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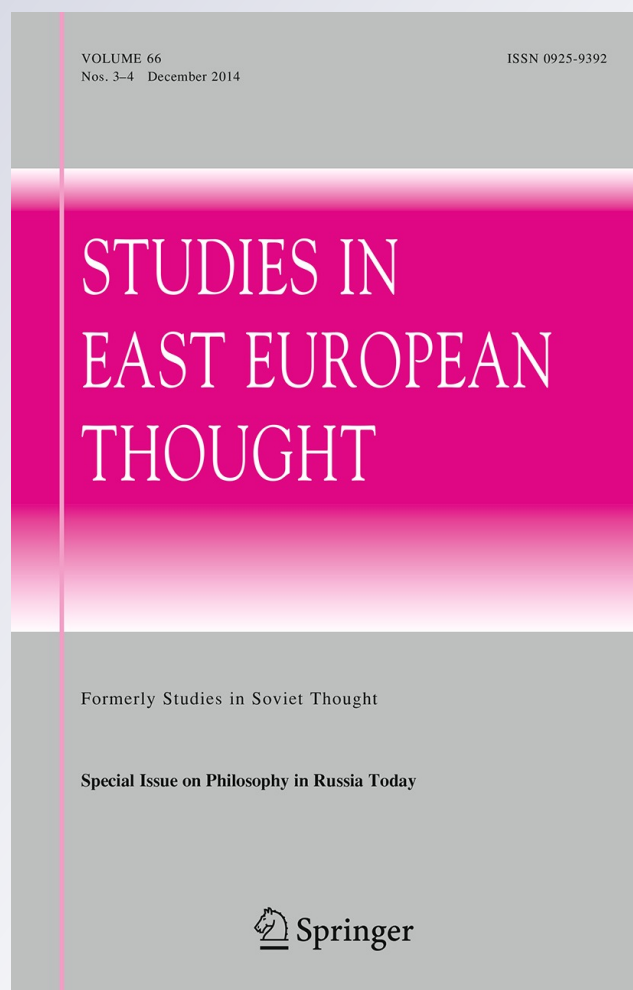
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## Aesthetics in Russia: looking toward the twenty-first century

Helen Petrovsky · Alexandra V. Volodina

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**Abstract** Processes observable in contemporary Russian aesthetics are the result of the transformation of the very notion of aesthetics following the emergence of a number of new “aesthetic” objects as well as ways of describing them. The scope of questions studied by aesthetics in its broader interpretation concerns not just professional philosophers in academic institutions, but also researchers whose works formally belong to different disciplines, some close to, some quite distant from aesthetics. The present article offers an overview of contemporary aesthetic theory as well as a general prognostic analysis of the latest trends in this field.

**Keywords** Old Russian and modern Russian aesthetics · Religious aesthetics · Post-Soviet aesthetics · Postmodernism · The avant-garde · Contemporary art

Recent developments in Russian aesthetics have transformed it into a field of considerable thematic complexity. It would be ill-advised to try to fit it into the Procrustean confines of academic aesthetics, and, consequently, to identify the discipline with research carried out in academic institutions. Any attention to discussions of aesthetics in Russia over the last couple of decades will invariably lead beyond the boundaries of academic science. Because the kinds of substantive issues under consideration within the domain demand new strategies to find answers, many philosophers and cultural personalities, whose primary interests appear to lie outside the domain of aesthetics, have joined the discussion.

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In light of this situation, it will be more fruitful to restrict ourselves to the general questions of theoretical aesthetics. Even though the works of certain theoreticians obviously straddle the fence between various fields of philosophy or altogether transcend the boundaries of philosophy, the present article will deal primarily with conceptions related to actual questions of aesthetics.

### **Aesthetics: the institutional dimension**

Contemporary trends together with the development of established aesthetic traditions within philosophy are researched by a number of academic and educational institutions in present-day Russia. Those include the Department of Aesthetics of the Institute of Philosophy (RAS) and the Chair of Aesthetics in the Faculty of Philosophy of the M. V. Lomonosov Moscow State University. Mention must also be made of State Institute of Art Studies and the Research Institute of the Theory and History of Fine Arts; even though neither of these institutes specialises in aesthetics per se, the research they carry out is nonetheless closely related to philosophical questions regarding the arts and culture.

Research conducted by the Department of Aesthetics of the Institute of Philosophy has primarily been directed to the role and place of aesthetics in the contemporary world, the history of aesthetic thought, and Russian religious aesthetics. The Department sponsors a publication aimed at addressing these issues, the yearbook *Aesthetics: Yesterday. Today. Always*. We shall only cite some of the major lines of research pursued by the department's staff, among whom are prominent theoreticians whose scholarly careers began during the Soviet era. In addition, the department is home to an independent research group, Post-Non-Classical Aesthetics, which includes V. V. Bychkov, N. B. Mankovskaya, and N. A. Kormin.

Viktor Bychkov, head of the Department between 1998 and 2011, is the author of a large number of monographs on Byzantine and Russian mediaeval aesthetics (Bychkov 1991, 1992, 2008, 2011), as well as on contemporary aesthetics (Bychkov 2010); his works have been translated into English, German, Italian, Greek, Serbian, and other languages. Bychkov calls on an extensive range of materials in his analysis of the spiritual paradigms of late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Russian Orthodox cultural space, with the aim of providing as rich a description and investigation as possible of models of artistic and aesthetic consciousness in Christian culture. His two-volume work titled *Two Thousand Years of Christian Culture sub Specie Aesthetica* (Bychkov 2007a) goes far beyond merely recounting and analyzing the aesthetic views of the greatest thinkers within their respective epochs; it also offers an analysis of the philosophical actuality of aesthetic categories (such as the Christian tradition of thinking about the beautiful). In the final chapters of the second volume the author focuses on the most recent periods in the history of Christian aesthetics, tracing the development of major aesthetic subjects and categories: the notions of beauty and the sublime, the spiritual and the corporeal in religious art, etc.

In his works Bychkov often lays emphasis on the focal problematic points of aesthetic thought (e.g., questions about the image and the symbol, or the icon). The manner in which the research is structured around major problems and conceptions is conducive to a

comprehensive impression of the type of cultural consciousness under study. He has been researching the aesthetics of theurgy for many years (a trend in Russian “implicit”<sup>1</sup> aesthetics of the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries associated with the works of such great thinkers as Vladimir Solovyov, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Vasily Rozanov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Pavel Florensky et al.; see Bychkov 2007b). Bychkov is also the author of several textbooks on aesthetics, which have seen numerous editions and are among the most respected (Bychkov 2012). He was likewise the general editor of *The Lexicon of the Non-Classical. The Arts and Aesthetics in the Culture of the twentieth Century* (Bychkov 2003), which provides an overview of all the key figures, concepts, and artistic and aesthetic schools of the century.

The works co-authored by Bychkov, Nadezhda Mankovskaya, another member of RAS IPh staff, and Vladimir Ivanov deserve separate mention. They include: *Dialogue: The First Conversation on Aesthetics, Contemporary Art, and the Crisis of Culture*, *Dialogue: The Second Conversation on the Philosophy of Art in Various Dimensions*, and *Dialogue: Living Aesthetics and the Contemporary Philosophy of Art* (Bychkov et al. 2007, 2009, 2012). This extensive work in three volumes was penned in the epistolary genre and presents a discussion touching on a very broad range of subjects related to the Classical, Non-Classical, and Post-Non-Classical aesthetic consciousness (terms coined by the authors). The discussion turns mainly on central questions of present-day aesthetics, such as the perception of contemporary art, the crisis of contemporary art, and others. All of these subjects fall into the field of interests of one of the participants of the “dialogue,” N. B. Mankovskaya, the translator of several twentieth century French philosophers and a leading specialist in postmodern aesthetics (Mankovskaya 2000, 2009). In her research in the “implicit aesthetics” of postmodernism, the author provides more than a survey of the key concepts of postmodern aesthetics, she also raises questions about its further evolution. In particular, she undertakes an analysis of the aesthetic potential of interactive, technologically-generated imagery and the tendency of the ludic model of existence to become absolute. She likewise researches the emergence of the so-called “new corporeality” (computer-aided “corporealisation” of perception) as well as other modifications of contemporary perceptual consciousness, which is being transformed from a spectator into a spectator/co-creator. In addition, N. B. Mankovskaya examines the question of virtuality as an important component of contemporary cultural and aesthetic consciousness.

Returning now to pre-Soviet Russian philosophical aesthetics, we must mention the work of Nikolai Kormin, whose research primarily concerns the aesthetics of Vladimir Solovyov. Kormin has produced a number of articles and monographs summarising Solovyov’s aesthetics, in which he considers every aspect and detail pertinent to Solovyov’s metaphysics of the symbol (Kormin 2001, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010). Another important area of Kormin’s research is the philosophy of Symbolism. In addition to his interest in the epistemological dimension of aesthetics, he works on the ontology of the aesthetic (as presented in a monograph

<sup>1</sup> The notion of implicit aesthetics has been elaborated on by V. V. Bychkov, who interprets it as a “semi-theoretical freeform conceptualization of the aesthetic experience from within other disciplines such as philosophy, rhetoric, philology, theology, etc.” (Bychkov and Bychkov 2010).

bearing this title; Kormin 1992). By studying the theories of philosophers of the past and constructing his own theoretical schemes, Kormin reveals the possibilities of applying an ontological language to the description of harmony, art, and the aesthetic being of the individual and society alike (Kormin 2012). We should mention as well the theoretical works of Vera Samokhvalova, Chief Research Associate of the Institute of Philosophy. She is concerned with the same field of aesthetic thought as Kormin, studying the ontological dimension of beauty and art. In her monographs and articles V. I. Samokhvalova analyses such crucial aesthetic concepts as harmony, creativity, and artistic form in relation to questions examined within anthropology (Samokhvalova 1990, 2012).

Another scholar whose research lies in the domain of aesthetics is Konstantin Dolgov, Chief Research Associate of the Institute of Philosophy and President of the Russian Association of Aesthetics. His works include monographs and articles on Konstantin Leontiev, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Vasily Rozanov (Dolgov 2008), as well as works related to the history of Western aesthetics and the philosophy of art and culture—*From Kierkegaard to Camus. Philosophy. Aesthetics. Culture* (Dolgov 2011); *The Aesthetics of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Dolgov 1990), and many others. Dolgov has been a contributing author to, and the general editor of, a number of collective works on general questions of aesthetics and the history of aesthetic doctrines (Dolgov 1996a, b). We can briefly mention research into such areas as bionics and morphogenesis of living systems, which have been of standing interest to another member of the Department, Anatoly Lipov, Cand. Phil. (Lipov 2010).

Helen Petrovsky has headed the Department of Aesthetics since 2011. She specialises in contemporary philosophy, theory of art, and visual studies. Her works are associated with studies of concrete phenomena of contemporary culture, as in her monograph entitled *The Unapparent. Essays on the Philosophy of Photography* (Petrovsky 2002), as well as questions of a purely theoretical nature, such as the non-semiotic conception of the image Petrovsky presents in *Anti-Photography* and *The Theory of the Image* (Petrovsky 2003, 2010). The image is understood as being at base a pre-conscious phenomenon, a place without a place where figuration originates. The image expresses the initial connectedness and the shared experience of existence in a global world, including the kind of experience that has traditionally been defined as aesthetic.

Contemporary culture, including mass culture, and relevant advanced strategies for studying it, provide productive areas of contemporary aesthetics. Among works of note in this regard are the publications of Oleg Aronson, of the Institute of Philosophy, devoted to film and media theory (Aronson 2003, 2007). Like Helen Petrovsky, Aronson is concerned with philosophical issues of community (Aronson 2002; Petrovsky 2012). The introduction of the motive of communicative affectivity has enabled both authors to find a fresh perspective on the relation between aesthetics and politics and to establish an essential connection between critical thinking, aesthetic judgment, and social action.

Oleg Genisaretsky, member of the Centre of the Methodology and Ethics of Science, is a figure apart. He was one of the first Russian scholars to investigate the theory of design and project culture. In the 1960s and 1970s Genisaretsky participated in the seminars of the Moscow Methodological Circle (MMC) headed

by G. P. Shchedrovitsky; the range of his scholarly interests is extensive and includes the aesthetics of socio-cultural project-making closely associated with the ecological and axiological dimensions of project culture (Genisaretsky 1991, 1995).

### **Aesthetics: the institutional dimension (concluded)**

Turning now to the other institutions from the list of those mentioned above, their scholarly work also takes place within the domain of contemporary aesthetics. We shall commence by naming the theoreticians working in association with the Department of Aesthetics at the Faculty of Philosophy of Moscow State University. Professor M. F. Ovsyannikov became Head of Department upon its foundation in 1960 remaining in this capacity for many years. He is known as a pedagogue and a theoretician, and his works on the history of aesthetics have won as much acclaim as those on the history of Western philosophy (Ovsyannikov 1984). His successor as Head of the Department was Professor E.G. Yakovlev. Professor Alexander Migunov has held the position since 2001. He specialises in contemporary aesthetics and the philosophy of art. His works deal with the little-researched subject of the aesthetics of the marginal (naïve art and outsider art for the most part), as well as a wide scope of questions relevant to the study of contemporary art (Migunov 2002, 2010, 2011). Marginal and deviant aesthetics fall within the scope of interests of another member of the Department, Stanislav Zavadsky. Questions concerning the current state of Russian aesthetic consciousness are also examined at MSU (by V. P. Krutous and T. V. Kuznetsova).

The State Institute of Art Studies (SIAS), founded in 1944, comprises the Department of Art Theory, formerly known as the Department of Aesthetics. Renamed in 1998, the Department has been focusing on bridging the gap between theoretical aesthetics and artistic practices, and its researchers have been primarily concerned with finding solutions to the problems posed by contemporary art and the present cultural situation, which are of a transitional nature. Among the past and present members of the Department we find such names as A. I. Mazaev, N. A. Yastrebova, S. T. Vayman, O. A. Krivtsun, I. V. Kondakov, M. N. Boyko, V. A. Kolotaev, and Yu. N. Kulikov. A. K. Yakimovich, known for his significant contribution to the aesthetic theory of the avant-garde and contemporary art, was also a member of the Institute (Yakimovich 2004).

For the most part SIAS publications bear on comparative historical research in art history and cultural studies. However, works on the history of aesthetics and new developments in contemporary culture occupy a prominent place among them, as well as textbooks and methodological aids to aesthetics and the theory of art. Topical issues of aesthetics are also touched on, including the issue of 'high' and 'low' in twentieth century art (Bogomolov 2011, 2013), the specific nature of aesthetic experience in the context of globalisation (Novikova 2008), the aesthetics of psychedelic art and the mass media (Kuzmina 2013), and others. Publications by SIAS members seek not only to conceptualise the aesthetic aspects of the modern-day cultural universe (Tasalov 2007), but also to investigate the history of aesthetics and the theory of aesthetic perception and thinking (Belyaev 2008), the aesthetics of advertising and the urban environment (Salnikova 2002), and the function of the



artistic element in everyday life (within a wider framework of folk culture studies; —see Gamzatova 2007).

A comparative analysis of philosophical conceptions of art by thinkers from different epochs is regularly featured in the journal *Artistic Culture* published by the SIAS.

Research conducted at the Research Institute of the Theory and History of Fine Arts is primarily associated with the name of its director, V. V. Vanslov, a specialist in aesthetics and music studies and the author of an impressive number of essays and monographs on general theoretical issues of aesthetics (*The Paths of History. On the Artistic Culture of the Twentieth Century, Art and Beauty, and Aesthetics and the Fine Arts*; see Vanslov 2002, 2006, 2007), and also the theory and history of music. The Institute's members have worked on Western European and Oriental aesthetics, as well as the aesthetics of different artistic styles. Note should be taken of the yearbook published by the Institute, *Russian Art of the Modern Age*, with articles on the psychological, aesthetic, and social aspects of artistic activity. In addition, the Institute hosts a scholarly seminar on the problems of aesthetics and the theory of art headed by O. A. Krivtsun, the author of a textbook, *Aesthetics*, for university students (Krivtsun 2000), as well as a number of books on the psychology of art and the creative mind of the artist.

Given the current intellectual situation, we are unlikely to find any thriving schools or trends outside the institutional paradigm. It would be more productive to trace out the “lines of force” that structure contemporary aesthetic thought and bring together distinct theoretical constructions.

### **Non-institutional aesthetics: primary problem fields**

The traditional line of development of aesthetic theory as the study of the history of aesthetics is primarily associated with scholars whose work involves close cooperation with the above institutions. We can doubtlessly continue our list of theoreticians, for example, Vyacheslav Shestakov, who for decades has been conducting studies related to the philosophy and history of culture at the Russian State University for the Humanities and the Russian Institute for Cultural Research. He is the author of a number of works on various cultural epochs and the corresponding aesthetic ways of thinking (Shestakov 2010, 2013). Contemporary religious aesthetics is also often researched in the vein of the history of philosophy and associated with the scholarly work conducted in specialised institutions. However, there are other extant “lines of inheritance” today.

A growing interest in various schools of Marxist and Workerist<sup>2</sup> thought among today's philosophers and intellectuals is also exerting an effect on the development

<sup>2</sup> Workerism (or Operaismo) is a trend in contemporary Marxism that emerged in Italy in the 1960s. The research of Workerists and Post-Workerists focus on the analysis of new types of labour (“precarity” and “immaterial labour” as described by M. Hardt and A. Negri and the “virtuosity” of P. Virno), and the forms of social and political existence in the post-Industrialist era. The most prominent representatives of post-Workerism are M. Hardt, A. Negri, P. Virno, and M. Lazzarato. In general, a growing interest in Marxism can be explained by the emerging need for a socially-oriented critical theory.



of aesthetic theory. Contemporary research is often based on achievements by Soviet aestheticians in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the concepts and principles of aesthetics formulated by Mikhail Lifshits, a prominent Soviet philosopher and literary scholar, and, albeit to a lesser extent, those of Evald Ilyenkov and Moisey Kagan. Lifshits' aesthetics, which sought to be an alternative to "official" Marxism, did not result in the creation of a fully-fledged philosophical school; however, his reflections on the onto-epistemological foundations and functions of art as well as on the anthropology of the creative individual remain largely relevant to date.<sup>3</sup> The theoretical field of contemporary Marxist aesthetics is in a transitional state; as for established theoreticians representing the Lifshits line, mention should be made of V. G. Arslanov, the author of several monographs and the editor responsible for publication of materials from the Lifshits archive. His best known critical work is titled *The Myth of the Death of Art* (Arslanov 1983). Later works include books on the history of art in the West and a work that has sparked much debate, *Postmodernism and the Russian "Third Way": The Tertium Datur of Russian Culture in the twentieth Century* (Arslanov 2007). The author bases his research on both historical and cultural events of the previous century, and their inherent meaning and the cluster of accompanying problems are studied with the aid of theoretical tools from Marxist philosophy.

The aesthetics of M. S. Kagan, whom we mentioned above, though faithful to Marxist aesthetics, is influenced by structuralism and systems analysis. The scholar prioritises the ontology of art and the artistic image in his early as well as his later works, with equal attention to problems of axiology (Kagan 1997, 2003). The Structuralist impulse, coupled with interest in the category of aesthetic value, is present in the works of other well-known theoreticians of Soviet and Post-Soviet aesthetics, such as L. N. Stolovich and Yu. B. Borev. However, Structuralist methodology in the vein of the Tartu School eventually began to draw criticism, largely due to the influence of synergetics in the humanities (as reflected in the works of Kagan and Samokhvalova).

Returning to Yu. B. Borev, it should be noted that his conception of "theoretical and informational aesthetics" aimed at studying contemporary aesthetic information, is among the first Russian philosophical works within media studies (Borev 2002). Media aesthetics is developing quite rapidly; important works by scholars outside Russia are receiving close attention and a corpus of texts by Russian specialists in the area is taking form. The theoretical heritage of Post-Structuralist philosophy often serves as the basis for various conceptions associated with the new subjectivity generated by the current cultural situation. The analysis of such concepts as the media subject and media reality can be found in works by V. V. Savchuk, whose theorising relies on his meticulous study of the artefacts and tendencies inherent in contemporary art. According to Savchuk, what we are witnessing today is a reorientation of aesthetic thinking, since with the rise of media

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<sup>3</sup> The Lifshits Institute project, founded as a social movement in 1994 by Dmitry Gutov and Konstantin Bokhorov, needs to be mentioned in this respect. One of its initial goals was the rediscovery of the phenomenon of Soviet Marxism and finding a means of bringing together artists and theoreticians sharing Communist views on art. Apart from work with the archive of Lifshits, the Institute's activities include the organisation of exhibitions and public discussion events.

reality it is no longer possible to operate with familiar aesthetic categories or the traditional concept of the work of art. The more viable approach refers to “aesthetic events” and examines the actual functioning of a given artistic practice without evaluating individual artefacts (Savchuk 2001, 2008).

A substantial number of texts by specialists in media theory deal with photography. N. N. Sosna presents her own understanding of the image in photography on the basis of her analysis of such authors as V. Flusser, R. Krauss and M.-J. Mondzain. She researches visual production techniques, elaborating on the theme of mediation (Sosna 2011). O. V. Gavrishina analyses episodes from the history of photography in the context of the theoretical and anthropological problems of corporeality and documentation (Gavrishina 2011). V. I. Mikhalkovich and V. T. Stigneev, in a work titled *The Poetics of Photography* (Mikhalkovich and Stigneev 1989), focus on the mechanics of creating photographic imagery and the artistic means to which the photographer has recourse.

Contemporary film theory as a component of media theory is pursued by scholars coming from a wide variety of methodological backgrounds and expressing different views. The most important writings by theoreticians who started to research the subject already during the Soviet period include those by L. K. Kozlov, who has developed Eisenstein's aesthetics (Kozlov 2005), M. B. Yampolsky, who applied the method of intertextuality to his analysis of cinematography (Yampolsky 1993), and R. A. Kazarian, a pedagogue, sound engineer, who defends the idea that in cinema the acoustic space is irreducible (Kazarian 2011). All of these scholars have been greatly influenced by the Tartu School of Semiotics, in particular Yuri Lotman, who worked on the aesthetics of cinematography (Lotman 1973).

Another prominent trend in contemporary Russian aesthetics is the development of phenomenology within the framework of aesthetic theory. In his endeavour to advance the anthropology of literature, Valery Podoroga, one of the most influential contemporary Russian philosophers, turns to the phenomenology of consciousness as well as to corporeality and corporeal images. However, the images in question are perceived as non-objectified corporeal systems rather than as phenomena of a purely artistic nature (Podoroga 1995). Mention should also be made of Podoroga's fundamental work *Mimesis* and his original conception of double (or reversed) mimesis, in which he uses Russian literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries relying as well on the Russian formalist school and Post-Structuralist theory (Podoroga 2006, 2011). According to Podoroga, who polemicalises with E. Auerbach, mimesis is not limited to the artistic depiction of reality; he is interested in deeper foundations of mimetic mechanisms, which lay bare the anthropological limitations imposed upon the creative subject, have a structure of their own, and transcend the limits of literary or visual texts. In any case, the theory of the novel as a problem of philosophical aesthetics is not without its precedents in Russia (Mann 1998).

Another theoretician whose primary philosophical preferences are close to Podoroga's is M. K. Ryklin. He has focused on the relation between aesthetics and politics, as well as on issues such as power, ideology, and collective subjectivity. His publications include *Terror-logics* (Ryklin 1992), an examination of the concept of speech culture with emphasis on ideological language, *Art as an Obstacle* (Ryklin

1997), an attempt to work out a new extra-disciplinary definition of aesthetics, equating it with politics, and *Freedom and Interdiction: Culture in the Time of Terror* (Ryklin 2008), a study of several individual intellectual projects from the Soviet era. Ryklin's interests overlap partially with those of B. E. Groys, art critic and media theorist and author of books and articles on the aesthetic forms of Soviet and post-Soviet culture as well as the aesthetics of the avant-garde in its declared liaison with totalitarian politics (of special note is Groys' *The Art of Utopia. Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*; Groys 2003). It has to be said that the aesthetics as well as the projective principles of the Russian avant-garde have not suffered lately from lack of scholarly attention; works by S. O. Khan-Magomedov, E. Yu. Dyogot, and E. A. Bobrinskaya are widely known, even though they are closer to art studies.

The opening-up and expansion of the strict disciplinary bounds of contemporary aesthetics illustrated by the foregoing has played a significant role in stimulating a corresponding development of philosophical thinking. Questions of aesthetics are addressed by people who have no professional ties to academic philosophy. Thus, the minimalist composer V. I. Martynov wrote a book entitled *Jacob's Streaked Rods* (Martynov 2008) in which he presents a generalised theoretical analysis of the verbal and the visual aspects of contemporary culture and formulates the notion of a "hieroglypheme," which ostensibly resembles the traditional interpretation of the artistic image, but de facto relates more to pre-conceptual cognition and immediate perception of reality. This is closely associated with his understanding of music as a substance that permeates the world and requires no objectivation or form of representation whatsoever (Martynov 2002). We might also mention the reflections of the architect E. V. Asse on the philosophical foundations of architecture, the boundaries of art, and what it means to work with contemporary urban space (Asse 1997).

### The future of the discipline

In this final part, we shall refrain from forecasts concerning the future of research within the framework of aesthetics. That would be presumptuous of us and, furthermore, it would fail to address the task of providing an overview of the many statements within aesthetics understood in the broadest sense. However, what we cannot ignore are *the tendencies* that have emerged and continue to emerge in the humanities, and here we would like to sketch a brief outline of these.

Let us begin with the fact that aesthetics is considered, explicitly or implicitly, as an essentially *historical* phenomenon. We encounter the negative affirmation of this understanding—the affirmation *a contrario*, if you will—whenever the subject and the categorial apparatus of aesthetics in its older form are put in question, which happens de facto as new disciplines, such as visual studies and media studies, seek to address the altered conditions of living in a global world. We shall not be exaggerating if we say that these new disciplines altogether refuse to employ the conceptual apparatus of the old aesthetic theory, even though they do show considerable interest in their own foundations, that is to say, they betray a penchant for self-reflection. On the other hand, areas where the apparatus of classical

aesthetics still retains a measure of importance tend to relate more to the history of ideas, which implies that research into the circumstances underpinning the publication of historical texts, and thus also their actual content, is given priority over the analysis of the present.

Finally, we cannot omit mentioning the transformation of the very definition of “aesthetics.” It is possible that examples of the word’s contemporary usage are the most convincing proof of the quiet revolution that occurred in the discipline a while ago. Before we consider this in detail, let us briefly recall the historical and theoretical conditions that had led to the current state of affairs. More specifically, the fate of aesthetics could not have remained unaffected by such major events as the crisis of the philosophy of representation and the crisis of art, which became clearly manifest in the course of the twentieth century. Let us make the following disclaimer right away: we do not attach any judgmental connotation to the word “crisis,” using it only to point out the exhausted state of certain conceptual and axiological possibilities inherent in the art and philosophy of Modernity.

Indeed, the kind of aesthetics that emerged from the depths of classical philosophy was not merely a type of cognition inferior to intellectual speculation (or at least comprising the initial stages thereof), but also a discipline that became firmly associated with the philosophy of art starting in the eighteenth century. One might say that until the twentieth century the philosophy of art laid primary emphasis on *form*, be it the transcendent absolute of the Romantics manifest in phenomena of the material (i.e., artistic) world, imbuing them with meaning, or, strictly speaking, giving form to them, or the very work of the artist, in which are revealed formal principles of its structure wholly unrelated to the meaning conveyed. But it was the twentieth century avant-garde that forcefully posed the problem of formlessness, and in a twofold manner.

On the one hand, avant-garde artists proclaimed objectlessness to be the aesthetic principle of the new art. Thus, Kandinsky and Malevich taught us to view geometric figures such as a point, a line, a circle, a triangle, a sphere, etc., as something other than pictorial elements—more like vectors directing the viewer’s gaze. In this sense, abstract art is not all that distant from icons, whose purpose is to transform the religious believer as he contemplates the icon. This is deemed possible inasmuch as it entails the “absent presence,” which is nothing other than God. Secular abstract art likewise aimed to transform the viewer. However, it was seen from the perspective of a coming new social order, where art, albeit still autonomous (at least with regard to the choice of the means of creative expression), would have to serve the purpose of life-building (*zhiznestroitelstvo*) that was elevated to the status of state policy. The avant-garde abolished, literally erased itself in the name of extra-artistic reality, and no matter how much one discusses the ambiguous position of an artist under the Soviet regime, there is no doubt that the art produced during that period acquired—and retains—a certain projective surplus, or potential of the social imaginary, as S. Buck-Morss puts it, which remains perfectly relevant.

Let us state this thesis as pointedly as possible: contemporary art consistently rejects every form of spectacularity or representationism. This is perfectly obvious if we consider the most salient trends of twentieth and twenty-first century art such as conceptualism, performance art, action art/intervention art, etc. Art breaks out of

galleries and invades life itself, as if to claim the legacy of the *raznochintsy* intelligentsia of the 1860s (Chernyshevsky et al.). Acting as a catalyst of a new composition of social relations and in this way remaining true to the avant-garde, such “art” leads one to question the very definition of art. It is quite obvious that such criteria as “high/low,” “beautiful/ugly,” etc., no longer apply, since this kind of art has already lost its aesthetic autonomy once and for all. This art becomes truly indistinguishable from life itself, first and foremost, in its collective dimension, manifest quite unambiguously in the conditions of globalisation. We maintain that aesthetic contemplation as a cultural practice of individuals is being replaced by shared perception as the dominant practice of communities. Sensual perception today is the prerogative of the collective subject (see Petrovsky 2013). It goes without saying that mass culture played an important part in establishing this shift, having evolved from a manipulative cultural industry (Adorno) to the object of collective desires (Jameson) as perceived by those who interpret it.

We mentioned above that new modes of philosophizing emerged in the course of the twentieth century, their origins traceable to nineteenth century thinkers. Stating the point summarily, philosophy is becoming immersed in the endless circulation of interpretations. By this we mean to say that any sign that attracts the scholar’s attention is already an interpretation of sorts, which is precisely why it is given the status of a sign, according to Foucault. Marx in his analysis of money deals with a structure seen in its interpreted, i.e. distorted, form. The same is true for Nietzsche’s notion of truth, or Freud’s account of fantasy (Foucault 1964). None of these phenomena is *the source* of interpretation, none is a referent per se. A new interpretation intrudes to validate itself by means of another interpretation that is always already in place. It is in this sense that the world is said to be a text (Derrida). If stated in more familiar terms, philosophy today gives voice to that which was previously treated as having no language of its own or simply mute, viz., everything that the logic of representation failed to grasp. Twentieth century philosophy had been invaded by *exteriority* in a variety of forms, which has prompted questions about such established categories as ipseity, identity, totality, and value. All of this could not but affect the way aesthetics is conceived today.

Today the word “aesthetics” refers to many different kinds of things. Perhaps, all that its numerous definitions have in common is the use of the predicate “sensuous.” By aesthetics we may mean something like “atmosphere,” which acts as a mysterious mediator between the object and the subject of perception (Böhme et al.); it can also be understood in terms of an “ethical turn,” which reveals some sort of bifurcation: the emancipatory aspirations of the avant-garde, and thus the image of a break in the continuity of historical time, give way to lamenting the Catastrophe, another break, but this time viewed in retrospect. Rather than this, however, politics and art are to be interpreted in all their ambiguity outside the “theology of time” as such (Rancière). Aesthetics is also perceived as “cognitive mapping,” or the experience of daily existence within a totality (viz., the globalised world) without the possibility of representing it; all we can “know” about the absent whole and the logic of the forces that drive it we know by means of substitute figures that invariably introduce distortions (Jameson). Finally, let us cite the notion of aesthetics as “anaesthetics,” or, according to Ernst Jünger, the “second

consciousness” of the contemporary human being, which liberates one from experiencing pain by offering countless technical prostheses (Buck-Morss). These reflections draw on Benjamin’s well-known observation that aesthetics requires politicisation against the background of mass mobilisation, or the “aestheticisation of politics” (during the rise to power of the Nazis).

This vagueness of the very notion of aesthetics does not strike us as deplorable or as testifying to nothing but the decline of aesthetics and/or the erosion of its disciplinary boundaries. On the contrary, the new interest in aesthetics can be seen as a promise of sorts. Two points are worth making in this respect. Firstly, the renewed interest represents a shift of attention to a specific—sensual—mode of cognition, or, in a wider sense, the rise of trust in sensual experience as such. Apparently, what we see here is the influence of contemporary philosophy, which no longer neglects the body and affect, which formerly underwent one form of reduction or another as alleged impediments to knowledge. Secondly, by addressing areas having little to do with the standard interpretation of what the discipline stands for, contemporary “aesthetics” hints that anything can become a source of aesthetic ideas, from artistic practices that cannot be subsumed under the concept of art as spectacle to science that boldly combines living and artificial matter in its experiments. In this sense, aesthetics is open to forms of life that as yet have no names or designations. However, the very use of aesthetic figures and concepts may serve as a guide to the periodisation—or historicisation—of our experience at present.

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