

Laura PAVEL, *Theory characters, fictional beings* [Personaje ale teoriei, ființe ale ficțiunii], Institutul European, 2021, ISBN 9786062403096, 338 p.

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Against a Romanian cultural background that is dominated by political and ideological segregation, writing literary theory can sometimes be problematic, especially if one approaches serious academic subjects, such as fictionality and narrativity. In her latest book called *Personaje ale teoriei, ființe ale ficțiunii* (translated as *Theory characters, fictional beings*), published in 2021 at Institutul European Publishing House, Laura Pavel manages to bring to the fore a fresh theoretical approach, arising from her hypersensitive reflection and her close attention to the relationship between visual arts and written texts.

The book is structured in three main parts, each one of them describing different theoretical horizons, such as *Fictional beings*, *Interpretative narratives*, or *Ekphrastic interpretations*. Every essay tries to answer specific hermeneutical questions; the author often uses close-reading to analyse intermedial artworks and texts, and chooses a series of cryptic paintings to highlight the “post-auratic” artistic and contemporary epoch of our existence. Moreover, it is mandatory to add that Laura Pavel regards her latest release as engaging in New Aestheticism, more than in critical theory: “Along with noticing the interpretative limits of some manners doing criticism, one can prefigure a mode of reading that elaborates its own concepts inspired by the particularity of the analysed texts, and not derived from a pre-existing critical-ideological device” (326).

In the first part of the book, *Fictional beings*, the arguments that the author makes constantly point to different concerns that are not always fully resolved; this is partly due to the fact that they deserve, as Laura Pavel herself states, their own complete monographs (30). The first essay approaches Bruno Latour’s theoretical strategies, elaborated in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, that will work as an analytical tool for the rest of the chapters. The whole

analysis that Laura Pavel makes finds its basis on Latourian key-concepts, such as “engagement”, “subjective interpretation”, “gained subjectivity” and so on, because it seems that we, as art consumers, are engaged to the artwork, and if it is true that it must always be interpreted, we never feel free to do whatever we want with it. If the work requires a subjective interpretation, it is in that sense in which we are subjected to the work, or because, by interpretation, we gain subjectivity.

Further in this chapter, the author opens a case study based on Ion Iovan (*alias* Mateiu Caragiale), starting from the “stylistics of existence” theory elaborated by Marielle Macé. The following chapters, “The literary *boémé* of the ’60-’70”, “The total novelist of the 1970s” and “Defictionalization and self-exposure” will focus on a “single-frame” speech and on autobiographical performance. The given answers and the theoretical paradigm in which Laura Pavel operates will provide an infracritical mode of interpretation, rather than a metacritical one. What makes the approach unique is the fact that Pavel is not just writing theory about theory; the critical voice is an active and fine observer whose conclusions are not just empty dialectics. Moreover, she follows the interaction of literature with visual and performative arts, having a wider and clearer analytical lens.

These essays unleash the interpretative potential of the fictional beings and the various components and meanings of *ekphrasis*, which is defined as “the potential dialog between artistic, literary and plastic languages, but in the end the one anthropologic as well” (30). Laura Pavel insists on how Bruno Latour confirms that fictions themselves have a certain dose of objectivity and a specific ontological condition. Their domain expands towards other existential areas, such as art, science and, the most important aspect for Latour, towards the [FIC-REF] intersection, between fiction and reference. These fictions borrow from other ways of existence their own morphological mechanisms, their self-con-*figuration*, seeing as, for Laura Pavel, the process of semiotic establishment of this group of entities relies, on one hand, on a linguistic fold that the etymology of the word “fiction” implies: the Latin verb *fingere* (to model) may in turn be modelled in the form *fictus*, from which the roots or the morphemes *fig* and *fict* derive. The relation between fiction and *icon*, and the connection with the otherness of the fictional being no longer relies on the ontological authority of the creator-subject in relation to the work-object, but on complicity and mutual interpellation, just like in the case described by W.J.T Mitchell, as Laura Pavel continues to demonstrate. In his 2005 volume, *What do*

pictures really want? *The Lives and Love of Images*, Mitchell shifts the question of what pictures do to what they want, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak.

Later on, Pavel highlights the sensitive nature of images over time, suggesting their ability to feel the so-called *Zeitgeist* and to be part of an epoch that didn't always pay attention to their real essence:

In fact, Mitchell finds that the iconoclastic, demystifying critical perspective in which the images in modernity have often been treated is a paradoxical symptom of their "life", of their state of living beings, as is the opposite attitude, the naive belief in a lively presence (*liveness*), inherent to works of art. Consequently, the theorist proposes that *image-beings* should be approached through a "critical idolatry", through a kind of "secular divination", understood as an antidote to that reflexive critical iconoclasm that governs the intellectual discourse today. The aesthetic experience thus finds an ethical component, in a restorative, curatorial attitude, through which any destructive and disfiguring act is followed by a reconstruction, a reunion and a reconfiguration of the *image-being*. (47)

What is obvious during the reading of Laura Pavel's book is the fact that the author goes well beyond basic concepts regarding art history, and expertly uses some key-concepts and theories delineated by Erwin Panofsky in his 1972 volume, *Studies in Iconology*, (the iconological perspective of reading an image), Georges Didi-Huberman (the symptom and symptomatology, in *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Time*), and many others.

The second and the third parts of the book, *Interpretative narratives* and *Ekphrastic interpretations*, are intrinsically linked and, as Laura Pavel states, bring to the surface the figures of several theorists who will become important characters of the volume. They are named "actors of theory," "interpretative subjects" who are, in turn, being interpreted: Rita Felski, Bruno Latour, Martha Nussbaum, Stanley Cavell, Donald Davidson. The author is actually tracing a theoretical network between these theorists, traversing a variety of artistic fields: starting from Latour, she arrives at Felski, then at Nussbaum (due to her great interest in ancient Greek tragedy). By the same token, she approaches Cavell through her Shakespearian readings and meets Davidson by accident, during Lewis Carroll's *Humpty Dumpty*.

She goes even further, discussing post-utopian art and the deconstruction of the aura in some paintings made by the Romanian artist Adrian Ghenie.

Nevertheless, Laura Pavel does not simply stop here. Respectively, she resorts to Agamben to explore Melville's character, Bartleby, linking these aspects to a better understanding of Victor Man's cryptic paintings, which she names *meta-paintings*. For the theorist, these paintings are *symptomatic* (most probably in Didi-Huberman's sense) and they contain an interior resistance, being remarkable for their *potentiality*, as Giorgio Agamben would point out. Therefore, she states that Man's seemingly cryptic works rely precisely on what remains in the potential, unspeakable and probably unrepresented pictorially, the enigma being only exposed on canvas, hence not explained. However, a key to interpreting his creations can be found in the pictorial-literary interconnection, in a privileged inter-art dialogue. Many titles of his paintings and installations include an inverted *ekphrasis* formula, which makes the images become pictorial emblems of the literature of Shakespeare, Joyce, Lewis Carroll or Ezra Pound. The nostalgia of painting for the *Other*, which is the literary text, becomes for Victor Man not only an aesthetic statement, but also an ethical one. An assumption of the state of "potentiality" (in the sense in which Giorgio Agamben uses the term) of the artistic process, and not the expression of a power position towards this textual otherness (231-2).

When discussing Adrian Ghenie's artworks, Laura Pavel also tries to explain the roots of post-auratic aesthetics. The parodic and tragicomic manner in which Adrian Ghenie aestheticizes the figures of famous dictators of the twentieth century (Hitler, Stalin and Ceaușescu) calls into question the way of deconstructing and reconstructing the aura of the portrait: "The much-discussed concept of aura could be interpreted, in this context, beyond its metaphorical and even quasi-mystical layers, as an aesthetic and anthropological effect of reception, experienced in a certain context and on a certain emotional background" (262). In Pavel's perspective, the post-auratic aesthetic focuses, to a large extent, on the way of producing and receiving art, on its instrumentalization, on its social efficiency, on its implementation in the sphere of daily life. In addition, it is related to the anthropological relevance of the artist's position, of his identity, situated between singularity and a sense of the common. That is exactly the point where the author arrives, when she raises the following issue: "Is there any need left, to find the state of intense, acute presence, in front of the object or artistic process, in a post-

Duchamp era, when neo-avant-garde aesthetics and parodic distillation of canonical works lose their subversive potential?” (261).

In a nutshell, Laura Pavel’s latest release is a solid theoretical work that brings to light new interpretative approaches. A considerable and worthy of appreciation part of this volume is the variety of applied discourses (literary, plastic, performative) and the *ekphrastic* interpretations on the underground artwork of some Romanian painters.