

FINE ARTS AND DESIGN UNIVERSITY CLUJ - NAPOCA
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THE MEMORY OF PLACES - SECOND GAME

PhD Thesis
Summary

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Summary

1) Intention, method, idea

a) *Interdisciplinarity*

The architecture of the present thesis' discourse is guided by an interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary intention (if this term – that has been endowed with a cultural prestige it had never known before by Basarab Nicolesco, the French philosopher of Romanian origins – is more adequate), to shed light upon the essential relationship announced by the theme of the thesis: the *relationship between places and artworks*.

The interdisciplinarity issue is analyzed on two levels:

- the relationship between acknowledged places and things that belong to the village – considered to be a privileged topos, wrapped in the aura of a sacrality beyond any doubt – and the plenary experience of a biography that claims its origins and inspiration sources in this formative topos, revalued to render an artistic configuration aimed at defining a new space – the space of the artwork.

- relationship of a creative interweaving of techniques specific to painting and drawing, and newer means of artistic expression related to the field of multimedia, photography and digital language (image processing, animation, CD and web production).

The place envisaged is neither an abstract, geometric space, nor the empty space of classical physics, but a habitual place, domesticated by the presence and initiatives of mankind, disciplined through work, faith and creation. It is a place filled with buildings, objects and signs that would have never come to life, had the place never been inhabited. Reasons connected both to my biography and my esthetic project made me grant this privilege to a particular place: **the village**. It is an inhabited space, exposed to changes over the years, and a living proof of memory and sensitivity.

b) *The binary layout of the place*

I have chosen - in this generous topography bordered by the spiritual universe on one side and by nature on the other - to make a configuration of our reality extended to a duality of concepts: a *Primordial Place*, corresponding to the sky and the spiritual dimension and a *Final Place*, to whom the earth and the practical, material dimension of daily life correspond, in a somewhat symmetrical way. The two places are not separated by any border, or any radical split that could make them foreign to one another, or that would end any possibility of communication. On the contrary, they are formal limits of the universe in which our entire life experience takes place, where we are constantly defining and adjusting our identity, values and our own history. Obviously, together with the others and the things we receive from nature or that we create ourselves. The primordial and the final place are in a constant communication; they intensify and condition each other. They are caught in the dance of a unitary cosmic dynamics, just as ancient Greek

philosophy and Biblical wisdom used to believe that *whatever is in Heaven is on Earth, as well; and what is up there is down here, too*. In other words, we are living in a world bordered by *divinity* and *nature*, and we are privileged creatures, meant to attain a level of excellence that the other creations of the universe do not possess, as we are endowed with qualities and features specific to both dimensions: the divine and natural one. The sky and the sun, the moon and the stars, the Earth with its living creatures, mankind and its objects or works are included in the dynamic order resulting from the teleologically synchronized interconnection of the two places.

It is on the grounds of this ambivalent nature that gives the human destiny both its greatness and drama that creation is possible. Creation is what we called in the present thesis the *second game* – it means to absorb into one's own experience the traces and influences of the habitual environment. It also means to use them so as to create an artistic configuration that should preserve in its significance not only a general, human *modus vivendi*, but also the particular history of the person who creates the respective game, its biography, sensitivity, values and his/her relationship with the world. In this sense, the creative game expresses, beyond the strictly esthetic achievements of an artist, a certain position that the artist has chosen in the world. It designates a particular setting meant to give the artist peace and a certain meaning in the capricious flow of life, which should recover him/her from the fatality of the time flow. To sum it up, the creative game is also a philosophy of life, by the means of which the artist can save himself/herself from the fatal dissolution inherent to the time flow and find shelter in the world of pure forms.

c) *The privileged topos; the second game*

In the economy of my thesis, the village – seen as a privileged topos – is situated at the crossroads of *the Sky* and *the Earth*, of the *Primordial Place* and the *Final place*, similarly to the way in which Liviu Rebreanu, Lucian Blaga or Mircea Vulcănescu used to understand its significance. In their opinion, Romanian civilization is fundamentally rural; and our wisdom, mythology, morals and manners are not conceived around a polis, around the fortress-city, but around a humble, simple house, around a peasant's hut, in close connection with nature and the cyclicity of seasons, on the grounds of a feeling of vulnerability, of a dependency upon the times, fate and the good will of God. The village is endowed with social-moral characteristics; it is literally the extended church of rural daily life. Its perimeter is big enough to fit several major components stretching along the two axes: from the *centre-* to the *border* and from *up-* to *down*. These are: *the church* – the most prestigious, central element, thanks to its height and holiness, position proved by the cross and icons; and *the cemetery* – the place from where terrestrial life is parted with, in the company of mourning persons, in a transition to the other

world. If the church and the cemetery represent the sacred dimension of the village, the houses and households, the gardens, yards, public fountains, the roads, paths, fences and fields of crops, the countryside and the forests represent the profane or domestic dimension, where nearly all of what rural life means takes place. However, this dimension is protected by faith, by the sacred body of the church and the steeple, where the bell plays its melody on holidays and religious celebrations, when someone passes away and when there is a natural disaster, a storm, a fire or in case of drought.

The creation act has already been prepared, in a way, by this sensitivity of the place. Therefore, the structure, esthetic option and creative freedom convert, leading the natural environment, the matrix, towards a second art game. I have chosen a few special meanings of the syntagm second game to ponder upon:

- The second game is an act through which a new world comes into being, parallel to the real world in which we live effectively;
- It is a mind game that operates with concepts, feelings, language elements, forms of the actual experience representation and molding;
- It is a mirror game, a game of encountering oneself in the mirror of time.

To sum it up, the second game transforms nature into creation, turns it into a work of art, leading to the creation of objects, signs and forms made by man, through which man justifies its existence before time. This creation is the most intimate testimony of the purpose and specificity of human feelings and emotions. Every artistic product, every cultural object is, strictly speaking, the outcome of a second game, made possible thanks to the memory and sensitivity of a *matrix place*. I believe there is no creative act that should be completely free of the remnants of a *formative topos*, coming from the environment in which the artist spends his/her life. I believe that there are no works of art that should be the outcome of a pure, unleashed imagination, free from all biographic relation, because any artistic idea, any message takes the shape of our memory. In this respect, culture means to constantly refine our complex relationships, forever adjustable and repositionable in our concrete, real world.

2) The structure and plan of the thesis

Once the intention of this thesis has been announced and the meanings of the second game defined - as being the game of artistic creation- we can put forward the development of ideas, entangled in the discourse architecture in an expository, analytical way, in order to support the thesis. Its parts succeed one another according to the following plan:

- a) An introduction into the idea of a second game. It defines the *place* as being a phenomenon of inner sensitivity, a place in

one's soul, a trace left inside ourselves by the habitual relationship, depending on which the esthetic option is also defined.

- b)** The first section deals with the relationship between light-place-remembrance, as they are three inherent needs of human existence:

Light:

- The sky and its adornments
- About the moon and the stars
- About mystic light
- The image, the face and light
- artificial light

Place:

- good place, bad place and hidden place
- about things
- about things in their place
- about the human being in its place
- about having one's place
- about the "village-place"
- about the ephemeral character of places and things
- about shelters and inhabitation
- about "the household" and about the house
- about the construction of the house
- about the places in the house: the threshold, the main room, the guest room, the porch and the veranda, on the horizontal axis, and on the vertical one, about the cellar (down) and the attic (up)
- about things in the house: a) the heating system, the lighting system and the preparation of food; b) the furniture used for resting; c) furniture used for storing things
- about places and things around the house

Memories:

- about memory
- about memory, remembrance and rerecembering
- time and remembrance
- memory – remembering – imagination
- remembering- forgetting

- c)** A second section: water, mirror, icon

Water as a fundamental element:

- about the symbolism of water
- water as an intermediary
- man on the brink of water

Mirror:

- reflex as an image
- the specular double
- the ephemeral character of reflexes
- shadow and reflex
- reflex as an echo
- the painters' mirror
- revealing the unseen – a way of knowing oneself
- looking into the mirror and knowing oneself
- the mirror of the Middle Ages
- the mirror of the Renaissance

Religious painting:

- religious paintings on glass – a reminder for pilgrims
- the making of a religious painting on glass
- to contest, assimilate, and acknowledge religious paintings

d) A third section: tradition, modernity, post modernity

e) My personal artistic creation

- **“The memory of places”** - CD-ROM multimedia project, 2004-2006
 - o **„Memories of thoughts”**, digital animation, 2004
 - o **“TransApparences”**, digital animation, 2005
 - o **Radu Şerban: portfolio**, 2005, multimedia presentation
- **„Memory box”** - objects, painting on glass, water, light, 2006
- **„Traces”** - painting, 2004-2006

3. Philosophy of the thesis and conclusions

The first part of the thesis substantiates the truth - which had been stated by many cultural theorists and philosophers, from Plato to Aristotle and Heidegger – according to which our entire spiritual life, the essence of culture and of our way to relate to the world are centered on light.

There is in Platonism an analogon of the Sun: the intellect. It plays the same role in knowledge and creation that the Sun has in the act of seeing: it is an active agent, a source of light. The intellect is a “Sun of the mind”, and the fact of knowing is translated as “*seeing in our mind’s eye*” the intelligible light of things. Consequently, the ideal world is full of light in its essence, and the entire spiritual order – that encloses both the essence of the divine and the essence of all that is human – is translated as the metaphor or the symbol of light; which proves the depth of the human attachment to the nature of light. The human spirit takes in the ideal essences that confer all things in nature

their shape, qualities and use, and became enlightened while exercising them, in a state of remembrance and anamnesis.

The light and the sun have been valued by Western tradition (which took over both the wisdom of the Greeks and the prophetic attitude of the Christian Jews) both in the natural order, as the source of life and of sight, and in the spiritual-moral order, as the source of truth and justice. It is not only in monotheistic religions, fundamentally defined by the radiant, solar transcendence of God, but also in major pagan religions of Indo-European origin – like that of the Greeks, Latins, Persians or Hindi – that the main divinities are Uranian, dwelling in the heights of the sky, from where they reveal themselves through bright epiphanies – lightening, fire, stars. Let us remember the cult of fire in Persian Mazdeism or the fact that Zeus/Jupiter is the one that handles the lightening - the heavenly fire in the sky. Moreover, the Biblical God reveals Himself through beams of light, or a burning bush, and his messengers, the angels, have a glowing consistency. Solar, Uranian Gods dominate the entire patriarchal religious culture, although we are also dealing, in most mythological spaces, with sacred unions, with a primordial masculine-feminine, sky-earth couple. The synergic integrity of the world's polarities is recovered through this couple, and the dynamic of life between the two extreme points – the *primordial Place* and the *final Place* is restored.

The esthetic universe also depends on light, on the world of shapes and colors, through which the human soul enters the exterior world and interacts with its elements. Fine arts, and especially painting and sculpture are subordinated to light and its functions, because their expressive power is based on the association of shapes, images and colors. They depend on light and on human eyes, as the eyes are organs capable of managing the information received from the environment aesthetically. Therefore our place in the world is defined in a permanent relation with light, and the aesthetic culture of visual forms, vested with the prestige of epiphanies or the appearances of transcendental essences goes in parallel with the philosophy of light and with the religious cults dedicated to solar gods. It is not an accident that pagan art is focused on expressing divine figures, gods and goddesses, and the Greek beauty canon is defined in a direct connection with the plan of a formal theology of an aesthetic nature. In other words, just like gods are the paradigm of the human in the moral order, in the aesthetic order, divine beauty is the one that gives the measure of absolute beauty, a beauty that man has the privilege to resemble. In what the use of light is concerned, Plato considered that the eye is the most spiritual of all our sense organs, which is why the eye has the main mission in what knowledge is concerned. The light in our eyes, as necessary to our positioning in the world as it is mysterious, is the most spiritual part of the human face. That is why it has been so intensively exploited by the art of the portrait, as well as by Christian

iconography. According to several theologians of the icon, the look in the Saints' eyes is, through the ambiguity and the indescribable character of its source, the look that God has when He looks upon us from beyond the icon, using it to preserve the order of the world. Thus, what is important in relation to the icon is not the fact that we are looking at the object called "icon", but that God looks upon the world through the icon, reverting the relationship of optical authority.

The following section of the thesis that ponders upon water, the mirroring relationship and the icon further develops the suggestions present in the first section. Water is presented as a natural element, as the source of life, in various ways of its "behavior" – lively, running, still, friendly or hostile, beneficent or evil, slow or pouring down, etc. Water is also represented here as the natural mirror of the sky, the mirror of nature itself, in relation to which our first encounter with our own image is consumed. If we were to evoke only the myth of Narcissus, kidnapped by water while he was admiring his own face in it, we would see in water the mysterious and magic richness of this mirror of nature, in which man risks to lose oneself completely. I insisted upon this narcissist relationship with oneself and with nature relying on the meditations of philosophers like Bachelard, Jung and Eliade. I also emphasized Caron's and Ofelia's complex, which expresses melancholy in relation to water, the resorption into the aquatic element and the reintegration into nature through death, and also a comeback to the indefinite fluidity of the primordial world.

The mirror, an artificial replica of the property of water to reflect things, expresses a narcissist complex. Through this artifact, man seeks an encounter with himself, motivated by the desire to know his own face – action that he just cannot do directly, due to his natural constitution. Therefore, the mirror has a practical function, on the one hand - the reflection of the person, and on the other, a theoretical one – it helps the knowledge of the self. The art of self-portrait renders the relationship of mirroring more objective (with obvious stylizations that rely on the sensitivity of each artist), by composing several "fixed mirrors", from which the image does not disappear at nightfall, or once the subject moves out of the frame. The portrait makes the relationship of mirroring eternal, inaugurating an age of aesthetic humanism, in which the human face plays a decisive role. We could even state that in a lay universe, the portrait has the prestige that the icon has in sacred art. The icon - transfigured, hieratic face of the creation, where all that is earthly is seen "as God sees it", reflected by the divine environment, and taking upon itself its heavenly archetype.

Beyond its mystical qualities, the icon has had from its very beginning a theological, mystagogical and pedagogical function, as it reveals certain mysteries and educates man in the path of his encounter with God. The need

for an icon expresses a double inclination of man: on the one hand “to see God”, even if indirectly, in God’s proximity, in the sacred space—church, monastery – where he goes to pray and celebrate, and on the other hand, to regain his divine prestige, defiled once he first fell into temptation. The world of icons recovers the holiness of the world and of man before the fall, which is why contemplating icons should serve the spiritual mission to awaken man to the conscience of his true nature. In other words, man is not just a creature that God threw on earth, constantly fighting to satisfy primary needs, but the son of God, created in His Divine image. The most noble characteristic man has been vested with along the history is to be named Son of God, his face to serve representations of a theological nature and to be the mirror of the Divine in nature. I consider iconography the true mirroring relation – mirror of the divine into human nature – and the icon, even the most naïve, the art of portraying the face par excellence, in its dynamic divine-human symbiosis. And if I were to bring up again the concept of my thesis, I would note the fact that the icon is a second game that has the richest expression and a canonical function in man’s spiritual destiny, as it is a reminder of man’s being an image of God. The icon saves the face of man tainted by sin and from this perspective, it is a step in the direction of man’s complete recovery, which is connected to an eschatological event.

The third section deals with the relationship between tradition and modernity, as well as with the relation between modernity and post modernity, highlighting the diversity of forms and expressivity we are witnessing today, in this postmodern, iconoclastic, experimentalist age – in relation to tradition, and quite diversified and formally rebel.

The final section ponders upon the author’s most recent artistic projects, carried out between 2004 and 2006, grouped under the generic name „Memory of places”. The chapter “Creation portfolio: Radu Șerban” was included in the present thesis in order to provide a retrospective overall view of the author’s creation, aimed at highlighting the coherency of the approach from a conceptual and language viewpoint, beyond the varied focalization of the author’s preoccupations in the successive creation stages.

Three distinct directions of examining the expression of the image are discussed, configured in a differentiated stylistic approach, in correlation with the materials and techniques used. The media of interest are digital animation, artistic object and painting.

The digital animation project relies upon elements taken from my previous works. These elements have been digitalized and endowed with a new life: still images taken from painting or drawing, transformed into digital „raw material”, together with photographs are now set up in dynamic frames, that contribute through links and successive transitions (I used the „frame by frame” animation system, with no video films) to the birth of film creations, which have a clearly defined subject, script and timing (the Flash movies „Memories about Thoughts” and „TransAppearances”).

The “Memory Box” cycle brings in the concept of *trace-image*, proposing a type of plastic object made by imaginatively combining the

principle of obtaining the image specific to the dark room (naturally, according to an allusive formula) with the suggestions offered by the technical procedure consecrated by Transylvanian glass painting: a reconsideration and a post-modern revalorization of tradition, integrated in a manipulation of light achieved through contemporary techniques. The image painted on the back of the glass is projected by a beam of light and directed on to a film of water which functions as a mirror, reflecting it in order to offer it to the viewer as immaterial, changing and ephemeral.

The comment of the paintings from the "Traces" cycle emphasizes a chosen road, which leads to a cleansing of the shapes through the expressive conciseness of the gesture and through a free treatment of color. Color, detached from concrete, object references becomes refined painting plasma, ever transforming and reshaping itself. The image keeps evanescent traces of the objects filtered by memory and the discreet trace of the nostalgic reflexiveness of the artist.

Since we were referring to painting, we are not the first to ask whether painting, the queen of all arts is dead, whether it is agonizing through its last moments or whether it is forced to get involved in a cohabitation with the other traditional or contemporary manners, means and techniques that make up a visual artistic approach. Postmodern age favors the simultaneous expression of all artistic orientations, ways of thinking and of expression. Painting continues to be present in the most important international events and painters will never cease to ask themselves the fundamental questions of life and death, of macro and micro cosmos. They will continue to express their feelings and emotions through color. To them, every artwork is a new experience, a new beginning.