



SEC-IASR 2013

Stylistic types in the history of arts

Gabriel Bulancea *

"Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, 102 Domnească Street, Galați 800008, Galați, Romania

Abstract

There are classifications in the theory of styles which might help create a unitary vision upon styles by giving up the rigid nature of the notion of style and make its significance more fluid. This text is based on the idea that humans relate to the world in three ways: through senses, intellect and sensibility. The shape they give to their perception of the world depends on the mixture of these three. The will guides humans towards one of the three personal attitudes: the empirical, the rational or the empathic one, this phenomenon being reflected on art as well.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Sports, Education, Culture-Interdisciplinary Approaches in Scientific Research Conference.

Keywords: history of arts, stylistic types, naturalism, idealism, expressionism, the baroque, the classique, the romantic;

1. Introduction

When discussing the notion of style, Tudor Vianu introduces a notion that was not exactly new which he calls artistic type which resembles style because both style and the artistic type organize the works of art according to the similitude of their structures. The differences operated by Tudor Vianu refer to the fact that "the type groups the works around one of the constitutive moments of art or another" taking into account its organizing manners while "style groups them around their artistic agent, whether an artistic individuality, an era, a nation or even an entire cultural circle." On the other hand, the type represents a purely systematic, ahistoric notion while style introduces the temporal coordinate as well. In the notion of style the motivations of the unity of the structural elements of the work of art are deeply related to the historic context, the style becoming thus a harmonization between the artist's originality and the tendencies of the era and of the society.

2. Max Deri

We would like to mention first the classification made by Max Deri (1878-1938) which took into account the

* Corresponding author: Gabriel Bulancea

E-mail address: bulancea_gabriel@yahoo.com

distance between nature and the artistic creations. He distinguishes three fundamental attitudes in art: the *naturalistic* one, the *idealistic* one and the *expressionistic* one

Naturalism aims to reproduce as exactly as possible the model selected from reality, with as little intervention as possible from the author. We could include in this category of styles the realistic searches in the plastic art of the Gothic and the Renaissance, the futuristic experiences in the musical art, the realism, the naturalism in all arts, the hyperrealism in the plastic arts, the oiseau style promoted by Olivier Messiaen in music or the onomatopoeias of all kinds that are used by numerous composers in various musical styles, the pictorial impressionism etc. the artist's imaginative-creative function is abolished while he is transformed into a mirror reflecting the reality in front of it as accurately as possible.

Idealism corrects reality; in other words, it understands the ideal of beautiful the way reason perceives it. This category comprises characteristics from the Egyptian art but also the Greek one, from the Roman style, from classicism, neoclassicism, parnassianism, pictorial symbolism, abstract or non-figurative art, neo-impressionism, cubism, futurism, etc. by idealization the artist does not render what he/she sees but what he/she knows he/she sees, distilling the impressions through the filter of reason. He/she adjusts reality till he/she obtains the idea of beautiful, idea which subsists within the symmetry, harmony and proportionality of the components. The work of art becomes an ideal object whose correspondence with reality is generally outlined. The logical construction, the discovery of the mathematics underneath it, underneath the shapes describing the compositional space, becomes a priority. Eliminating the accidental complexity of things till the point where the idea of that particular thing infiltrates, this is the basic characteristic of the idealist attitude.

The *expressionist attitude* distorts reality in order to obtain expression effects. The artist is determined to render the particularity of the experienced emotion, the individual character and not the shape of things. He/she perceives reality through the lens of his/her sensibility, being deeply attached to the subjective emotion. The beautiful is no longer justified by reason, but by feeling. Reason becomes one of the soul's faculties controlled by passionateness. This category comprises styles such as: the gothic, the mannerism, the baroque, the rococo, the romanticism, the expressionism, the metaphysical or surrealist painting, the neo-gothic, the non-figurative expressionism or the action painting etc.

3. Lucian Blaga

Preserving the same ternary classification, Lucian Blaga (1895-1961) introduces other formative values around which the art's tendencies are cantered: the *individual*, the *typical* and the *absolute*. To a certain extent, these notions reiterate the classification made by Max Deri, but the perspective is much ampler and covers a large scope.

The *individual* corresponds to the unique manner through which the human person perceives the world at a given moment. The existentialist philosophy of the beginning of the 20th century recovers precisely this type of attitude. Lucian Blaga associates the individual to Leibniz's philosophy focused on the construction of some entities which make the world, called monads, quasi similar but never identical. These represent the unique shape that our sensibility puts on, a sensibility characterized by the ineffable and because of this impossible to be rendered into words or transmitted identically. The individual becomes somehow similar to the expressionist attitude from Max Deri's classification while in romanticism it associates with the characteristic or the particular.

The *typical* identifies with the archetype, with the Platonist idea, with the ideal which gains formative properties in configuring human conscience. The typical runs away from the accidental aspect of things in order to embrace the essential or the pure idea. The Greek philosophy created it and artists of all ages have periodically pondered upon it. The belief was that if one succeeded in discovering the canon, then the idea of beautiful could have perfused the work of art when it was complied with. But this canon, although an abstract, rational construction, came out of the practical experience after having compared thousands of models from which it was subsequently extracted. The Euclidian geometry played an important part here. These *formative aspirations*, as Lucian Blaga calls them, describe the existing model of the society as well. If the individual breaks its coherence, the typical was a call for unity and harmonization of principles and, respectively, of the individuals. The typical overlaps Max Deri's idealism.

The *absolute* dissolves the human will, removes any impulse towards creativity, towards the exertion of human personality possessed by the capacity to imagine, to invent, to discover new forms of expression. It despotically limits the human freedom in order to give humans another kind of freedom, the freedom of grace, of autonomous

consciousness. The absolute is the most difficult to define and the least similar to Max Deri's category. The absolute typically presupposes the overcoming of the intellectual preoccupations. Starting from the individual and going through the rationalistic abstractions, Lucian Blaga considers dogma as the terminus point of the human spirit's saga. It surpasses the intellectual powers of the isolated man, having a super individual nature. From this point of view, the category of the absolute becomes the image of max Deri's naturalistic attitude only to the extent to which it represses the creative freedom and recommends docility in complying with the dogma or nature as Max Deri foresaw. The personality, the individual, its particular manifestation has no value; what is important is the alignment of the consciousnesses with the absolute, the conformity of the individuals and the achieving of the unity of the collectivity to which he/she belongs to, as a symbol of spiritual unity.

4. Gilbert Durand

Gilbert Durand (1921-2012) approaches the issue in a similar manner grouping the tendencies in art around three *pseudo metaphors*, called this way by him after borrowing some images from the Greek mythology: *Zeuxis' mirror*, *Pygmalion's mirror* and *Narcissus' mirror*. These metaphors catch the complexity of stylistic amalgamations and distillations, engaged in a permanent game of reflexes which, at a certain point, can reflect, within the same stylistic area, the various facets taken by art. It is the most detailed stylistic analysis which divulges in the framework of the history of styles the mixture, the twists and transmigrations of the three mirrors.

Zeuxis' mirror represents the metaphor of naturalism. He chooses Zeuxis because he was an ancient Greek painter whose paintings were so realistic that the birds used to come and peck the grapes depicted on his canvas. Gilbert Durand speaks about a realistic nature or the western art of all times where the beautiful conceived under the light of positivism, seriousness and the purity of truth has priority over Beauty's charm, contingency and subversiveness. And here he is recalling numberless European stylistic instances starting from the Greek and Roman antiquity till the impressionism of the 19th century, all being hovered by the Zeuxis' mirror, whose privileged locus seems to be the Franco-Burgundian one.

Pygmalion's mirror signifies the soul which represents itself, which seeks fulfilment in creation, which shares the hope of a resurrection of the self, which violently tears itself away from the self in order to induce movement into the inert matter of the art. It searches for the expression, identifies itself with the creative impulse, with that tension that will pull it out of immobility, out of non-creative inertia. Being the opposite of the first, Pygmalion's mirror is looking for the passions, the feelings, the emotional depths of the soul, its wishes and aspirations, and it exalts whenever the imitation of what is human is identified in nature. Humanistic realism identifies with the intention of reproducing the human nature as faithfully as possible. Thus, the two mirror already mentioned are separated by a very thin border where one is facing the exterior, the other is facing the interior; one is searching for the light, the other is searching for the shadow; one proves to be synthetic, the other mystical. Pygmalion's mirror finds its privileged locus in the northern German sensibility and in any form of mysticism, because "the focus of the Germanic art is always the expression of the soul through mimics going as far as the tension of the grimace, the contortion, sometimes caricatural, of the bodies, gestures, situations. The torments of passion or melancholy, the uncertainties of faith, the temptations of the devils or of the Nibelungs, the burden of the sin of *being here, dasein*, in the world, confers Germanic sensibility that durable seal of the pathetic."

Narcissus' mirror finds its correspondent in the soul seduced by its own rational image. It lets itself spelled and numbed by the contemplation of its essence, by the blurred perspective of the ideal. We do not know who we are in reality, the reason being the one which, underneath the plane surface of the water, reveals from the depth of the subconscious our ethereal image. But this mirror that Gilbert Durand talked about refers to a far more important aspect, that of the human propensity to the ornamental, to the ludic exercises of the imagination. The formalist impulse related to the revealing of an esthetical attitude in art, which evokes the mere indulgement in combining lines, volumes, colours, turns this aspect into a game of virtuosity of the imaginary.

5. Herbert Read

Herbert Read (1893-1968) reflects a similar opinion: "As far as I believe, maybe there is nothing else but these three fundamental approaches – the realism, the idealism and the expressionism. The realistic approach needs no

explanation; it is, in plastic arts, the effort of representing the world exactly as it presents itself to our senses, without attenuations, without omissions, without counterfeits of any kind. The fact that such an effort is not as simple as it might seem is proven by a movement such as the impressionism, which questioned the scientific bases of the normal or conventional vision and strived to be more and more exact in mirroring nature. Idealism, probably the most employed manner of representation in arts, starts from the basis of the realist vision but deliberately chooses and removes some of the multitude of facts. According to the classic definition given by Reynolds, «in the art of painting there are qualities that go beyond what is commonly called the imitation of nature ... all arts reach perfection due to an ideal beauty, superior to anything that could be found in the concrete nature». He eye of the artist, he says in the same *Discurs* (the third), «being endowed with the gift of distinguishing, within the general aspect of things, those accidental defects, the excrescences and deformities, of extracting, as far as their shape is concerned, an abstract idea which is far better than any individual object.»

Idealism, as it will be further seen, starts from an intellectual basis; Reynolds realizes that precisely this intellectual dignity, by itself, separates the artist from the simple craftsman. Realism, we might say, is based on senses; it records what the senses perceive as faithfully as possible. But the human psychic also comprises another sector that we call the emotional and it is precisely the emotions that the other fundamental type of art corresponds to. Expressionism is the art that tries to depict neither the objective facts of nature, nor some abstract notion based on these facts, but the subjective feelings of the artist. As a method, it should be as entitled as the other two and in various times and in various countries it was most common and the most unanimously accepted form of art.” Expressing such an opinion, he aligns himself to the three visions mentioned above. The world, as we perceive it, is mediated by the senses, the intellect and feelings, without the possibility of sacrificing any of these facets. It is a reflection whose image represents a synthesis of the three channels by means of which we access the world. The senses connect us to the physical universe; therefore they belong to the physiological, to the activity of our body, while the others are the sensors which detect mainly the activity of the human soul, *invisible* somehow for the first category. What is also interesting is the fact that for Herbert Read “the different styles that were predominant from the last quarter of the 18th century till the first quarter of the 20th century were essentially derivations, matters of culture and education rather than the appearance of an authentic spiritual form.” Such an approach strengthens his conception which analyses style from the perspective of the domination of the typological vision over the historic one.

From this point of view, the one who best seizes the relationship between the creator and the world is Gilbert Durand who suggests a symbolic terminology meant to enrich, by significance, the concealed nature of concepts. He does speak of a magnifying glass or lens, but of a mirror, an object which through its symbolism refers to the searching for the truth, to the secret corners of the heart or to the discovery of the surrounding universe. It is not accidental that he speaks of a mirror since the unveiling of its content always presupposes a narration more or less evident of the self. It depends on the angle from which we look into the mirror. Time determines the shape of the tumultuous spirit the same way a torrent of lava is shaped by the ford it flows through. The spirit digs into the granite limits of the temporal dimension in order to escape from its embrace and to win the freedom which can be translated into the supreme lucidity towards itself. In doing so, invading the territories outside the ford, the spirit will fecundate currents, will influence new tendencies, and will create new channels which will engrave a new paradigm on the destiny of humanity.

6. Adrian Marino and Romul Munteanu

Adrian Marino (1921-2005) underlines the existence of an “ancient classicism and romanticism, a medieval one, a Renaissance one, etc. It results that the entire history of literature would limit to only two, at most three stereotypical, recurrent, permanent currents (including the baroque).”

As a matter of fact, Romul Munteanu (1926-2011) is also tempted to admit the existence of two stylistic types marking the entire evolution of styles. “Both literature, and the aesthetic thinking of the age highlight two different types of sensibility, one classical in nature, situated under the sign of reason, equilibrium and geometrical spirit, other stimulated by the free fantasy, state of dreaming, expansion of affectivity and the artifice generated by the anti-mimetic spirit, inclined towards asymmetry or saturated forms of expression.”

In conclusion, the analysis above would generate the following correspondences among the typologies mentioned

so far:

Table 1 Equivalence

Max Deri	Lucian Blaga	Gilbert Durand	Herbert Read	Adrian Marino
Naturalism	The absolute	Zeuxis's mirror	Realism	The baroque
Idealism	The typical	Narcissus' mirror	Idealism	The classic
Expressionist attitude	The individual	Pygmalion's mirror	Expressionism	The romantic

Of course, the authors discussed here are not the only ones mentioning the existence of such stylistic types, not even by far. Searching through the archive of a history of art histories I have often come across references about these ahistoric structures which the vast majority of historians are aware of. The present study pays extra attention to this set of problems regarding style seen as a kind of archetype which populates the super-individual consciousness of a culture, together with a subsequence of patterns which, according to circumstances, mark the history of western culture.

References

- Vianu, Tudor (1998), *Aesthetics*, Orizonturi Publishing, București.
 Durand, Gilbert (2003), *Arts and archetypes – religion art*, Meridiane Publishing, București.
 Read, Herbert (1969), *The meaning of art*, Meridiane Publishing, București.
 Marino, Adrian (1973), *Dictionary of literary ideas*, Eminescu Publishing, București.
 Munteanu, Romul (1998), *Classicism and Baroque*, Allfa Publishing, București.