

## The Genealogy of Paradigm Shifts: For a New Aesthetics

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Oana Șerban, *After Thomas Kuhn: The Structure of Aesthetic Revolutions*, De Gruyter, 2022

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**The publisher:** De Gruyter or 270 years of academic publishing. De Gruyter is one of the world's most prestigious publishing houses, specialised in academic publications. In 1749 Frederick II of Prussia granted it the royal privilege of printing books. From 1919, Walter de Gruyter (1862-1963) succeeded in merging the publishing house with four other major publishing houses, forming Verlag Walter de Gruyter & co. (1923). Since then, De Gruyter has been publishing reference academic works in fields such as linguistics, scientific monographs, multimedia publications, as well as extensive bibliographies in these areas. As an independent academic publishing house, De Gruyter publishes annually 1,500 volumes and over 16,000 articles; 200 books and 500 articles are available for open access, and authors who wish to publish with this publishing house have at their disposal a very detailed and explicit guide, *How to become an author with De Gruyter.*

**The author:** Oana Șerban, a lecturer at the University of Bucharest, is part of the new generation of Romanian scholars who are highly appreciated nationally and internationally and, needless to say, also a De Gruyter author. In 2022, her book, *After Thomas Kuhn: The Structure of Aesthetic Revolutions*, was published by De Gruyter, but more importantly, this work was how De Gruyter chose to celebrate 100 years since the birth of

Thomas Kuhn and 60 years since the first edition of his work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*:

“The cooperation with De Gruyter is one of the greatest honours that I had in my career. As a book author, you invest much time and dedication to your research: years of reading, study, revaluations, advocating different perspectives and disseminating them at conferences, and engaging feedback in conceiving new arguments, more reliable, more critical, hopefully indestructible. De Gruyter took care of my book by all means: I had the joy to work with a professional editorial team: they created not only a competitive editorial product on this occasion, but also a long-lasting project that I am proud to see embraced by such publishing press. My joy is that they found a place for this book in their powerful philosophical tradition. The greatest news is that this book appears at the 100th anniversary of Kuhn's birth and the 60th anniversary of the publication of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*! It is the perfect occasion to track down the hypotheses that convinced the American philosopher that paradigm shifts in the arts are worthy of more systematic consideration”, said the author. (Oana Şerban)

**The work:** Regardless of the approach you take towards Oana Serban's volume, whether you do it as a novice, for conceptual awareness and rigorous understanding, whether the reading occurs under the specialized lens of an aesthete or epistemologist, following the consistent sources and references, or whether the reading becomes a rather didactic/methodological one, one firm conclusion appears to be irrefutable: *After Thomas Kuhn: The Structure of Aesthetic Revolutions* is, above all, a praise of the method. The author's 'invisible' aims are to organise, reconsider and update previous theories that have attempted to explain and broaden the Kuhnian hypotheses regarding the world of art. In this way, Oana Şerban outlines the philosophical frameworks through which a foundation could be established for a new aesthetics and a new criticism for art in general and for contemporary art in particular. Her analytical approach is in equal measure genealogical, phenomenological and hermeneutic.

The work comprises: 1) an extensive introduction on the enigmas of progress and predictions in science and art; 2) six chapters, in which the Kuhnian hypothesis on the similarity

between the structure of scientific revolutions and the structure of artistic revolutions is analysed, from its origins to its effects; 3) some summarising conclusions and 4) a remarkable “reference”. Each chapter may be considered as a stand-alone research piece.

The book is built around the following questions: how can we address the issue of rationality and truth in art and aesthetics by inspiring ourselves from scientific perspectives? Are artistic styles akin to scientific paradigms? “Can *paradigms* in science and *masterpieces* in art be considered rational models”? Is the concept of “paradigm” in science equivalent to that of “style” in art? Why is Thomas Kuhn relevant to the world of art and how exactly does he become relevant to contemporary art? Can cultural revolutions be explained in the same way as scientific revolutions are?<sup>1</sup> “What are the possibilities through which concepts from science such as *progress* and *predictability* can be borrowed to study the evolution of art and aesthetics? “Historically, are science and art equally influenced by politics.” From a historical perspective, do science and art equally experience political influences? All of this in order to verify whether the hypothesis of commutability of the structure of scientific revolutions in art can be supported and what are Kuhn's merits in decoding certain aesthetic validity criteria necessary to discuss about cultural revolutions. Analytically scanning the six chapters of the book *After Thomas Kuhn: The Structure of Aesthetic Revolutions*, the following conclusions can be noted, by which Oana Șerban (2022b) supports the thesis of equating the structure of scientific revolutions with the structure of aesthetic revolutions:

1. Cultural revolutions are “packages” that can be reduced to an aesthetic revolution and the artistic manifestations it entails. The aesthetic element becomes reducible to the ideological content of a revolution, and the artistic element reducible to its forms of expression.
2. Aesthetic paradigms are represented by artistic styles.
3. A revolutionary aesthetic paradigm insinuates itself in exactly the same way that a scientific paradigm imposes itself: it claims to either identify the solution to an outstanding problem within the dominant paradigm, or to provide a radical and complete alternative to new problems for which the dominant paradigm no longer offers satisfactory solutions.

4. If in terms of scientific revolutions, the paradigm shift is accompanied by radical social transformations, in art it is the political factor that determines the duration of dominance, the timing of the revolution and the nature of the changes.
5. Distinctions arise from the perspective of the revolutions' structure not at the level of the mechanism that produces the changes, but at the level of the understanding of the notion of progress, which, for the world of science, will always be cumulative, and for the world of art, non-cumulative.
6. If in the world of science paradigms exclude each other, in the world of art, they can coexist and are not incommensurable.
7. In order to explain the duration of a dominant paradigm, it is necessary to articulate a theory of aesthetic validity, which explains the time validity of a paradigm in terms of its norms, values and adherence of its principles regarding the socio-political problems existing in a particular time frame, specific to a cultural "ethos".
8. The nature of change, as well as that of progress, in arts and aesthetics is linked to temporality.
9. The temporality of a work of art is authentically connected to the temporality of a revolution: the validity of a style is conditioned by the validity of a paradigm prescribed by a cultural revolution.
10. The notion of style characterises artistic revolutions.
11. The notion of paradigm is attributed to aesthetic revolutions.
12. Artistic revolutions and aesthetic revolutions are dominant components of cultural revolutions.

These are the final answers of the author to the questions she put forward. From the *Introduction* of the volume we learn that Thomas Kuhn's interests in the world of art are not peripheral. In fact, in the first manuscript of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, available in the Kuhn archive at MIT, Thomas Kuhn considered the comparison between the image of science and the image of art as the most appropriate way to announce his project: changing the image of science by bringing it closer to the image of art. Although the published version is very different from the original manuscript, this appeal to the

history of art is not merely occasional in Kuhn's works and allows us to understand his controversial retrospective statement that the *Structure of Revolutions* was in fact a “belated” product of his discoveries through parallel analyses between science and art. In 1969, in his comments on Everett Hafner's essay, *The New Reality between Art and Science*, Thomas Kuhn concurred with Hafner's conclusion: “The more carefully we try to distinguish artist from scientist, the more difficult our task becomes.” (Kuhn 1969, 403). However, the only reason why art and science seem so similar is that we lack the appropriate tools to distinguish them. Oana Șerban supports this thesis regarding the commutability of the structure of scientific revolutions in art and retraces the entire history of debates on this topic, using the concept of *aesthetic validity* in such a way that she effectively sustains with arguments the idea that “politicized art undergoes paradigm shifts, although these patterns prove to be more cyclical than linear.” (Șerban 2022a). Thus, she analyses Kubler's model (in the second chapter) which proposes incommensurability between science and art; she constructs the concept of aesthetic validity (correctness and veridicity) based on Everett Hafner's theories, who suggests that art and science become commensurable as long as the spiritual element is taken into account (Chapter III). Additionally, the following themes are also rethought and reformulated in the fourth chapter:

- a. possible discussions about progress in art; the comparison between the linear and the cyclical progress;
- b. “revolutionary” artistic innovations;
- c. the end of art in Hegelian terms;
- d. Bortslap's thesis on the impossibility of really questioning progress in art;
- e. Doorman's thesis in which he postulates that the discussion about Kuhn's paradigm of incommensurability negates the thesis of progress in art.

Willing to give as much consistency as possible to the notion of *aesthetic validity* that the author explores, the ideas of Remi Clignet, for whom the aesthetic codes and paradigms are creators of cultural capital, Habermas' concept of pragmatic communication or the Heideggerian “double”, truthfulness-correctness, are also proposed as reinforcing arguments. Șerban does not forget to discuss, in line with the views expressed by of

Foucault, Erjavec, Ranciere, the eloquent example of the paradigm shift produced by the artistic avant-gardes through their political role.

The most complex task that Oana Șerban identifies in her attempt to support her position is that of rejecting conventional hypotheses that propose the incommensurability between science and art. A possible mediator would be aesthetics, through which the classical objective-subjective binomial can be relinquished. In this case, the constitutive hermeneutic relationship of the three domains becomes the saviour.

In the last chapter, Oana Șerban blends between *styles* and *paradigms*, which she assimilates as complementary facets of cultural revolutions, with styles attributed to artistic revolutions and paradigms to aesthetic revolutions (p. 204). This approach should be at the core of any radical change, understood as a paradigm shift, which equally involves understanding the necessity, predictability and ideology that produced the change. Thus, artistic revolutions are material manifestations of aesthetic revolutions (p. 89) or phenomenological projections of the artwork at the level of aesthetic perception through which art becomes a true manifestation of the Spirit. (p. 89). Oana Șerban grants art the power to record human progress as a whole through its infinite objects, forms and practices (p. 106) and acknowledges the ability of art to provide the means for new experiences of historical time. As Doorman mentions the Renaissance demonstrated that “people wanted (and believed they could) achieve what was best faster” (p. 107). She characterizes Doorman's notion of artistic revolution as having three features: “necessity, understanding, and effective outcomes adjusted to social expectations.” (p. 107). In the end, Oana Șerban notes a weakness in all the views because they fail to satisfactorily incorporate art and politics, which she considers a central feature of art since the avant-gardes (p. 202). Her thesis links aesthetic validity to the changes determined by the political influence on the artistic act: “the concept of aesthetic validity is based on the political accents embodied by artistic representations corresponding to a dominant paradigm.” (p. 211) “Archaeologically, the distribution of the sensible operating within each aesthetic paradigm, ensuring the transition from a dominant paradigm to a newer, revolutionary paradigm, retrieves the immanence of these conditions of possibility and,

implicitly, connects art with community and reciprocally with politics.” (p. 212). When criteria of validity, correctness and aesthetic veridicity are applied to genealogical determinations, they produce criteria for the perception of aesthetic objects and their appropriate interpretations; whereas when applied to archaeological determinations, they generate criteria for historically perceiving aesthetic paradigms and correctly interpreting the “contingency between political practices and artistic praxis.” (pp. 215-6).

*After Thomas Kuhn: The Structure of Aesthetic Revolutions* is a complex synthesis that presents the theories of numerous art historians who have either adopted or rejected the idea that artistic revolutions are as important as revolutions in science. The initial questions are not left without well-reasoned answers. Perhaps more insight could have been brought to the initial thesis if, in what concerns the substitutability of the structure of scientific revolutions to the structure of artistic revolutions, a critical approach to paradigm shifts in the perception of the works of art had been considered, in other words, it would have been useful to comparatively examine how paradigms of reception modify and transform and what factors influence this profound aspect of the presence of beauty in our lives. From my point of view, and using a metaphor, I hope an appropriate one, reading Oana Șerban's work is like listening to a jazz concert in a cathedral. As for the methodology, the way in which the author combines the research methods, from the hermeneutic ones (genealogy, archaeology) to the phenomenological approach, in order to support with a variety of references her working hypotheses, remains exemplary.

Of greater philosophical interest is the way Șerban takes Kuhn's five criteria that define a scientific theory and employs them in the world of art. A theory must be

- (1) Precise – it should lend itself to empirical tests in the realm of art;
- (2) Consistent with other theories dedicated to progress and change in art;
- (3) Have a wide range of applications;
- (4) Simple, and
- (5) Fruitful, able to “expand our knowledge of artistic paradigms, aesthetic revolutions and their intimate connection with the

patterns of paradigm shifts prescribed by the history of science". (p. 16)

**Instead of conclusions...** However, what was really Thomas Kuhn's view of paradigm shifts in art? He tells us, in the *Essential Tension*, that great works maintain their value over time, even when they face revolutionary changes in style; Picasso's success did not cause Rembrandt's works to be cast into the shadows of some museum repository. Although the Kuhnian model cannot be said to have been accepted as particularly relevant to the arts, it cannot go unnoticed that when it comes to the language of aesthetics or philosophy of culture, analysing and discussing about paradigm shifts or cultural revolutions has become a common practice. Also, Kuhnian concepts and terminology are more readily embraced by the meta-artistic rather than scientific/epistemological discourse. On the other hand, where Thomas Kuhn really failed to find an answer is "where do bold and revolutionary ideas that bring about paradigm shifts come from?" The artists themselves became his allies, trying to answer this question in a personal key.

According to James Rosenquist, some ideas burst explosively in a moment of enlightenment, in the middle of the night. Rosenquist is one of the most creative contemporary artists, who, alongside with Warhol and Lichtenstein founded Pop Art in the 1960s. Taking up Kuhn's question, Rosenquist has created a series of sculptures and paintings on the theme of *The Origin of Bold Ideas*. For him, there are no paradigm shifts, but rather "paradigm breaks". In 2007, he presented a sculpture entitled *Idea in Middle of the Night*<sup>2</sup>. The artwork, composed of three oil on canvas figures, is exhibited at Acquavella Gallery, New York. In *Figure 1a*, the pencils piercing the light bulb symbolize the hands of a clock and writing an idea that crosses your mind in the middle of the night. *Figure 1b* presents a painting entitled *Idea, 2:50 A.M.* The light bulb is the light that suddenly sparks in the creator's mind in the early hours of the night, like an intellectual alarm clock. The light bulb is also the light necessary to capture any fleeting inspirations before they fade away. In the painting from *Figure.1c*, titled *Idea 3:50 A.M.*, the light bulb represents the beginning of an idea that explodes in so many directions that it becomes an abstract version of itself



and eventually transforms into something entirely new – like a paradigm shift (cf. also Goldstein 2012).

Other artists, such as the Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone, tell us that a great idea is formed in a slow and gradual process of crystallisation, similar to the one that takes place in the formation of a rock. Penone is an Italian artist whose works are outdoor installations in which bronze carved trees are integrated into nature in a thematic manner. The same thesis is shared by contemporary aestheticians such as Estelle Zhong Mengual and Baptiste Morizot (2018, 79-83).

Therefore, wherever science proposes incredible solutions, it supports art in making them visible.

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*After Thomas Kuhn: The Structure of Aesthetic Revolutions* lays the foundation of a new art criticism, based on the redefinition and recontextualization of the concept of aesthetic validity and directly affirms the necessity of criticism, and therefore of an aesthetics, for contemporary art.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kuhn himself considered as a great step in his research the successful attempt to find valid ways to extend the theory and structure of scientific revolutions into the artistic and cultural area (1969, 403-412).

<sup>2</sup> *Figure: Instant idea formation*, James Rosenquist. Cf. Bancroft (2007): (a) *Idea - Middle of the night. Light bulb, pencil and electrical wiring on painted wood*. 7 1/2 x 12 x 12 x 12 inches. (b) *Idea-2:50 A.M.* Oil on canvas. 57 x 44 inches. (c) *Idea-3:50 A.M.* Oil on canvas. 63 x 49 inches. Exhibited at Acquavella Gallery, New York, NY . (<https://laskerfoundation.org/paradigm-shifts-in-science-insights-from-the-arts/>).

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