

THE STYLISTIC GRAMMAR OF EXPRESSIONISM

Corina Gajea

* corinagajea@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the re-conceptualized notions of Expressionism, as a modernist movement extended in literature, painting, and film, from an aesthetic point of view. Works from a range of genres will be taken as a case study and figures as diverse as Kafka, Kandinsky or Emil Nolde will be embraced, as well as some of the main manifestos and critical statements regarding Expressionism. Thus, after a survey of ideas about beauty and related concepts, questions about the value of aesthetic experience and the variety of aesthetic attitudes will be addressed.

Keywords: *aesthetic, cosmic, Expressionism, unconscious, manifestos, multi-dimensionality.*

1. The unifying effect of synchronous elements

Expressionism, a current equating with the 20s silent movies of German school, brings in cinema the themes and styles of literary, plastic, and theatrical aesthetic expressionism, while providing an important exam designed to impose film as art. Eisner defines Expressionism as “*a reaction against the atom-splitting of Impressionism, which reflects the iridescent ambiguities, disquieting diversity, and ephemeral hues of nature.*”¹

The current cannot be understood without giving the décor its value both in plastic, literary, and screen place, as in the whole diegesis. There is in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* a non-figurative décor, a photonic one, and *iridescent ambiguities, disquieting diversity, and ephemeral hues of nature.*”²

The current cannot be understood without giving the décor its value both in plastic, literary, and screen place, as in the whole diegesis. There is in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* a non-figurative décor, a photonic one, and

*Iulia Gajea, PhD. Candidate at Babeş-Bolyai University, and English Teacher at SAM Poiana Turda. The areas of interest are historical and evolutionary linguistics, philosophy of language, and neurolinguistics.

Recent publications: *The Phenomenology of Space in Romance Languages' Development* *Analele Universității Creștine Dimitrie Cantemir*, http://aflls.ucdc.ro/doc/anale1_2014.pdf

Linguistic Memories of Romance Languages - Buletin științific al Universității Tehnice de Construcții București <http://dlsc.utcb.ro/tsci/>

¹Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), p. 10

²Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), p. 10

another one, which is mobile. Each is materialized by converting his primordial substance into a significance collector hypostasis. Expressionism, more than any other current, operates with meaning-object (lines, lights), in other words, the subject is the poetic itself. That is why, as Kracauer remarked, in Wiene's film the universe is stereoscopic: "to a revolutionized people, expressionism seemed to combine the denial of bourgeois tradition with faith in man's power feely to shape society and nature. On account of such virtues it may have cast a spell over many Germans upset by the breakdown of their universe"³. Kracauer's observation should not be accepted as an interpretation of a universe designed in relief, but, I would say, as an abolition of a three-dimensionality in favor of that of a flat expression: "As entertainment made for profit, Weimar cinema was responsive to the point of clairvoyance to the desires and pleasures as well as anxieties and secret fears of its primary audience"⁴. Janowicz, one of the film's screenwriters, suggests contacting the painter Alfred Kubin, the author of various works representing illustrations of human drama, set in a directorial vision, with horror's staging of a subconscious terror. The idea of an abstract décor remained, although the scenography returned to three other modern painters.

2. The décor's dimensions

To the three dimensions of the décor: non-figurative, photonic and mobile, one may add a fourth - scenography could be in the equal manner *music*, harmony and a mark of des-harmonization of souls: "[...] the revolutionary pathos, that [...] sets Expressionism as a vanguard modern art, does not come from a stylistic concept, but from the nerve to settle the individual, and his emotional life, in the center of the artistic expression".⁵

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari occurs in a time of experimentation, in a time of explosion of abstract films. Eggeling, Richter, and Ruttman now produce short films whose characters are spiral lines, squares of different colours, captured in their movement. Wiene does not transform the painted décor in a scope itself, although the delirium of the painted scenography, of the painting as a state of mind, says a lot about his film.

³ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (New York: North Rivers, 1947), p. 68

⁴ Thomas Elsaeser, *Weimar Cinema and After* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 48

⁵ Brill, Alice. *O Expressionismo na Pintura*. In: GUINSBURG, J (Org.) *O Expressionismo*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002. p. 401.

3. Existence formula's expression

The *Beauty* began to be eroded by the *Sublime's* category, which completes, then, the ruin of the *Beauty*. On the other hand, the aesthetic pleasure, theorized by Kant: "Atingerea oricărui scop este legată de un sentiment de plăcere. Dacă această reușită este condiționată de o reprezentare a priori, precum în acest caz de un principiu pentru facultatea de judecare reflexivă în genere, atunci sentimentul de plăcere este determinat și printr-un principiu a priori"⁶ exists both in the creative act, as well as in the receptive act, and it is possible, necessary, and unique both because of the indeterminate nature of the artistic object, as well as the rigorously determined character of the receiver subject. Thus, if we analyze for example Kafka's *The Trial*, knowing that Kafka is an expressionist writer considering his hallucinatory and labyrinthine fragmentation vision of reality, we have:

$$L_W = A_W + C_W$$

where: L_W - literary work

A_W - actual world

C_W - created world

Thus, the work became a synthesis between the verified dimension and by the new dimension which have been created, and the indeterminate nature by which the reader and the critic can approach the work is more due to created world: „În triada formată de autor, operă și public, acesta din urmă nu este doar un element pasiv, ce nu face decât să reacționeze în lanț, ci dezvoltă el însuși o energie capabilă să <<facă istorie>>. Existența istorică a operei literare nu este de conceput fără participarea activă a celor cărora le este destinată, deoarece abia prin mijlocirea lor intră opera în continuitatea unei experiențe literare în mișcare, în care se desfășoară trecerea permanentă de la simpla lectură la comprehensiunea critică, de la receptarea pasivă la cea activă, de la normele estetice recunoscute la producția literară ce le înlocuiește.”⁷

A similar thing happens in what concerns Lucian Blaga's concept of *cosmoid*: the *cosmoid* is another cosmos as a result of the individual grammar owned by the imaginary dimension. The re-reading or re-receiving of a literary work is felt depending on what the receiver lives or conceptually uses. Also, specialized aesthetic judgment is based on certain rules related to the era's canon.

In literature, as in the painting area, based on the mathematical

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critica facultății de judecare*, trad. Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu și Alexandru Surdu, trad. *Primei Introduceri (1789)* de Constantin Noica, Ed. TREI, București, 1995, §8, p.73

⁷ Jauss, K, *Literary History as Provocation of Literary Theory Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1982. 1967, p. 56

axiom according to which three points determine a plane, there is an applicability of those point. So we have name, portrait, and biography. Relationally, the character is a sign whose existence is determined by other signs.

Anaphoric, the character is made up of some automatism out whose coat he cannot exist. In Kafka's *The Trial*, character K. is a character with no portrait and no biography; he is a-spatialized because he doesn't suggest the tridimensional projection. By the early 20th century, this formula has not been defined, though, before the mentioned formula, the literary image, via Ion Creangă, have had a premonition of what will happen. On Ion Creangă we find what we called the fourth dimension, namely the spatial-dimension, translated in that that the subject is standing and the author walks around it, observing it from all possible angles- object's reconstruction is a fact of mind, just as in a cubist painting the light doesn't come from exterior, but is created in the painting. This mutation of the spatial determination from *space 3* to *space 4* is fundamental. It must be mentioned the existence of another dimension, from *space 3* to *space 1*, the *uniplaneity*, used mainly by modernism.

The interpretative layers of a work, coupled with the variety of interpretations, leads to what S. Fish called *formal structures*: „Dacă citesc Lycidas sau The Waste Land în mod diferit (lucru pe care nu îl fac), nu este pentru că structura formală a celor două poezii (chiar numindu-le astfel este tot o decizie interpretativă) ar cere strategii interpretative diferite, ci pentru că predispoziția mea de a utiliza diferite strategii interpretative va produce structuri formale diferite. Asta înseamnă că cele două poezii sunt diferite deoarece eu am hotărât asta.”⁸.

These layers are found both in literary works, and in painting. The plastic work must be understood in a double perspective: first layer, *the painting*, is an ontology of the work (frame, canvas, primer, material, paint). The second layer is the portrait, a work sustained by itself.



4. Linguistic articulation in Painting

Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*

Interpreting the Variorum in Lodge, David & Nigel Wood
Criticism and Theory: A Reader. Harlow, UK: Pearson

- The concept of *imitatio Cristi* by which Dürer put himself in the position of Jesus, he doesn't hold the globe anymore, but want to wrap his coat
- Any painting has a field of tension that cannot be seen with the naked eye, and for one can deduce it, one must know what colour is and from what spectrum that colour belongs.
- Light is turning to look, and the diagonals, and internalization, viewed on a black background, resemble the great Italian painting technique inherited from Giotto.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Portrait_%28D%C3%BCrer,_Munich%29



Hans Memling – *Portrait des Maarten van Nieuwenhove*

- The image is framed in a linguistic square, in which dark and its derivatives preeminates
- The painting's key consists of the ring and the buttons.
- In Flemish painting, rings and birds are symbols of perishability Link image: <https://desydemeter.wordpress.com/category/hans-memling>

[ory/hans-memling](https://desydemeter.wordpress.com/category/hans-memling)

In painting, the double linguistical articulation existing in literary works is absent. Literary works are richer in meaning aspects than the plastic one, given that the painting is based on a single body organ: the eyes only. In compensation, painting has several indeterminate areas. Both are purely intentional objects, in that neither in one, nor in the other the author is not to be found as the creator of the work itself: the author does not impose, but proposes something in the support of an ideal.

Self-consciousness of art, defining its function of knowledge, manifests as a concrete philosophy, making use of a concrete imaginary,

too. Beginning with the 20th century, aesthetics meet new guidelines, including the avant-garde aesthetic trends.

The Avant-garde phenomenon's determinations are multiple and they conjugate themselves: the militant nature, philosophy, politics, *fin du siècle* atmosphere, and the discovery of the unconscious by Freud.

The premonition of The First World War leads literally to what we called the "lost generation". A "myth of escape" and one of "the noble savage" are created. The Avant-garde is illustrated through destinies, often tragic destinies (Kandinsky goes in North Africa, Idel Segall goes to Brazil, Paul Klee in Tunisia, Ernst Barlach in Southern Russia, and Van Gogh kills himself). Each of these currents (Expressionism, Dadaism, surrealism, cubism, futurism, and constructivism, illustrates a well-defined program orientation and proposes aesthetic solutions, whilst not summarize to a mere denial. All encourages art's efforts of re-synthesizing, starting from the interferences which exists between these arts. All these currents are contemporary, forming a veritable crucible in which great representative artists overpass their current: Tzara makes the switch in Surrealism, Picasso, too.

The Pangermanist Ideology, the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the immanent World War, the option for a new Middle Ages (German Expressionism uses Gothic writing, taking as references the works of Nordic mysticism), the existence as an extension of the neo-romantic nihilism of Nietzsche, are the numerous and combined sources of German Expressionism. Having Münch, Van Gogh, and Gauguin as precursors, German Expressionism adopts an antithetical attitude to positivism and impressionism. He becomes doctrinary, ranking itself under the subconscious efigy, under the human interiority.

The two precursor schools of the current, The Nabistic School at the one hand, adjacent to the symbolism and decadentism, and the plastic school, on the other hand, in which the painting has an intimist character cultivate bi-dimensionality. It is the Fauvist School who makes the transition from impression to expression, purity and freshness of the colour, and who evokes the stained glass as inspiration (that violent colours with religious themes).

"Indeed, the aspiration to free the arts from the aesthetic sphere in which they have exiled since the 18th century might be considered the fundamental engine of the group's ideas and practices in their years in Dresden. The profound interest in the so called 'primitive' art, non-European, or non-gothic, and considered an authentic manifestation of an artistic craft completely integrated to the other spheres of social life, was

born from this ideal”⁹



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Dance of negros*

- The motif of the bistro
- The putrid purple as a symbol of the end of the world

- The images' suspension

<http://www.wikiart.org/en/ernst-ludwig-kirchner/dance-of-negros>

The new objectivity

Die Brücke Group, which included Kirchner and Emil Nolde, takes motifs from Ibsen's sceneries and start to cultivate a symbolic art, emphasizing not the primordial, but the original, their art being impregnate of Scandinavian mysticism, with a brittle language and a grotesque vision.

Der Blaue Reiter, the other German Expressionist group, represented by Kadinski and Paul Klee, art's equivalents of Mallarme and Paul Valery, bring with them a purified Expressionism: "Atît cartea mea Spiritualul în artă cît și almanahul Călărețul albastru au avut ca scop principal să trezească la viață capacitatea experienței spirituale în toate domeniile materiei și ale spiritului. Va fi o capacitate indispensabilă în viitor, fiindcă numai datorită ei experiența umană dobîndește dimensiuni infinite"¹⁰. Kandinsky is convinced that he can enter in the world of phenomena and essentialize it in symbols.

The expressionist realism grows up once with Bertold Brecht, and has a polemical character – it claims its origin to Zola's naturalism and starts to develop a different kind of art. In painting, the painters work especially with coal, the images being mostly darker, in the spirits of Brechtian poetry *The Legend of the Dead Soldier*.

The high meanings of Expressionism, those activists that exceed the realistic expressionist school's limits, are related to the northern

⁹Mattos, Cláudia Valladão de. *Histórico do Expressionismo*. In: GUINSBURG, J. (Org.) *O Expressionismo*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002. p. 4

¹⁰ Wassily Kandinski, *Spiritualul în artă*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1994, p. 5

intellectuals' premonition regarding the outbreak of the war.

The escape in the world of abstraction, in fiction, and nostalgia, the cerebral attitude, metaphysical per excellence, the religious and the critical attitude, devote the existence of a strong mystic-Christian fiber, by which a return to the medieval writing it is made. The atmosphere, although grotesque, cultivates line, the significant of void (an active void, full, and non-manifested).

The German expressionists try to restore a communion between the space and the ego. Expressionism's vision brings with it an ecstatic tension, a hallucinatory projection, an apocalyptic existence, and creates in literature the symbolic drama.

References:

BRILL, Alice. *O Expressionismo na Pintura*. In: GUINSBURG, J. (Org.) *O Expressionismo*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002. p. 401.

EISNER, H. Lotte, *The Haunted Screen* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), p. 10.

ELSSAESER, Thomas, *Weimar Cinema and After* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 48

FISH, Stanley. 1980. "Interpreting the Variorum" in Lodge, David & Nigel Wood (eds.) (2000): *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, p. 303

JAUSS, Hans Rober, *Literary History as Provocation of Literary Theory Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1982. 1967, p. 56

Kandinski, Wassily, *Spiritualul în artă*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1994, p. 5

KANT, Immanuel, *Critica facultății de judecare*, trad. Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu și Alexandru Surdu, trad. *Primei Introduceri (1789)* de Constantin Noica, Ed. TREI, București, 1995, §8, p.73

KRACAUER, Siegfried, *From Caligari to Hitler* (New York: North Rivers, 1947), p. 68

MATTOS, Cláudia Valladão. *Histórico do Expressionismo*. In: GUINSBURG, J. (Org.) *O Expressionismo*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002. p. 4

- <https://desydemeter.wordpress.com/category/hans-memling>
- <http://www.wikiart.org/en/ernst-ludwig-kirchner/dance-of-negros>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Portrait %28D%C3%BCrer, Munich%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Portrait_%28D%C3%BCrer,_Munich%29)