Jolita Mulevičiūtė, *Besotis žvilgsnis. Lietuvos dailė ir vizualioji kultūra 1865–1914*, Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas, 2012. 304 p. ISBN 978-9955-868-54-5

The monograph by Jolita Mulevičiūtė researching the change in supervision and vision in Lithuanian art and culture in the second half of the 19th century can be called a changer of paradigms.¹ Although the work deals with various, sometimes already asked, questions (for example, there is an investigation into the censorship of images, a discussion on why one or another genre developed, or on the contrary, why it did not expand, the work methods of the ‘core’ and ‘marginal’ artists of the region are reconstructed), all of them are combined in the hope of revising the model of the development of Lithuania’s art in the late 19th and early 20th century. The goal of this revision is to discover the beginnings of the ‘exploded’ modernism before the First World War in the politically restricted and economically backward Northwest region of the Russian Empire.

The study by Mulevičiūtė joins the works of Laima Laučkaitė, Mindaugas Kvietkauskas, N. Lukšionytė-Tolvaišienė and Andrzej Romanowski on modern culture at the turn of the centuries, and at the same time it goes beyond them, by expanding the chronological framework from the abolition of serfdom until the First World War. Since the artists of the period actively migrated, the geographical borders of ‘Lithuanian Art’ are seen as an expression of the development of international art, and thus in discussing the work by the artists, the art scene and their updates in Cracow, Warsaw, St Petersburg, Paris and Munich are included.

The relatively rarely used approach in Lithuanian art history applied to the study of visual art gives this study originality, and helped the author to see the 19th-century heritage in museums in a new light. Among them, as is known, small-size, medium or even poor-quality canvases in the genres of academicism and naturalism dominate; while sculpture and graphics, due to the political constraints in the region during the period discussed, were almost dead. Until now, this heritage as a whole has almost not been

¹ Cf. *XX amžiaus pradžios Vilnius: modernėjančios kultūros židinys*, ed. L. Laučkaitė (Vilnius, 2004); eadem, *Vilniaus dailė XX amžiaus pradžioje* (Vilnius, 2002); M. Kvietkauskas, *Vilniaus literatūrų kontrapunktai: ankstyvasis modernizmas, 1904–1915* (Vilnius, 2007); N. Lukšionytė-Tolvaišienė, *Istorizmas ir modernas Vilniaus architektūroje* (Vilnius, 2000); A. Romanowski, ‘Vilnietiškas’ modernizmo laukimas, *XX amžiaus pradžios Vilnius*, pp. 18–32; A. Romanowski, *Młoda Polska wileńska* (Kraków, 1999).

studied, because as the author herself admits, the style of the works is unattractive, without any metaphysical flights of fancy (p. 10).

Demonstrating an excellent knowledge of historiography and the theory of visual studies, Mulevičiūtė looks for a sense of the visual not so much in the visual artefact itself, but in the environment of its operation. For this reason, the change in visual practices is presented to the reader, with the general cultural development of the country, supplementing it with an analysis of the impact of new media, photography, mass spectacles and the illustrated press, which spread in the second half of the 19th century.

In her narrative, the author skilfully uses primary sources, and, reconstructing the environment of visual culture at that time, weaves together science and art, philosophy and history, memoirs and reflections, literature, and, of course, fine art. It should be noted that in the 19th century, not only high, but also the 'mass' culture of Lithuania was very muted, and so the press began to use photography relatively late, and relatively rarely, so that visual mass culture in the region did not develop quickly. In general, the author pays little attention to the visibility of mass culture, if it existed; there is no discussion of cartoons, pictures, posters, or placards, things that not only illustrated text, but also changed, formed the taste and choice of the masses, and aroused nostalgia and a variety of other feelings. It is unfortunate that the author does not dispute the arguments of Richard Stites and other researchers of the Russian Empire that in the early 20th century, postcards, along with other low-cost images, were instruments of mass-culture education, forming, for example, a romanticised image of peasants and the countryside, not only among the peasantry itself, but also among educated people.²

In general, looking from the perspective of a historian, one of the greatest deficiencies of the book is a kind of hostility to mass culture and wider social processes. After all, without the latter, social sight from the outside, according to W.J.T. Mitchell, one of the fathers of visual culture, a visual turn in general is hardly possible.³ At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries we can notice a relatively significant rise in industry, rapid urbanisation and demographic leaps, the strengthening of the bourgeois class, the growth of education, and a more politically free society. There is a lack of detailed discussion of these social processes in the book. On the other hand, this criticism is aimed not at the art critic, but more at the community of 'pure historians', not having investigated more broadly up to now this complex social and economic change.

² R. Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 26.

³ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Interdisciplinary and visual culture', *Art Bulletin*, 77 (4) (1995), pp. 541, 544.

Critics have already noted that Mulevičiūtė presents the investigated art in the late 19th and early 20th century as a place for the expression of ideas (first of all, concepts of nature and the person), or more accurately, one of the sites of expression, not coupled with other forms of popular culture at that time: photography, literature, etc. For this reason, a work of art is viewed in the book sociocritically, not as an object placed in a context, but as an inter-discourse player.⁴

Of the components of visual culture mentioned, Mulevičiūtė devotes the most attention to the increasingly popular and sophisticated medium of photography. While analysing the influence of photography on artistic supervision, it is explained how in the second half of the 19th century artists used it to seek the effect of reality. Artists such as Stanislovas Bohušas-Sestšencevičius used photos in their works to create at first glance a unique and extremely realistic image, but looking at their work more closely, one can see that it is based on the reproductions of motifs, that the artist basically mimics the documentary, but at the same time manipulates images. The technical possibilities of photography at that time allowed all this. In her analysis of the artist's printed ink drawings of scenes of daily life in villages and towns, prepared in Vilnius and printed in Warsaw in 1913, the author discusses how widely the Munich school of art applied this 'auxiliary tool' to achieve a cheap and quick effect of realism. The results of this method of creativity complicates the searches for the Lithuanian or Polish identity in art, and provides an ideological and political context for modern nationalism (p. 57) for the issue.

The first section of 'Insatiable Gaze' is devoted to a discussion of the domestic scenes by Bohušas-Sestšencevičius. In other sections, the author examines portraits and landscapes, and closes the book with a much broader chapter devoted to the figure, first of all woman, representing the problems of inter-genre art. As is quite common for such works, the basis for each section is a case study, becoming the starting point for the author's discussions. It is perhaps a pity that in addition to the already-mentioned Bohušas-Sestšencevičius, the author chose to devote attention to the work of Alfredas Römeris, Ferdinandas Ruščicas and Vincentas Slendzinskis, and in this way stays very close to traditional art history. After all, these painters are already presented, in the words of the author, as the most important symbolic figures, around whom the analysis of Lithuanian art in the late 19th century (p. 25) is concentrated. Of course, in their abundant creative legacy, the trends of the period are brightly unmasked, but if the look and the way we observe are historically constructed, perhaps at least one scene in a section could have been devoted not to a painting, but to some other artefact of visual culture? For with the assistance of various

⁴ D. Satkauskytė, 'Tarp teksto ir konteksto: sociokritika kaip kompromisas', *Colloquia*, 31 (2014), p. 28.

quality non-art images, it would be possible to open up a wider view of the visual culture of the 19th century, in the words of the already cited W.J.T. Mitchell, allowing us to talk about differences between high and low, visual art and visual culture.⁵

The second section of the monograph is eloquent from this point of view. It begins by answering the question why the portrait 'Woman with *kykeliu* (bonnet)', painted from a photograph in 1890 by Vincentas Leopoldas Slendzinskis, does not stand out either by its individualism or its psychologism, but only repeats the universal schemes of photography at that time. Mulevičiūtė, almost for the first time in Lithuanian historiography, shows the studios of photographers and behind-the-scenes commercial portrait studios, reveals how the conventions of photoportraits, which were gaining in popularity, depersonalised and vulgarised the portrayal of man. This section comes the closest to popular culture and mass visual practices.

In the third section, devoted to the work of Ferdinandas Ruščicas, there is a step backwards from the context of the traditional understanding of this artist's work: neo-romanticism and symbolism. There is a focus on the St Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts, where the classic of Lithuanian art studied, considering how painting from photographs of nature influenced the landscape genre in the 19th century.

The last and the largest section about the human figure, more accurately of woman, in the second half of the 19th century in Lithuanian art, starts from the portrait 'Girl by the Door' painted by Slendzinskis in 1879 in Kharkiv. At first glance, this is an anachronistic piece, reminding one of Classical compositions of Renaissance or Baroque *putto* and *amor*. However, the artist's *trompe-l'oeil* illusion technique allows Mulevičiūtė to categorise the look of Slendzinskis not only as a natural science, but also aiming to moralise the subject of sexual maturity, so in general of the human body. The author's interpretation is continued by showing how the erodable patriarchal model of the relationship between man and woman threatened the values of bourgeois society, especially morality and public decency, and in art and the commercial press the increasing ambivalence: desirable, but at the same time and dangerous, image of a woman. Since the modernisation of art in the second half of the 19th century, as the transgression of social, cultural and moral conventions, developed in many European countries, and the changes in the depiction of a woman's body became one of the main expressions of this process (p. 148), the author refers to the abundant Western historiography devoted to this topic, and thus at times, arguments, for example, from Tolstoy's 'Kreutzer Sonata' are not very surprising. In this case, the diaries, letters and correspondence of the investigated artists, found by the author in archives, are much stronger, revealing the positions of the very creators on the issue of changes in the

⁵ Mitchell, 'Interdisciplinary and visual culture', pp. 542–543.

image of man, and partly answering the question why the genre of the nude did not appear in Lithuanian art. In analysing problems of sexuality, the monograph mentions the spread of prostitution in the cities, and the import of legal exotic erotic material.

Mulevičiūtė discusses problems of gender relationships, the body and sexuality, and the quite popular 19th-century style of narrative painting, in which important elements are combined in the narrative, often seeking to disturb the viewer; for example, forcing him to wonder what happened to the heroine of Bohušas-Sestšencevičius' painting 'A Crying Woman' (1903). Mulevičiūtė associates riddles asked of the viewer, such as turning the back or covering the face, with the theory of the psychology of the positivist era, of belles-lettres, especially the popular detective genre, and the unique position of the creator, using the main form of recognition in the 19th century, observation of the external (p. 233).

In this section, the discussion of the female is not limited to the theme of the courtesan: their opposite is 'Women in Black Clothing'. They, in the words of the author, are spiritual and without bodies. After the suppression of the 1863–1864 rebellion, they wore eternal mourning, took over from the men the duty of symbolic resistance, gradually became involved in community activities, and became established in the social field. And the opposite of these are small women, children, portraits of whom allowed the author to present the social and economic transformation of the family in the emotional space, as well as the real cult of the children of the nobility and wealthy families in the cities that became entrenched at the end of the 19th century (p. 214). The author presents not only unambiguous portraits of children, which allow us to expand the field of interpretation from the extreme of the romantic ideal of the child (p. 220) to the assumption that sin is hiding in virginity, and that is the position of the modern period (p. 226).

The book concludes with the 'Last Glance', deathbed portraits, and an event attracting the attention of hordes, the painting by Stanislovas Vitkevičius in 1889 'Drama at Palanga Beach'. Concluding the book, the author notes that the widespread deathbed portrait, prevalent in photography, seeks to overcome death, and led to a dramatic collision between the viewer of the desired memory space and the actual fact of death fixed in the image (p. 263).

'Insatiable Gaze' is in some respects devoted to one of the most conservative areas of Lithuanian culture. In this politically and economically depressed land, there was no higher school of art (to tell the truth, no higher school at all), and the financially limited buyers of works of art followed unsophisticated artistic taste and pragmatic reasons. As the author notes, the artists themselves, bound by moral links and various forms of self-censorship, focused on ethical and socially oriented values. The individual in the post-serfdom epoch (nevertheless, we would say that he is a person

of art), experiencing the processes of the democratisation of culture, and touching with his hands the discoveries of science and technology, also changes his skills of seeing. At the same time, images reflected by the tools of realistic art begin to appeal to the subjective experience of the viewer, and provoke a response. Celebrating the monograph by Mulevičiūtė, we can remember the old idea from Plato's *Cratylus* dialogue used by investigators of visual culture, that one can represent a person in two ways, by saying his name, or creating a portrait of him. In 'Insatiable Gaze' the late 19th-century portrait was painted not only as an illustration and for perceptive comments, but also in the lively, pleasurable to read, text of the author.

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