

# Aesthetic Investigations

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Review of Oana Șerban's, *After Thomas Kuhn: The Structure of Aesthetic Revolutions* (2022), Berlin: De Gruyter.

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Although it may seem commonplace to consider art history subject to paradigm shifts, as innovative artistic practices come to dominate accepted norms, Oana Șerban's *After Thomas Kuhn: The Structure of Aesthetic Revolutions* analyses various controversies surrounding this view. Invited in 1969 to comment on Everett Hafner's essay 'The New Reality Between Art and Science',<sup>1</sup> Thomas Kuhn, famed author of the influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, concurred with Hafner's conclusion, 'The more carefully we try to distinguish artist from scientist the more difficult our task becomes'.<sup>2</sup> However, Kuhn countered that the only reason art and science appear so similar is that we lack the right tools to distinguish them. Given Kuhn's reticence, it's no wonder Șerban claims scholars' efforts to commute the structure of scientific revolutions into the realms of art made history. [1]

On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kuhn's birth and the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his tome, Șerban revisits decades of debates among art historians regarding just how Kuhn's paradigm shifts apply to aesthetic revolutions. With her criteria of 'aesthetic validity' (rightness and truthfulness) [16] in hand, she concludes that politicised art undergoes paradigm shifts, though such patterns prove more cyclical than linear [18]. To arrive at this point, her six chapters: 1) introduce this book's approach, 2) analyse George Kubler's incommensurable model, 3) clarify her theory of 'aesthetic validity' and explore Everett Hafner's

commensurable model, which links science and art via spirituality, [95] 4) review notions of linear vs. cyclical progress, detours and innovations associated with revolutionary art, including Hegel's 'end of art' thesis, John Borstlap's repudiation of progress in art and Maarten Doorman's realisation that Kuhn's 'coining the incommensurability of paradigms' sidesteps 'progress' altogether, 5) develop her notion of aesthetic validity inspired by: Albert Hofstadter's version, Remi Clignet's view that legal and aesthetic codes, or paradigms generate cultural capital, Jürgen Habermas's pragmatic communication and Martin Heidegger's two-fold notion of 'truthfulness' and 'rightness' and 6) review the avant-garde's political role as articulated by Michel Foucault, Aleš Erjavec, Jacques Rancière and Şerban, though not Natalie Heinich.

In the introduction, Şerban updates Kuhn's 'five standards of theory choice' for art. The theory must be: 1) '*accurate* – that is, verifiable throughout empirical stances of the art world', 2) '*consistent*. . . with other theories devoted to progress and change in arts', 3) have a *broad* scope, 4) *simple* and 5) *fruitful*, such that we 'extend our knowledge on artistic paradigms, aesthetic revolutions and their intimate connection with the models of paradigm shifts prescribed by the history of science'. [1-2] In light of Kuhn's criteria, she considers it

worth reflecting on the understandings of progress, predictability and paradigm shifts in arts with the same lenses that we use in science because, at the end of the day, we seek both their relevance and utility in shaping ideals of the growth, happiness and welfare of our lives. [7]

For Şerban, the most difficult task is to reject the 'conventional assumption . . . that arts and science are *incommensurable domains*'. [11] She situates aesthetics as the mediator between science and the arts, thus dissolving the

dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity as a relationship corresponding to the constitutive dynamics between science and arts, advancing a more holistic approach on these three disciplines that dispute structural similarities in terms of paradigms and revolutions. [11]

In *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962), Kubler proposed 'style' as art's alternative to science's paradigm, such that artists produce 'prime objects' exemplary of an originating 'genotype' that engenders related 'phenotypes'. [58] Şerban suggests that if we 'substitute artefacts and works of art with scientific products and patented inventions, then the balance of art and science is quite equilibrated'. [49] She finds Kubler's idea of art's 'capacity to represent, express or depict scientific research' 'quite Kuhnian', since Kuhn

considered art a vehicle for the dissemination of scientific knowledge and products, being capable to provide a synthesized and ordinary visual explanation for inventions that could improve the life quality of individuals. [51]

In the final chapter, Şerban posits

styles and paradigms as two sides of a cultural revolution, one assigned to artistic revolutions, the other aesthetic revolutions. My point is that each avant-garde is the unitary expression of an aesthetic revolution, and a related, correspondent, artistic movement. [204]

Even so, Şerban posits Kubler as Kuhn's opponent, as their similarities came down merely to a "sympathy for epistemological attitudes such as curiosity, innovation, susceptibility" [53]. This resulted in "three commutable elements: the objecthood, the temporal occurrence as predictability or happening, and the multiple stances of accommodating the public with the produced innovations" [53]. Kubler, who considered art history a progressive 'chain of solutions', [55] distinguished 'promorphic' solutions that are 'inexpensive and clear' from 'neomorphic' ones that are 'costly and interactive'. [62] For him, artists' radical solutions, however temporary, make 'noise' and then fall into a 'drift'. [62] Kubler considered invention and repetition alternating patterns, much like permanence and change. [64]

In a move meant to eschew 'anti-progressive' views, she argues that crediting revolutions with innovation requires 'accurately differentiating between styles, paradigms and progress'. [115] To defeat Borstlap's repudiation of 'progress in art' given its dependance on hierarchical views that commit art to always improving upon yesteryear's efforts, she notes that progress in art and science imply game-changing knowledge and techniques, yet this hardly necessitates hierarchies, let alone winners and losers. [118] Nineteenth century critic William Hazlitt confidently claimed that scientific paradigms build upon knowledge in ways that art does not, but this notion rather reflects his era's art. A practicing scientist, artist and former student of Kuhns, Robert Root-Bernstein considers the view that art lacks science's truth values exemplary of 'scientific chauvinism'.

Şerban's theory of aesthetic validity questions the phenomenon of revolution in terms of 'three core concepts that the nucleus of any such radical change, understood as a paradigm shift, should have, meaning the necessity, the predictability, and the ideology behind it'. [88-89] For her, artistic revolutions, which are material manifestations of aesthetic revolutions, 'determine the objects, symbols and artefacts for aesthetic revolutions, which are placed under the sign of a dominant ideology and framed by particular social, cultural and political puzzles'. [89] Şerban characterises Hofstadter's 1963 notion of aesthetic validity as the 'phenomenological projection of the work of art at the level of aesthetic perception, through which art becomes a truthful

manifestation of Spirit'. [141]

While Şerban acknowledges art's 'power to register the human's progress as a whole through its infinite objects, forms and practices', she credits Reinhart Koselleck and Maarten Doorman with recognising art's 'capacity to provide the means for "a new experience of historical time"'. [106] As Doorman puts it, the Renaissance demonstrated that 'people wanted to (and thought they could) achieve what was better faster'. [107] She characterises Doorman's notion of an artistic revolution as having three traits: 'necessity, comprehension and effective outcomes adjusted to social expectations'. [131] She credits Clignet with having the most 'inclusive and receptive notion of structural compatibility between science and art'. [147] Apparently, Clignet saw artistic revolutions more as 'methodological constructs' that 'reiterate social movements and change'. [149] Recalling Kubler, Clignet characterises artworks as 'phenotypes that confirm or alter the underlying genotypic definitions of Beauty, Morality and Legitimacy'. [172] Şerban defends Clignet from numerable critics by claiming that his theory is incomplete since he failed to distinguish between aesthetic and artistic revolutions. [151] In this context, she concedes that artworks, unlike the objects of science, are intended to break norms, and even shock. [153] She worries that Clignet ignores political interferences that shape paradigms, which she attributes to the aesthetic. [169] By contrast, Habermas's pragmatist turn binds aesthetic validity, universal rationality and communicative reason, [181] which effectively solidifies validity, since he subjects his validity claims to theoretical, practical and aesthetic discourses. [188]

In the final chapter, Şerban remarks that none of the above views prove satisfactory, since they fail to integrate art and politics, which she considers a central feature of avant-gardes. She faults Erjavec for excluding Dada, given its 'anti-art' tendencies, from his view of avant-garde movements as proto-political, [202] and aligns Rancière's rejecting the 'incommensurability between older and newer paradigms' of art with Kuhn, since both treat 'art history as functioning in a non-cumulative way'. [211] Her thesis rather attributes this to incommensurable political orientations. [223] She is finally prepared to link aesthetic validity to politicisation: 'the concept of aesthetic validity lies on the political accents embodied by artistic representations correspondent to a dominant paradigm'. [211] 'Archaeologically, the distribution of the sensible that operates in each aesthetic paradigm, ensuring the shift from one dominant paradigm to a newer, revolutionary paradigm, recovers the immanence of these conditions of possibility, and implicitly "connects art with community and reciprocally with politics"'. [212] When her criteria for aesthetic validity, rightness and truthfulness are applied to genealogical determinations they yield the criteria for perceiving aesthetic objects and their appropriate interpretations, respectively; whereas when they are applied to archaeological determinations, they yield criteria for historically perceiving aesthetic paradigms and correctly interpreting the 'contingency between the

political practices and the artistic praxis'. [215-216]

Şerban not only introduces the complex theories of numerous post-fifties art historians who either welcomed or rejected the notion that artistic revolutions are on par with revolutionary science, but she captures various commentators' responses. Having led a graduate seminar on 'canon formation' (a.k.a. how art history comes to be), I imagine this book proving useful for related courses.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hafner 1969.

<sup>2</sup>Kuhn 1962.

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