomenon that appears to the recipient is the same as that for which it presents itself. The task of confirming authenticity emerged with the emergence of the art market, first in the Netherlands, when the immediacy of the commissioner-author relationship broke down and the art connoisseur encountered the work as an isolated object in the field of the art market.

In 1666, André Félibien, in his treatise *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes*⁷, first defined the three main questions on the answer to which the judgement of the authenticity of a work depends:

- Who is the author?
- Is the work authentic?
- What is its value?

In his book *Die Werke italienischer Meister in den Galerien von München, Dresden und Berlin: Ein kritischer Versuch*, which he published under the pseudonym Ivan Lermolieff, the Italian physician and art lover Giovanni Morelli⁸ presented and defended an original method he called 'experimental'. According to Morelli, each artist early forms a model on which he paints minor elements of the human figure. These elements do not depend on the stage of his artistic biography, nor on the person depicted. According to Morelli, the most characteristic examples of such static elements are the ways in which artists paint the ear and the fingers. Max Friedländer⁹ expresses reservations about Morelli's method, but nevertheless accepts that in individual cases this method can achieve certain results. For Friedländer, however, it is the intuition of the connoisseur that is most important. According to him, the first glance at a picture should last no more than three seconds, after which the impression should be subjected to reflection and further study. This procedure may be repeated several times until the connoisseur reaches confidence in his judgment.

The *opus magnum* for the connoisseur is the compilation of a *catalogue raisonné*. The first book to introduce and validate the term was the *Catalogue raisonné de toutes les pièces qui forment l'œuvre de Rembrandt*, published in 1751 by Edme-François Gersaint, in which the author described 418 images attributed to Rembrandt. We can call this genre an 'artistic encyclopedia about an artist'. The tasks of the genre, established with the development of this genre in the 19th century, are several: to present all the works; to describe the history of each work, which includes all its owners, an important argument for its attribution; to describe the physical qualities of each work; to describe the artistic qualities of each work.

Art Critic. When it is not a work coming from the past that is judged, but a new work or a new exposition of old works, then the triad of author-work-viewer is mediated by

7 A. FÉLIBIEN, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes*, Chez Pierre le Petit, Paris 1666.

8 G. MORELLI, *Die Werke italienischer Meister in den Galerien von München, Dresden und Berlin: Ein kritischer Versuch*, Seeman, Leipzig 1880, <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.1262>

9 M. FRIEDLÄNDER, *Der Kunstkenner*, Cassirer Verlag, Berlin 1920.

another figure, that of the art critic. The emergence of this figure is motivated by the opening of art salons to a non-professional public. The critic evaluates the new work, and often his judgment has the power of a verdict on the artist's fate.

Important for the emergence and stabilization of this figure was the appearance of periodicals: *La Gazette* (1631) and *Mercure de France* (1672) in France, *Tatler* (1701) and *The Spectator* (1711) in England, through which publications reviews of exhibitions reached art lovers and the general public. This genre therefore combines description, analysis and necessarily evaluation.

Through the periodical, the critics' articles reached not only those who would inform themselves before going to the Salon, or those who would read the text after they had already been to the Salon, but also art lovers who were far from the Salon and would not see the paintings on display there. An important element in this genre is therefore the presence of 'pictorial descriptions', so that absentees – 'by fate or chance' – feel like virtual visitors.

In his essay *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'État présent de la peinture en France, Avec un examen des principaux ouvrages exposés au Louvre, ce mois d'août 1746* Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne admits that in this work, which is an entire book of 200 pages, he sought to avoid the monotony of scientific expositions (*dissertations*) through more variety in style and picturesqueness. The author wanted to be neither an art historian nor an art theorist and stated that he would not avoid showing the faults of artists, but would also strive to encourage them to improve. The critic intends neither to apologize for the artist nor to discourage him¹⁰.

Historian of Art. If 'the connoisseur is a laconic historian' (Erwin Panofsky), then the historian is a profligate connoisseur. The history of art is a kind of collection, but one that is arranged not with personal taste in mind, but according to a conception of 'art in its history' (in Ernst Gombrich's words). The critic evaluates the new, the historian the significant. The critic takes the risk of being the first to appreciate, the historian takes the risk of (re)appreciating what is preserved by tradition. The figure of the art historian gains autonomy when, from books containing information on materials and technologies (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Books 33-37, Cennino Cennini, *Libro dell'Arte*, 14th cent.), an autobiography (Ghiberti, the second part of his *Commentaries*, 1450) or a series of biographies (Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori e scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*, 1550) authors arrive at a 'biography of concepts'. With Johann Winckelmann¹¹ art history emerges in the modern understanding of this perspective on art and its personifying figure, the art historian. Winckelmann presents a history of ancient art as a history of styles.

10 É. LA FONT DE SAINT-YENNE, *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'État présent de la peinture en France, Avec un examen des principaux ouvrages exposés au Louvre, ce mois d'août 1746*, Jean Neaulme, La Haye 1747, pp. 2 and 160.

11 J. WINCKELMANN, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, Dresden 1764.

Theorist. The typologist is ahistorical and the theorist is ahistorical. The typologist seeks to transcend the division of historical epochs, and the theorist to abstract from it. If we ask ourselves what is common in the structure of the classical books on the theory of art, we shall find that in many of them we can see a resemblance to Euclid's *Elements*, which in turn was influenced by the elementalism of Democritus. Euclid begins with definitions of the primitive elements (point, line, surface, figure), and in the remaining six books of his work explores the relations of the elements. It is not difficult to detect the same approach in many treatises on art, whether or not Euclid's books had a direct influence on them. We find such an approach in Aristotle's *Poetics* – the parts of tragedy (prologue, episode, exodus, chorus, parood, stasis, commos), in Aristoxenus (*Elements of Harmony*) – tone, interval, harmony, voice, in Vitruvius (*Ten Books on Architecture*) – the three orders (Doric, Ionic and Corinthian) and their ornaments, in Leonardo (*Treatise on Painting*) – perspective, light, colour, figure, composition, in Kandinsky (*Point and Line to Plane*) – point, line, plane. In the theorist's perspective, the definition of the art in question is given and the primary elements from which the structure of the artwork is composed are separated.

Aesthetician. The Enlightenment is the epoch in which most of the listed perspectives and figures of the phenomenal being of art are differentiated. One of the most important events was the birth of aesthetics in 1750, thanks to the book of the same name (*Aesthetica*) by Alexander Baumgarten¹². Already in the last two paragraphs (CXVI-CXVII) of his magisterial thesis of 1735 – *Meditationes Philosophicae De Nonnullis Ad Poema Pertinentibus* – Baumgarten introduces aesthetics through the theme of 'sensuous knowledge' (*aistheta*), which is not only distinct from but also independent of logical knowledge (*noeta*) (CXVI)¹³. According to Baumgarten, «aesthetics is the science of sense cognition» and beauty is «the perfection of sense cognition».

Thus, at Baumgarten's instigation, but also under the influence of a number of other theorists of the 'age of taste', including Joseph Addison (*The Spectator*, 1711-1712), Du Bos (*Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*, 1719), Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757), and Immanuel Kant (*Critique of the Faculty of Judgment*, 1790), the profile of the aesthetic perspective takes shape: an emancipatory description and analysis of the 'perception' of the beautiful and its modifications, and a search for the reasons why we 'appreciate' a phenomenon as beautiful. In stabilizing this perspective, the affirmation of 'taste' as an autonomous human faculty plays an essential role.

Metaphysician. Where is the place of art if we consider it in the horizon of the whole spectrum of existing things? The metaphysics of art can answer this question. Examples of such concepts can be seen in Schelling (*Philosophy of Art*, 1802), Hegel (*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst*, 1820) and Heidegger (*Der Ursprung der Kunstwerkes*,

12 A.G. BAUMGARTEN, *Aesthetica*, Halae Magdeburgicae, 1750.

13 Id., *Meditationes Philosophicae De Nonnullis Ad Poema Pertinentibus*, Halae Magdeburgicae, 1735.

1935-1936). Here, in contrast to aesthetics, the emphasis is not on perception and taste, but on relating art to the basic structures considered by metaphysics. If we accept as classical the structure of metaphysics presented in Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* (1739), this means that art must be correlated with the four themes within it – being, nature, man, God. For Schelling, art is «the image of the absolute», for Hegel «the first form of the absolute spirit» and for Heidegger «the dispute between the Earth and the World» (*der Streit zwischen Welt und Erde*). Heidegger's critique of aesthetics and his attempt to focus the question of art on the ontology of the work is an example of a contemporary consideration of art through the grand structures of metaphysics.

Conclusion. This approach in the *Philosophy of Art* course enables students to appreciate both the richness of art's 'phenomenal being' and the uniqueness of its 'perspectives' and the 'figures' who represent them. As a result of being introduced to this approach, students show increased attention to these perspectives, to their emergence and formation (crystallization as independent perspectives) in art history. It also helps them to increase their sensitivity and understanding of the historicity of art and its institutions.