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'LIFE ON ALIEN PLANET'

Approaches to the ecology of a painting - DLA Dissertation 2024.

THESES (ENG)

The narrow genre of my doctoral thesis is image analysis, namely the analysis of the painting ***Life On Alien Planet (Devil Head)*** (1908) by *Dezső Mokry-Mészáros*. Given the title, one of the aims of my thesis is to help us understand how to avoid being *alien* to our own planet. To this end, I wanted to present a framework for analysis and interpretation.

The analytical aspects of the painting were structured by looking at the painting with its title, and then exploring the work from these questions. Because of the aesthetic patterns of the painting - forms are branching off in all directions, 'characters' grouped in clusters - I did not attempt to construct a linear narrative. Although there is a central element to the thesis - the painting itself - my outline is not hierarchical. Just as it is not possible to look at a single surface in a painting, without that is being formally interlocked with other surfaces, my analysis has been multi-directional.

My main questions were: how does the artist imagine Life? As an alien intelligence arriving to planet Earth, or as an entity that is already emerging from the fabric of the planet? What qualities might this conception of Life have: organic, mechanical, or some fusion of the two? By the 'polyphony' of the painting -that the composition is not grouped around a central character- what world and aesthetic image could have emerged from it? Are we looking at a specific outer landscape, or a kind of microscopic vision looking into the depths of the land ? Does the network, that spreads out from the Devil's Head, suggest a Promethean connection, or the emergence of a utopian interconnectedness is in the process of being unleashed? Did the stylistic features of the painting, recognisable from current contemporary aesthetic interpretation, the biomorphic formal world, the late Romantic disenchantment with nature, the scientific-fantastic references, have similar associations in the period of the painting's creation?

One of the radical things about this painting by Dezső Mokry-Mészáros is that it is almost entirely 'of itself'. The aesthetic specificity of most of Mokry's paintings is that they aesthetically map the artist's inherent outsidership, and thereby construct a distinctively Mokry-ian world. Even in this world, however, we can derive the forms and characters of most of his paintings from some pre-existing aesthetic styles. In many of his paintings, we can detect references to Middle/Eastern European folklore, but often to other worlds of

folk art, such as Australian Aboriginal or Asian folk art. Some other paintings from him trace a prehistoric or religious (mainly Buddhist) syncretism.

In my opinion, the image of Devil's Head is more unique than other Mokry paintings. Its self-world is more difficult to presuppose along known categories. For this reason, its uniqueness is also very much related to the art of *Odilon Redon*, although Redon is probably easier to place in his own symbolist and bourgeois period.

Mokry's aesthetic idiosyncrasy seems to be a kind of anticipation of the era of climate change, also in the sense that he himself does not decide the direction and nature of change. The painting oscillates between pessimistic collapse and utopian optimism. In a sense, therefore, during the time of creating this painting, he was not an outsider but rather an '*in-between*'.

At the beginning of the analysis, my main question was: what is the genre that can best demonstrate ecological sensitivity? If my prior knowledge and assumptions are correct, and the beginnings of ecological awareness were already present in the examination of modernity in the 19th century, where could I find experiments in form and thought appropriate to that vision? In late 19th century scientific illustrations? In certain artists of late Romanticism or early Surrealism? In the ideas of artists reflecting on fragments of European folklore? Or in the work of mentally ill or outsider artists? Maybe in the genre of science fiction? In my opinion, this painting by Mokry encompasses all the genres or approaches listed.

Its interconnecting, biomorphic network system is a particular web of life, or pattern, along which I have speculated and developed my findings and theses. These insights were both related to the specific painting and to a contemporary view of it.

I can summarise the thesis of my dissertation along 5 ideas and concepts that follow from each other:

1. **Ecology** and **climate disaster** are two different things, although they go hand in hand. The early theoretical and practical development of the science of ecology coincides with the accelerating destruction of nature in the mid-19th century. The ecological vision and the utopian vision of a society that needed to be transformed were linked from the very beginning of the era. Ecological relations cannot be described in a linear way and cannot be organised in purely hierarchical relationships. Ecology is a logic, brought about in part by the insights of microscopic beings, the development of the theory of evolution, and the removal of the premodern conditions of daily life by the industrial and technological revolution. This ecological sensibility is not exclusively useful in environmentalism, although it is a *sine qua non*.

2. The two dominant visions in the history of ecology, the rise of **microbiology** and the **theory of evolution**, together created the **non-anthropocentric** view. This vision is the basis of a kind of 'long' 20th century. This 'longness' refers to a process begun but not completed, as the radicalism of their insights has not yet become part of the everyday intellectual framework. This lack of the non-anthropocentric approach is one of the causes of climate catastrophe. In my thesis I argue that the internalisation of this attitude on a systemic level would be the first step towards acquiring planetary consciousness. Without a common planetary state of consciousness, ecological perception is not possible. This state of mind was already present in modern or enlightened Western thought during the Romantic period, yet it took a quasi-pantheistic or animistic attitude on the part of some natural scientists and vitalist thinkers at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, for non-anthropocentrism to be included in the concepts of ecology.

3. The starting point for planetary-level, non-human-centred ecological sensitivity is a biologically based, networked morphology, for which I use the term **ecomorphology**. For me, one of the first and most influential artistic thinkers on ecomorphology is Aby Warburg. Ecomorphology, like Warburg's concept of pathos patterns, is not a wholly associative framework, as forms and effects can be scientifically and visually detected from each other. An important factor of this vital morphological framework is that it goes against linear and reductionist logic. Warburg's critique of modernity is not a conservatism based on regressive destruction, but a return to the intellectual stocks that

modernity has concealed, in order to bring them to the surface. Warburgian logic is *submodern*, a term that implies a double meaning of the process of modernity. On the one hand, it refers to its repressive tendency to push underground all that does not fit its pure and rational 'surface' (or civilizational normality): the colonial other, its spiritual or psychological traumas, and the ecological destruction necessary to feed the system. On the other hand, "sub" literally means a microscopic and subterranean cultural and intellectual orientation. This focus from a subterranean logic can also serve as a good entry point to perspectives of non-human-centricity.

4. The aesthetic framework in which the aforementioned hybrid ecological attitude and imaginary world could play a role, could only function freely in the genre of **science fiction**. One of my propositions is that it is possible to use science fiction as a broad aesthetic language, and it is possible to define it as the most appropriate descriptive genre for certain works of visual art. In the work of some artists, the aesthetic key of science fiction may be more appropriate for understanding the work, than categories that are more aptly descriptive of the period independently. The science-fictional approach is also sub-modern in this respect, as it runs parallel to the 'above' categories under the surface. From *Odilon Redon* to *Max Ernst*, from *Eduardo Paolozzi* to *Huma Bhabha*, or from *Tishan Hsu* to *Ivana Bašić*, science fiction framework traces an aesthetic trajectory, that extends from the precursors of surrealism to post-digital aesthetics. In my thesis, I analyse one of the earliest manifestations of science fiction art, Dezső Mokry-Mészáros' *Life on an Alien Planet (Devil's Head)*, based on the definition of the genre, on the one hand. On the other hand, I try to orient the work to the genre through the most recent subcategory of sci-fi, **solarpunk**.

5. The final, ecological thesis of my dissertation is a bioromantic and vitalist reading of Mokry's painting. In my view, by examining a work of art on a partly **biological** basis, we can go so far as to speculate that the work itself can be seen as a living being. This vitalist/animist approach is suited to representing the radical 'other' and to grounding a deeply compassionate ecology.

