

## REVIEW

On the dissertation for acquiring the academic degree Doctor of Science

On the subject: **THE METROPOLITAN CHURCH  
ST. STEPHEN IN NESSEBAR AND ITS ART CIRCLE:  
CULTURAL CONTEXT, INTERTEXTUALITY AND  
INTERVISUALITY**

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The text of this impressive dissertation is united by a common methodological idea, which, like any idea, has a formal and substantive side. If the content is revealed by constantly keeping its multifaceted issues in unity, then I would define the formal as *concentric*. The core, placed at the center of the work and clearly stated in the Preface, are the inscriptions themselves in that "special corpus" which does not consider several monuments with their epigraphy from the same century, but the inscriptions in one monument on different types of surface... for a period of several centuries"(pp. 5-6). Concentric circles are formed around this nucleus, which occupy ever wider territories. The closest is identified by joining various sources, directly or indirectly related to the main ones, followed by the circles of interpretation, each of which is outlined by a particular research aspect - art history, intertextuality and intervisuality, history, culturology and theology. The circles in question are not static, but are in such a movement that the core always sends signals and corrections to keep the high layers of interpretation, and vice versa, each thesis that the author has reached in the study contributes to the full and well-argued presentation of the corpus of inscriptions.

Hence, just as it is obvious that it was necessary for the author to have competencies in a number of very different areas of knowledge in the humanities, it is also clear that proper evaluation of this work requires attitude to be taken by

specialists from different research fields, each of whom to trace one or more of the overlapping directions.

That is why I am obliged to present the framework in which my review will predominantly move. It will not cover the specific matter of fine arts, nor in the spirit of modern art history; beyond it will remain the very important textual questions, as well as everything related to any segment or interaction of segments belonging to the visual senses.

However, the problems that the segments and scientific aspects themselves raise and that gather in the common artistic space and respectively in the common field of art sciences, as well as those related to the self-consciousness of an era expressed in the phenomena of art (in the singular ), whose goal, according to the important words stated by Jaspers, is "to make transcendence tangible, each time in the appropriate form"<sup>1</sup> - these problems discussed in the dissertation, I will focus on, as they are at the center of their own my research pursuits. The dissertation is structured in five sections, framed by Preface and Conclusion. It is provided with numerous illustrations and diagrams and includes Appendices and Iconographic Index. Together with the bibliography, respectable in quantity and scientific quality, covering titles in Bulgarian, Greek and Western European languages, and with the summary in English, it numbers 407 pages.

The five major sections reflect the methodological idea in a way that each of them applies the respective methodology from the overall methodological complex, in accordance with the research perspective chosen for this section. The first point of the discussion on the issues considered in the paper is highlighted by the title *Intervisuality and Intertextuality as Logos*, a subchapter of the **introductory section: Historiographical Review of the Issues, Principles and Objectives of the Study** (pp. 9-18). It immediately outlines directions - horizontal, by the connection indicated by the prefix inter-, between word and image, but also vertical, pointing

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<sup>1</sup> Ясперс, Карл. Духовната ситуация на времето. София, 1996, с. 128.

upwards, beyond the visible and verbal, to the supersensible, made tangible in them. It is this reality which we believe carry the faith and the knowledge that it is revealed to us - "this one and divine reality, realized through intertextuality and intervisuality, I will call here the Logos" (p. 10). I find as bold as well as justified such a clear application of the concept of "Logos" in the context of art and at the same time on the horizon of theology.

The main **contribution** of the dissertation, which is also the basis for the realization of the others - more particular, aspectual and specific contributions - is, in my opinion, to achieve a unified, organic and systematic view of the artistic image, the supersensible Model reflected in it, as well as the coherence between the two, the only one that makes it possible to generate meaning, and hence its discovery with the tools of science. It is clear that "science" itself is not one-dimensional, and that all areas of it involved in the methodology of work in the dynamic interaction that should be described by the concept of interdisciplinary approach<sup>2</sup>, in turn, are associated with perspectives of philosophy and theology, by academic rule not part of the pure, i.e. disciplinary science. Covering all these areas and directions is a titanic intellectual effort that the author was able to undertake, conduct and defend to the end thanks to his personal abilities and his education in many research disciplines of the verbal and the visual.

The coordinate system of the research is organized around two relations, internally homologous in their elements: word - image and Word - Image. The latter is the Model.

I should immediately declare: such a coordinate system is not built speculatively for the purposes of the dissertation *per se*, nor does it follow those inertias that

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term "interdisciplinarity" in the sense revealed by Georgi Fotev in a number of his works. Starting from the fundamental statement that "the form of scientific knowledge is disciplinary", the author outlines four types of discipline: monodisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity (Фотев, Георги. Социологията като строга наука. София, 2018, с. 106).. Distinctive for the interdisciplinary form of scientific knowledge is that it "is not mechanically or externally the objective task of connecting different perspectives, not just mixing two or more language games, two different corpora of rules, but methodical, strictly controlled interaction, in which the principle of additionality plays a key role "(Фотев, Георги. Дисциплинарна структура на социологията. София, 2006, р. 566)

have gained momentum in recent decades, which due to the otherwise understandable desire to distance oneself from the already compromised positivism that has concurred the humanities incite the authors to attract incompatible methods of interpretation of the research object. On the contrary, it was created with the consciousness of a necessity, of the irrevocable imperative, which has never been abandoned by the high historical times of knowledge in its entirety. In modern terms, this imperative consists in the adequacy between method and object. On the other hand, putting it in the authentic words of those times (of Antiquity and the Middle Ages), knowledge must be *appropriate*, that is, mathematical objects correspond to mathematical reason, to higher spheres of the higher realms of the existence - philosophical/theological reason. In this case, such adequacy is achieved by deliberate hermeneutic choice, which allows the researcher to achieve the self-consciousness of the studied era. How this difficult requirement is met is a question that philosophers and experts in cultural studies pay special attention to. The subject must take a detached position in relation to the object, which will allow him at the same time to make the moves of hermeneutic penetration into it, not by taking away his own independence, but on the contrary, by expanding and deepening it.<sup>3</sup>

Such an intellectual effort was carried out by Emmanuel Moutafov in a respectful manner and has led to the almost impossible synchronization of the elements of the multidimensional scientific fabric, illuminating and interpreting each other. An attempt has been made not to combine two modalities of thought - theological and modern science - in principle impossible due to their different foundations; such linguistic and conceptual stereoscopicity has been achieved that the Logos, while still being the Word of God, illuminates the artistic reality that reflects the Model and forces the researcher to develop a language to describe it properly: "...the material is presented with the conviction that The Logos with its

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<sup>3</sup> See Гинев, Димитри. Култорологични студии. София, 1995, с. 7 – 17; 112 – 117.

inseparable hypostases - text, inscription, image - is embodied in the Metropolitan Church "St. Stephen" in order to be read and understood by the worshiper viewer. I am certain that the murals have not only a decorative function and to not affect only aesthetically but presuppose the participation of a literate recipient in the decoding of the exquisite messages in it. These messages were set by an even more literate and learned artist in synergy with the local clergy, with different sources, in order to have a literate, educational and catechetical role using all the tools of the Logos. (pp. 102 - 103).

**Part 1:** *Cultural Context* (pp. 19 – 43) reproduces the methodological model adopted in the work, looking at different aspects of its thematic range. To this end, the author started from the toponyms Mesemvria, Missouri, Nessebar, went through the political events of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, addressed issues of economics and education in the city and reached to the presentation of the Mesembria Metropolitanate - one of the first metropolitanates "involved in establishing the new Christian Church under Emperor Constantine" (p. 29). The view here is inevitably retrospective due to the limited data on the earlier epochs of the city's development. **Part II:** *Intertextuality* (pp. 45 – 67) and **III:** *Intervisuality* (pp. 69-91) again share two research aspects, which, joined together in **Part IV:** *Intervisuality, Intertextuality, Reception, or the Logos in a Metropolitan Church and its Artistic Circle* (pp. 93 - 251) reveal in a synthesis the meaning of the phenomenon they describe and which is synthetic in itself. It is natural and expected that the last, **Part V:** *Problems in the Interpretation of the Monument and its Context* (pp. 253 - 355), based on everything achieved in the previous ones, builds on the author's interpretation of the monument, already crystallized but continuing to develop in depth. As a result of almost detective work related to attribution, localization of sources and monuments and reading inscriptions, the author sifts out the authentic from the unreliable ones that have entered circulation among specialists, and after the long research journey he has traveled, raised and defended his thesis and also offers hypotheses. Such is the

assumption that the painters who worked in Nessebar at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century belonged to a certain current or workshop, namely that "in Nessebar there is a team of masters from the wide circle around Mikhail and Constantine of Gramosta workshop, which is why ideological similarities are observed in some of the images, but never absolute coincidences" (p. 352).

Without going into an analytical commentary on all that is available at the historical and textological level, as well as the many specific levels of art history in this multi-layered dissertation, I cannot pass by the great work of collecting, researching, organizing and interpreting material, interception of information from diverse sources, requiring not only information but also heuristic ability. The choice of monuments with which parallels with "St. Stephen" are convincing, and the arguments are explicit. Behind every monument, behind every comparison, there are traditions, changes, tendencies. The deep knowledge of these has ultimately led to the presented **conclusions**, which contain the following **contributions** of the thesis. Even the example of the author's thesis that "in the altar apse the central image of St. Virgin Mary Pammakaristos, which has a connection with the Church of Constantinople and specifically with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, is decisive, since such a connection is also evidenced by the inclusion of St. Mary in the apse since about such a connection points out the inclusion of St Proclus in the program of the bema ... Another accent in the decoration is the scene "Communion of the Apostles", which follows both Palaeologus and later, probably Epirus models... The most interesting solution in the apse of the New Bishopric of Nessebar is that the whole Eucharistic pyramid of the bema is crowned by the composition *The Covenant of the Covenant, carried by the king and the people to the house of King David* (III Kings 8: 5-6), again following Constantinopolitan models of the Palaeologus era, recast through Cretan aesthetics" (p. 255). With the author's proposed **new interpretation** of the fragmentary surviving mural here, the connection of one of the long inscriptions

in the temple is also made. Among the other conclusions, worthy of note for their contributory character, I will cite one more, distinguished by its generalizing rank: "... "St. Stephen" with an original dedication to the Holly Mother is a typical metropolitan temple, with the ambition to gather as many cults and, respectively, shrines (relics) as possible, reflecting diachronically the preferences of the clergy, of the highly educated hierarchs with even more impressive career intentions, and of the peculiarities of the spiritual life of the rich Greek-speaking parish" (p. 294). The **conclusion** of the work (pp. 357 - 364) could be defined as a synthetic coda in its content - with this term, borrowed from the discipline of "musical analysis", I try to express the approach that brings together the main themes discussed in the exposition, placing them on a further, summarizing level and allowing them to emit new core of meaning thanks to their mutual contextualization.

The abstract has been prepared in accordance with the requirements and faithfully reflects the content of the work. The list of publications, many of which have appeared in refereed and peer-reviewed journals, attests to the research activity and authority of their author.

If I were to give a decisive definition of the work, it would be not just "contributory" but "groundbreaking" - because of the comprehensive methodological network that has been developed, covering new, previously unreported or only partially addressed research perspectives, because of its responsibly derived *methodology* in its entire composition of private-scientific methodologies, and above all because of that vector of the main *idea* which points upwards, towards the achrony over historical times, and which inspires the confidence that the people of drawing, writing, sound and/or reasoning of the past remain close to the people of today.

I confidently vote FOR the award of the academic degree "Doctor of Science to Emmanuel Stefanov Moutafov.

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