

University Seminar 703: Modern Greek

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Speaker: Fay Zika, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Theory of Art, Athens School of Fine Arts

The Revival of Multimodal Aesthetics and Contemporary Greek Art

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

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Attendants: Dorothea von Mücke (Columbia), Stathis Gourgouris (Columbia), Karen Van Dyck (Columbia), Dimitris Papanikolaou (University of Oxford) et al.

A version of this talk will appear in the *Proceedings of the World Congress of Philosophy* that took place in Athens last summer (August 2013).

Summary of Presentation:

In her presentation, Zika first discusses the context and implications of her claim that a “multimodal tendency” is currently at work in artistic production and appreciation before going on to highlight this development through a presentation of some works of contemporary Greek art. The paper forms part of wider project “connecting contemporary philosophical concerns with artistic production and aesthetic understanding or appreciation” in a Greek context.

Against what she conceives of as a bias against the senses in much of the philosophical tradition, Zika currently sees a “renewed interest in the senses in a number of disciplines.” Referring to the work of anthropologist Richard Howes, Zika charts the movement from the language-centered thought of the 1950s and 60s through the image-centered thought of the 1980s and an emphasis on the body and materiality in the 1990s to a “rise of sensory studies at the turn of the twenty-first century.” Zika wants to illustrate this shift towards sensory studies – a “redistribution of the sensory” in contemporary aesthetics – by presenting examples from contemporary Greek art.

Zika refers to an earlier moment of a “multimodal trend in aesthetics” in the later 19th and early 20th centuries and cites the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and cinema on the one hand and the phenomenon of synesthesia on the other hand as prime examples for this trend. Synesthesia in particular, Zika argues, emerged as a “locus for the possibility of merging – and transcending the limits of – the separate senses,” a development that was corroborated by contemporaneous research in the wave theory of light and the science of sound. Zika, then, wants to draw attention to the “reappearance of the ‘move’ from a single sense – usually vision – to multimodal experience and aesthetics in more recent contexts.”

Zika points to an important early moment – in the 1960s – of works of art being produced “in a distinctive multimodal direction,” and parallels this to the “‘new’ digital media” and the tension there between a reduction to “the merely visual” and the championing “of a multimodal approach.” This has led to a tendency towards “ocularcentrism” and “disembodiment,” and as a result, Zika argues quoting Tim Lenoir, “electronic digitality has been accused of eviscerating the real and of liquidating reference, truth and objectivity.” Against this view, Zika says, it has been argued by theorists such as Mark Hansen that the new media include other senses, too: “they involve our sense of touch and our whole body – our sense of proprioception – in a set of new ways.” This view is in tune with recent developments in biology, neuroscience, and the philosophy of the mind that are opposed to a “dualist view of matter and soul/body” and instead argue for a notion of “embodied consciousness.” “This multimodal dimension of our bodily involvement with new media,” Zika argues, “is further brought out via the concepts of *immersion* in virtual environments and *interactive incorporation* in cyberspace.” New media thus “can enhance our senses and bodily interaction with the world.”

Zika then refers to recent debates in neuroscience concerning the *modularity* and *plasticity* of the brain and presents neuroscientist Semir Zeki’s modular theory of the brain and of visual perception, which also pertains to issues of artistic production and aesthetic appreciation in the visual arts. Artists, according to Zeki, “‘tailor’ their art according to the physiology of brain cells that are responsive to distinct visual attributes,” which is part of the reason why there is functional specialization in aesthetics. This primacy of modularity, however, has been challenged within the field of neuroscience by theories emphasizing the brain’s *plasticity*, based on a revived interest in synesthesia and what is known as sensory substitution experiments.

The significance of the return to questions about synesthesia, Zika suggests, lies in the fact that synesthetic mechanisms are now being researched as “the neural basis for artistic creativity: the capacity to make uncommon, atypical connections – such as are evident, for example, in a successful metaphor.” The plasticity of the senses, and thus the possibility of transcending the limits between sensory elements or attributes previously thought of as distinct, Zika argues, “suggests new creative ways in which transcending the limits of our senses may enhance our experience of the world, as well as elucidate artistic creativity and aesthetic appreciation.” Research on these issues in relation to aesthetics is, however, still at a relatively early stage.

Zika closes with a PowerPoint presentation, in which she introduces works of art by several contemporary Greek artists in order to highlight her notion of a multimodal tendency in artistic production today, including those of Zafos Xagorakis, Nikos Tranos, Nikos Navridis, the collective Omada Filopappou, and Artemis Vassilopoulou.

Summary of Discussion

Q.

I was provoked by your parallel with neuroaesthetics. I'm very critical of the area of neuroscience/neuroaesthetics and kept thinking about ways to deal with actual artworks and how they deal with modular perception. I have a proposal: It's never only sense perception. Imagination plays an important role, too. Isn't it more of a question of the imagination generating a whole-body experience and so on? So my question involves imagination and reflection.

A.

So there are many questions here: One is about the status of neuroscience. I think we can learn a lot from it, even though the findings – once made – are often used in too simplified a way. The notion of synesthesia in relation to art seems to have much to offer at the moment. For example, that plasticity is behind artistic creativity because of the atypical connections it can achieve. You can get a lot out of neuroscience about how perception and pleasure work. Imagination has to do, after all, with transcending limits, and synesthesia is a case for the imagination as well. Synesthetic artists at the beginning of the century, like Kandinsky, were actually trying to induce the synesthetic experience rather than appeal to the imagination. But this – to induce synesthetic effects in the audience – was impossible, so of course we use the imagination to fill in the 'gaps' that cannot be filled otherwise. The other question was about the role of the imagination being at least as strong as that of the translation between the senses: I think you are right. What I presented is, in a way, an oversimplification, it is not the whole story. An artwork has much more to say than what I had to say, I'm just using some examples for what contemporary art is doing in relation to this multimodal effect. It's art that works on the basis of the multimodal perceptual experience. This doesn't mean that it destroys the imagination.

Q.

I would share the critique of Zeki because his response is still on the level of the functional, and imagination is precisely what isn't reduced to the functional. Art, very conventionally, might be said to functionalize the senses. The senses are engaged but what makes the experience art is that the senses are engaged in a functionalized relation.

A.

I don't think that's exactly what the synesthetic thesis is trying to say. By studying synesthetic mechanisms, which de-functionalize the modularity of functional division we are getting closer to understand not that artistic creativity is a perceptual activity; but to understand artistic creativity by cutting through those functional divisions.

Q.

But neuroscience is seeking to elucidate the functions of the brain, and art does the opposite. It's hard to explain.

A.

That's why synesthetic plasticity may explain the process of imagination in artistic creativity. It must be something more than just synapses. Let me be clear: There are different ways in which the multimodal works. The synesthetic is the one least used in artistic production at the moment because we don't know how it functions. It's more used in discussions of artistic creativity and aesthetic understanding. What is it that makes art different, what makes it appeal? The multimodal in digital media, as I was using it here,

is *not* synesthetic. It's about putting senses together in different ways. Using many senses in a different way *plus* reflection; the imagination there also gets activated in new ways.

Q.

What is the Greek cultural specificity here and why, perhaps, do you think that's not so interesting for you here?

A.

There are sensory mechanisms and a whole bunch of cultural determinations that come into play. That's something I should consider perhaps more: how to distinguish the cultural element from -and in- a discussion of the senses.

Q.

Is there something different now – perhaps because of those neuroscience approaches – that's different from similar developments in the 1960s, for instance in Xenakis?

A.

It's the same paradigm but of course it changes with changing concerns and new research. For instance, you have more environmentalist attitudes now. But in general, I think the model -in relation to the multimodal artistic experimentation and effects- is still the same. That is why I speak of a 'revival'.

Q.

We are resurrecting the author, the intention. It was everywhere in your examples! I'm thinking, "the author is dead." It's something I keep thinking when I come to this kind of conceptual art.

A.

The idea is not to offer a closed interpretation, but yes, there is a return of interest to the author or the artist.

Q.

I think it goes back to a certain historical specificity, e.g. the death of the death of the author. There is an attempt to personalize art again.

A.

It's also an attempt on the artists' side to 'hit back' at the theory that wanted them 'dead'.

Q.

I just feel sometimes that in other art forms the subjectivity of the author is questioned much more.

A.

One of the aspects of the discussion I outlined is a 'return' to the artist, but not as a subject of modernity or romanticism, nor as a center of authority, but in relation to the atypical perception and creativity involved in art.