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The Controversy about the Aesthetic Object

In 1977 in the United States there appeared a book by Michael Mitias entitled *The Aesthetic Object: Critical Studies*.¹ Some of its chapters had been published previously as articles, others appeared for the first time.

Michael Mitias is a philosophy professor at Millsaps College in Jackson, Ms. His interests concentrate on philosophy of law, politics, philosophy of man, and especially on aesthetics. The book discussed here concerns precisely the latter domain.

The main purpose which Mitias sets for himself is the determination of a basis or grounds for evaluative judgments pronounced about a work of art. Such a basis is necessary for the estimation of the validity of aesthetic judgments and it would also make possible an identification of the degree of the objectivity of such judgments (p. IV, 12). In the opinion of the author the aesthetic object is precisely the object that may best serve these functions. The working out of an adequate theory of the latter is the main task undertaken by M. H. Mitias in his study.

Thus, what criteria should such a theory meet? First, it should provide the aesthetic object with an ontological identity and, secondly, it should create a basis for its intersubjective cognizability.

Let us briefly explain the above conditions. The first one serves as a basis of the conviction that we are dealing with the same object in a possible controversy about the value of a certain work of art, while the second condition concerns the certainty that this object may be given as the same to many cognizing subjects. As we see, these are the two necessary conditions if we want to "...provide an adequate conception of objective validity of the aesthetic judgment". (p. IV).

M. H. Mitias's book is divided into two parts. In the first one he subjects to critical analysis the theories of the aesthetic object which, in his opinion, fail to meet these conditions. The second part contains an attempt to construct his own theory which would avoid the one-sidedness of previous theories and, at the same time, provide firm grounds for aesthetic judgments passed upon a work of art.

M. H. Mitias's critical analyses concern the apprehensions of the ontological status of the aesthetic object seen as: a purely physical entity; an imaginary construct existing in the mind of either the artist or the recipient of the work of art; an ideal construct; an abstract entity (p. 1-16), as well as G. Dickie's institutional theory, Hegel's conceptions, and Ingarden's manner of approaching the aesthetic object.

Apart from that, the author also considers a possibility of regarding the whole issue of the aesthetic object as a mere pseudoproblem: "...the whole question can be settled by linguistic analysis". (p. 19). The concept of this kind, Mitias declares, leads, among others, to the identification of the work of art with a purely physical object and to the elimination of aesthetic values from the content of the former (p. 17-23), i.e. the values which decide whether an object is a work of art or not.

¹M. H. Mitias: *The Aesthetic Object: Critical Studies*, University Press of America, 1977.

As far as the concepts of the aesthetic object mentioned above are concerned, Mitias concentrates his attention mainly on three of them, namely, the theories by G. Dickie, G. W. F. Hegel, and R. Ingarden. The remaining theories to some extent may be regarded as less actual, so we shall omit them from subsequent argument.²

Let us therefore pass on to G. Dickie's conception to which Mitias devotes a whole chapter. There he is trying to reconstruct in great detail Dickie's polemic with Beardsley's views concerning the nature of the aesthetic object. It is a purposeful undertaking in so far as the institutional theory of this object is constructed in opposition to that proposed by Beardsley, and particularly in opposition to a statement regarding the aesthetic object as directly sensuously perceptible.³ Dickie is not interested in the aesthetic object as such or the work of art as such in their aesthetic endowments but in "conventions governing the presentation of the work".⁴ Thus, regardless of its objective properties, a certain object may become a work of art and, consequently, an aesthetic object, if only it is included in the "art world" by force of certain conventions established within the latter.⁵ These are conventions which govern the presentation of the work and they are different for particular kinds of art. M. H. Mitias writes: "the social conventions of art form guide aesthetic perception and dictate what sort of object we should or should not perceive in a given aesthetic situation, but they do not convey or lead to any knowledge of what we perceive". (p. 37). In this way they constitute specific planes of identification and localization of the aesthetic object which should and, in fact, are used by the recipient who is trying to grasp the work in its generic character. First of all, they ensure the intersubjective cognizability of the object discussed in the sense of it being "given" as the same to many perceiving subjects. Nevertheless, as Mitias rightly stresses, they fail as far as the apprehension of the individual, qualitative endowment of the aesthetic object is concerned. This individuality determines the fact that, although some objects of art belong to the same genre, i.e. they are governed by the same conventions of presentation, yet they essentially differ from one another.

Still, this difference cannot be grasped by using conventions, for "they direct our attention to the spatio-temporal existence of the work of art, but *they do not lead to any knowledge of what we perceive, much less to the nature or identity of the aesthetic object*". (p. 45, italics mine).

This particular statement by Mitias is especially important. Institutional theory of art not only does not allow the determination of the ontological status of the aesthetic object or a description of its content, but within its framework it is equally impossible to differentiate the work of art from the aesthetic object (p. 36 ff).

These two circumstances make M. H. Mitias reject the theory as inadequate in the sense specified above.

In the paragraph discussing Hegel's aesthetics, within its domain and contrary to Croce's interpretation Mitias is trying to justify the autonomy of art and its specificity. Although speaking most generally philosophy, religion, and art in Hegel have the same content,⁶ and the same task, i.e. the expression of the interests of the absolute spirit,⁷ still, the truth revealed by art, according to Mitias, is

²Criticism of this kind of ideas was carried out by Ingarden in his book *O dziele literackim (On the Literary Work)*, first published in 1931 in Halle. Some critical theses concerning these theories mentioned by Mitias are similar to Ingarden's. Comp. Mitias: *The Aesthetic Object...*, p.3,5,9,11; R. Ingarden: *O dziele literackim*, Warszawa 1960, p., 29-44.

³Cf. G. Dickie: *Art and the Aesthetic*, Cornell University Press, 1974, p. 150-173; *George Dickie - instytucjonalna teoria sztuki i przedmiotu estetycznego*, „Studia Estetyczne” vol. XV, 1978, p. 347-348.

⁴Dickie: *Art...*, p. 147.

⁵Cf. B. Dziemiłok: *Instytucjonalna definicja sztuki jako świadectwo "kryzysu estetyki"*, „Studia Estetyczne”, vol. XVII, 1980, pp. 38-42; M. Misiec: *George Dickie...*, p. 347.

⁶Cf. G. F. W. Hegel: *Wykłady o estetyce (Lectures in Aesthetics)* vol. I, Warszawa 1964, p. 118, 139, 160-1, 171-176; K. Bakradze: *Filozofia Hegla. System i metoda*, Warszawa 1965, p. 180.

⁷In Hegel art, religion, and philosophy are stages on the way towards the self-consciousness of the absolute spirit and each of them serves this purpose *in its own manner*. Cf. Hegel: *Wykłady...*, p. 122.

different from that of philosophy or religion. It is a distinctive truth of art and as such it requires a specific way of apprehending. By this Mitias means the aesthetic experience which essentially differs from philosophical, religious, or scientific apprehension of an object. He reaches a conclusion that "From what has been said so far it is clear that the art work is an end in itself". (p. 67). It is a very bold and original interpretation of Hegelian aesthetics, different from former interpretations which emphasized the cognitive nature of art and the conceptual content of the work of art itself.

Although undoubtedly interesting, this interpretation still provokes some objection. (1) Mitias analyzes Hegel's aesthetics in separation from the whole system. Such an isolation "seems even more problematical since Hegel discussed art in categories worked out in other branches of his system".⁸ In consequence, the sense of such categories as ideal, beauty, truth, is not quite clear in Mitias's interpretation. From the perspective of the whole system, it would be difficult to reach a conclusion that in Hegel one may find any objective domain that would be an aim in itself, naturally, apart from the absolute idea. (2) Analyzing Hegelian aesthetic Mitias uses modern categories, e.g. the concepts of aesthetic experience or aesthetic object. The procedure is at least questionable because Hegel himself does not make a distinction between the work of art and the aesthetic object, although it does not mean that he identifies the two. For it is something else to speak of the unawareness of distinction than of the conscious identification of two objects, in this case, the work of art and the aesthetic object. Mitias does not seem to have perceived this difference. (3) Let us return to the distinctiveness of art in Hegelian aesthetics which Mitias strongly emphasizes. Hegel writes: "...the content of art is the idea, while its sensuous shaping is its form."⁹ Therefore it is form that decides about the distinctiveness of art, since its content is identical with that of philosophy or religion.¹⁰ As an apprehension of the idea in the categories of sensuousness, form does not only distinguish art but it also decides about the fact that "neither in its content nor in its form is it (art) the highest, absolute method of making the spirit aware of its true needs and aspirations. For art, because of its form, is restricted to a certain determined content".¹¹

The sensuous form in which the work of art expresses the idea and truth is not only a feature which distinguishes art from philosophy and religion but it is also its most serious drawback.¹² This restriction of art to sensuous form and the impossibility of going beyond it make Hegel regard art as the lowest stage in the evolution of the self-consciousness of the absolute spirit. It is the least effective instrument in making the spirit aware of its true needs and aspirations. In this respect both religion and, first of all, philosophy are higher than art.¹³ It does not mean, however, that Hegel subordinates art to philosophy, as Mitias rightly observes. Stressing the distinctiveness of the work of art in Hegelian aesthetics he still fails to perceive the negative consequences of this fact, as has been shown above. (4) Equally doubtful is also Mitias's thesis about the distinctive "cognition" of art. It concerns the aesthetic experience which "...is uniquely different from the philosophical or religious experience". (p. 67) as well as from the scientific apprehension of an object (p. 66). "The aesthetic experience is immediate, intuitive and as such it is *poorest in concept*." (p. 67, italics mine). Although the problem of the nature of the cognitive access to the work is not clear in Hegel,¹⁴ nevertheless, his lectures do

⁸Z. Kuderowicz: *Wolność i historia (Freedom and History)*, Warszawa 1981, p. 175-176.

⁹Hegel: *Wykłady...*, p. 118.

¹⁰Hegel writes: "Because of dealing with truth as an absolute object of consciousness, art also belongs to the sphere of the spirit and in respect to content it is based on the same foundation as religion [...] and philosophy [...] In view of the same contents of the three kingdoms of the absolute spirit, they differ in respect to form in which they bring their object, the absolute, to our consciousness"; *ibid.*, p. 170-171; cf. also *ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹²Cf. *ibid.*, p. 19; Kuderowicz: *Wolność...*, p. 195-196.

¹³Cf. Hegel: *Wykłady...*, p. 173 ff.

¹⁴Cf. *ibid.*, p. 65-66.

contain some theses which limit, and in a sense even undermine, Mitias's postulate quoted above.¹⁵ (5) In his analysis Mitias does not mention a certain methodological directive which is very important for Hegelian aesthetics and which could prove useful in art criticism. It is the directive about the principle of historicism which demands an explanation of artistic phenomena by indicating their relations to the historical context in which they came into being.¹⁶

Let us pass, in turn, to R. Ingarden's theory to which M. H. Mitias devotes most space. The author concentrates his attention mainly on the literary work.¹⁷ In spite of a fairly precise reconstruction of Ingarden's ideas as to the structure of the work, its ontological grounds, and the awareness of the distinction between the literary work and its concretization, Mitias reaches conclusions which are incompatible with Ingarden's theory.

More specifically, Mitias is of the opinion that "...although the object of literary criticism is in principle distinct from its concretizations it does not, ontologically, exist outside these considerations". (p. 48). Because of this "...we are bound to subjectivize the work, and consequently the aesthetic object..." (p. 58). Thus, according to Mitias, Ingarden's theory does not provide objective grounds for aesthetic judgments¹⁸ and should be regarded as inadequate.

The premise of the argument carried out by Mitias is an assumption that the polystratal structure of the literary work has potential existence: "It becomes actual in a concrete imaginative experience during an event of reading." (p. 49 ff). Thus, for Mitias, concretization is the realization of the literary work (p. 55) and it is also the only manner in which the work may be given to us.

The argument would have been valid if the premise it was based on had been consistent with Ingarden's theory. In fact, if we accept that the polystratal structure of the work has potential existence, then the concretization which actualizes and realizes such a structure becomes the only way of reaching the work and apprehending its content which, in consequence, leads to the identification of the work with the multiplicity of its concretizations.

However, an interpretation of this kind is inadmissible. As a polystratal structure the literary work contains only certain "moments" which have potential existence, namely, aesthetic values, metaphysical qualities, and, *in a sense*, the stratum of schematized aspects. The remaining strata, i.e. those of word sounds, meanings, and represented objectivities, have *actual existence, regardless of whether they are concretized in aesthetic experience or not*. The actuality of their existence makes possible a purely cognitive access to the work and its stratal structure without the need to refer to concretization.¹⁹ Such a strictly cognitive approach is adopted by Ingarden in his book *O dziele literackim (On the Literary Work)*.

The problem raised by Mitias is much more complicated than its brief outline presented above, still, on the basis of what has been said, its interpretation can hardly be accepted as justified.

Mitias's own conception of the literary work is a collection of certain suggestions concerning a possibility of constructing his theory rather than a theory in itself. His suggestions are implicated in, and, in a sense, concur with, his apprehension of the nature of the aesthetic object to which we shall return later on.

¹⁵Cf. *ibid.*, p. 21 ff, 41-44, 155-156.

¹⁶Cf. *ibid.*, p. 61; Kuderowicz: *Wolność...*, p. 175.

¹⁷Discussing Ingarden's concept of the aesthetic object, Mitias restricts his considerations to the literary work. In his book *O dziele literackim* Ingarden merely outlined the distinction between the aesthetic object and the work of art. He specified it and elaborated when discussing the ontology of painting, musical piece, work of architecture. Mitias's study does not take into consideration this fact and omits these domains of art. Cf. Ingarden: *Studia z estetyki*, vol. II, Warszawa 1958; *Studia z estetyki*, vol. III, Warszawa 1970, pp. 207-316.

¹⁸Cf. Ingarden: *Uwagi o estetycznym sądzie wartościującym; Zasady epistemologicznego rozważania doświadczenia estetycznego (Remarks about the Aesthetic Evaluative Judgment; Principles of Epistemological Considerations of Aesthetic Experience)* "Studia z estetyki", vol. III, Warszawa 1970, p. 153-177.

¹⁹Cf. Ingarden: *Studia estetyczne*, Warszawa 1966, vol. I, p. 164-241; vol. III, pp. 267-268.

It will be easier to grasp the nature of the aesthetic object if we first describe the cognitive process in which it can be given. M. H. Mitias constructs a very interesting theory of aesthetic experience, not unlike Ingarden's conception.²⁰

Speaking most generally, according to Mitias, the main aim of this kind of experience is the actualization or realization of the potentials inherent in the work of art as a physical object. The perception of this kind is not something that happens suddenly "or in one perceptual intuition; it is a complex, yet temporal process". (p. 76). This process consists of several phases each of which reveals an increasing richness and uniqueness of the perceived work of art. The first phase is an "introductory feeling". It is experienced by the recipient when, turning his attention to a certain property or aspect of the work of art before him, he begins to feel a certain excitement and emotion. This leads to a specific arrest of the surrounding world, the narrowing down of the perceptual field to the apprehended property, and to a total concentration on it: "We still perceive other things, but indirectly, opaquely" (p. 78). The temporal perspective is also narrowed down. We are what may happen in the future. We are totally concentrated on the present, "saturated with the introductory feeling". (p. 79) Gradually we become aware that what has originally provoked in us this state of excitement exists among other properties which together create a certain coherent whole. Adding imagination and intuition to the sensuous perception we can better grasp the mutual relations and connections between particular properties and elements; slowly, we apprehend the work "as a dynamic complex of properties." Now, our cognitive activity discovers and reaches aesthetic values which exist in the work only potentially. These values create a certain compact whole which may be called the aesthetic object. Although the necessary condition of its existence is the perceptual activity of the recipient, involving his various cognitive faculties, it cannot be identified with the mental state of the latter. The aesthetic object is determined first of all by "the *inner logic of the formal structure of the work.*" (p. 83, italics mine).

The form, "which the artist has imposed on his material medium" (p. 83) is precisely the feature which decides about the unity and coherence of the aesthetic object, due to which it is an organic whole. One might expect that the strong emphasis laid by M. H. Mitias on the cognitive activity of the recipient must necessarily lead to the subjectivization of the aesthetic object which exists only when experienced (p. 73, 75, 104). Yet, it is not so because, according to Mitias, the form, which is the "spirit" of the work of art, is something dynamic, alive, and the "...elements which constitute its (form's) being are active, potent; they reflect the essential nature of activity which led to their formation... It articulates the life of the mind during artistic creation". (p. 112) Hence, the proper reception of this understood work of art requires from the recipient an accomplishment of a number of cognitive acts which involve, among others, purely sensuous perception, imagination, intuition, and which constitute a coherent process called by Mitias aesthetic experience.

The subject who in aesthetic perception experiences the dynamics and expressiveness of form, also actualizes and realizes aesthetic values which exist only potentially in the work as a physical object. For Mitias the latter is not an object in the strict sense of the word. It is rather a kind of event, a "dynamic reality, and as such it exists as a process of meaningful experience". (p. 86). According to Mitias, an error made by the previous theories consisted in their substantialization of the aesthetic object so that, in consequence, they had to identify it either with the physical object or with the mental state of the recipient perceiving the work. Both these solutions are rejected by Mitias. The structure and, in part, the content of the aesthetic object are determined and defined by the form of the work of art as a physical object.²¹ The strict relation between them, in Mitias's conception, ensures the preservation of the ontological identity of the aesthetic object which is necessary for the

²⁰There is a close similarity between these theories in respect to both their substance and the manner of arguing. Cf. Ingarden: *Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Object*, "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", vol. XXI, no. 3, 1961, p. 289-313, especially p. 289-301, 303-306.

²¹For Mitias the concept of form concentrates in itself what the artist wants to communicate by using a certain medium, e.g. sounds, colours, words, marble etc. It is a means of communication between the recipient and the artist. "Thus form refers to the fullness, plentitude of the sensuous content which we apprehend in aesthetic perception" (p. 107); "Form is accordingly the being, or substance of the work of art." (p. 108).

latter to serve as an objective basis for aesthetic judgments pronounced about a work of art. As we remember, it is the first requirement which an adequate theory of the aesthetic object is to meet.

As far as the possibility of its intersubjective cognizability is concerned, the matter is more complicated. M. H. Mitias also refers here to form which, being accessible to direct sensuous perception²², is intersubjectively communicable. However, the aesthetic object cannot be identified with form in the work of art as a physical object²³ – even though Mitias attempts to carry out such an undertaking (p. 74, 104, 108) – because: (1) as the author frequently emphasizes himself, one could not then speak about the potential existence of the aesthetic object in relation to the work of art, since the form of the latter must, out of necessity, be actualized. It is this purpose that is served by the artist's creative process whose effect is the work of art;²⁴ (2) the notion of form concerns the sensuous content of the work of art, while aesthetic values, as well as the aesthetic object itself, are not – according to Mitias's conception – directly given to the senses. Sensuous perception is here a necessary but insufficient condition for the aesthetic object to exist;²⁵ (3) form is a "relatively stable structure". (p. 74) while the aesthetic object, as a process or event, exists in a discontinuous, discrete mode.

The impossibility of identifying the aesthetic object with the form of the work of art, demonstrated above, questions the intersubjective cognizability of the former and, as we recall, it is a necessary condition for the object discussed to constitute an objective basis for aesthetic judgments.

Neither can the aesthetic object be reduced to the experiences of the recipient perceiving the work. It is somehow "suspended" between the work and the percipient. Its ontological status still remains unclear, in spite of Mitias's explanations describing the nature of the object discussed as a process or event. In this case it seems instructive to recall R. Ingarden's considerations contained in volume 2 of his *Spór o istnienie świata (Controversy about the Existence of the World)* which concern, among other things, the identities of process and event which are precisely distinguished by Ingarden.²⁶

M. H. Mitias's conception is then one more attempt to reconcile the uniqueness and individuality of communing with the work of art in aesthetic experience with claims of the objectivity of evaluative judgments pronounced about it. Some failings of this theory, mentioned above, only partly may be held against the author. They result largely from objective difficulties posed by the problem of finding a firm and lasting basis for criticism in art. These difficulties are multiplied in a theory which tries to avoid all "reductionisms". And such is M. H. Mitias's construct.

If one attempts to evaluate the whole work, one should first of all emphasize its great informative value. In fact, it is hard to think of an approach in the controversy about the ontological status of the aesthetic object which has not been analyzed by M. H. Mitias. Moreover, in spite of the great variety of material covered in this study, the author has managed to preserve the coherence and clarity of the text.

The multiplicity of approaches to the problem of the aesthetic object which reveals the author's great erudition, the correctness and depth of his critical analyses, clarity of argument – are merely some of the merits of the work discussed. Thus, it is certainly a book worthy of reading and considering.

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²²Cf. Mitias: *Aesthetic Object...*, p. 26,27,74,81,83,84,108.

²³If such an undertaking succeeded, the question of the intersubjective cognizability of the aesthetic object would be solved.

²⁴Mitias writes: "The main point, however, which merits emphasis is that artist's major contribution to the finished product is the organization of his material – sound, color, lines, movement, marble – into a definite form which will, upon contemplation, affect the spectator in a definite way" (p. 24).

²⁵Cf. Mitias: *Aesthetic Object...*, p. 22,23,73,74,76,82,85.

²⁶Cf. Ingarden: *Różnice formalne i związki bytowe między zdarzeniem a przedmiotem trwającym w czasie; Zagadnienie tożsamości procesu i zdarzenia (Formal Difference and Ontological Relations between an Event and an Object Lasting in Time; Problems of the Identity of Process and Event)* [in:] *Spór o istnienie świata (Controversy about the Existence of the World)*, vol. II, Warszawa 1961, p. 281–292, 339–355.