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Aleš Erjavec, *Art, Philosophy, and Ideology. Writings on Aesthetics and Visual Culture from the Avant-garde to Postsocialism*, edited by Tyrus Miller. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024. ISBN 978-90-04-69750-8 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-69751-5 (e-book)

Respectable American aesthetician and avant-garde theorist Tyrus Miller has edited a critical edition of theoretical studies by the Ljubljana-based aesthetician Dr. Aleš Erjavec. These studies were written between 1989 and 2018. The selection of studies has been published under the title *Art, Philosophy, and Ideology: Writings on Aesthetics and Visual Culture from the Avantgarde to Postsocialism* in the series *Trans-cultural Aesthetics* by Brill and IAA (International Association for Aesthetics).

Aleš Erjavec's philosophical and aesthetic work began in Slovenia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In his doctoral dissertation on ideologies of modernism, he presented research on the relationship between national and international modernism with artistic avant-gardes and the theoretical platforms of Marxism. In a broader sense, he understood the concept of ideology as the determining effect of institutions, the imaginary, representations, and relationships among people in society. Therefore, his fundamental thesis was that the condition of ideology is society. For Erjavec, modernism was a particular form of sociality with a complex web of singular cases linked to the relationship between the materiality of human social life and the autonomous idealizations of art. He presented modernism as a political, cultural, artistic, and aesthetic field defined by antagonisms and contradictions of individual and collective life.

From a critical materialist perspective, Erjavec has positioned the relationship between modernism and the avant-garde as a dialectical turn concerning the autonomy of art, the functional use of art and culture, and social struggles. He emphasized the character of a modernist artistic creation, the character of avant-garde destruction of artistic creation, and finally, the character of social production, which directly introduces modernism and the avant-garde into the field of tension between social production, exchange, artistic or cultural consumption, i.e., between politics and economics versus aesthetics and art. Erjavec sees the essence of aesthetic, artistic, and political projects in modernism and the avant-garde. Therefore, important projects for him include Italian Futurism and Soviet Constructivism.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Aleš Erjavec's research into aesthetics gained prominence on the international stage. He was very active on a global scale during the first and early second decades of the 21st century. Erjavec was one of the founders and the president of the Slovenian Society for Aesthetics (1984-1999 and from 2005 to 2010). Shortly before the International Congress of Aesthetics in 1998 held in Ljubljana, he was elected president of the International Association for Aesthetics (IAA). He worked as a scientific advisor at the Philosophical Institute within the Scientific Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences (FI ZRC SAZU). He was appointed a full professor of aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. He taught philosophy and theory of visual culture at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Primorska in Koper.

Erjavec's philosophical and aesthetic work shows a consistent and gradual development from Marxism characteristic of the late self-managing reformist Slovenia, through neo-Marxism as the left-wing of late-socialist postmodernism, to critical studies of postsocialism and studies of contemporary global visual culture.

In his early writings, Erjavec recognized the importance of *aesthetics* as a critical philosophy and theory in contemporary humanistic studies. This marked a distinctive departure from aesthetics as the philosophy of normative or autonomous beauty and autonomous art towards aesthetics as a critical, culturally oriented, and politically developed theory of art, human sensibility, and the social structuring of the sensory, emotional, visible, and ultimately, knowable realms. Following a post-Adornian critical thought direction, Erjavec opted for the concept of *aesthetic theory* over *aesthetics as a philosophical speculation*, thereby defining his scholarly research work. His aesthetic theory has been shaped and developed as a critical theory of the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics in the modern, postmodern, and contemporary global world. Regarding the aesthetic-philosophical and political tradition that Erjavec's work belongs to, notable authors include Schiller, Hegel, Marx, Adorno, Benjamin, Lukács, Morawski, Welsch, Paetzold, Kreft, Althusser, Lyotard, and currently, Rancière.

The early stages of Erjavec's research in aesthetics and philosophy led him from studying French Marxism, for example, in the context of Lucien Goldmann, Roger Garaudy, Louis Althusser, Henri Lefebvre, Claude Lefort, to the engaged phenomenology of Michel Dufrenne. In the realm of *postmodern Marxism*, he was close to the philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Martin Jay, and he also maintained friendly relations with Heinz Paetzold, Lev Kreft, and Anthony J. Cascardi. Transitioning from postmodern Marxism or post-Marxism, he moved into the realm of critical discourse on the *postsocialist condition*, aligning himself with postsocialist theories of Eastern European philosophers, aestheticians, and art theorists such as Slavoj Žižek, Marina Gržinić, Mihail Epštajn, Boris Groys, Peter Gyorgy, and also drawing closer to the Third World theorists such as Gerardo Mosquera, Gao Minglu, Gao Jianping, Patrick Flores, or Jale Erzen.

For Erjavec, the concept of Marxist aesthetics in the postmodern era is based on definitions and representations of subject, society, and art that construct existential, representative, or formal-media homologies (or resistances to homologies) within social and narrower cultural practices. These homologies or resistances to homologies can be interpreted as contextual functions – the artwork as a function of context. The idea of function for him cannot be reduced to the logic of reflection (Lukács) or the utility of representation (poetics of socialist realism), but to the concept of ideology in a post-Althusserian sense, which means material practices in society and culture that not only enable but also constitute a certain type of artistic expression (representation, expression, and behavior). The path to this position was paved by the identification of specific epistemological marginal (late, but not marginal) formations of Marxist aesthetics (situationism, Lefebvre, Goldman, and Althusser) towards that critical juncture after which nothing remained the same: that moment of the Slovenian alternative – the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* movement in the 1980s.

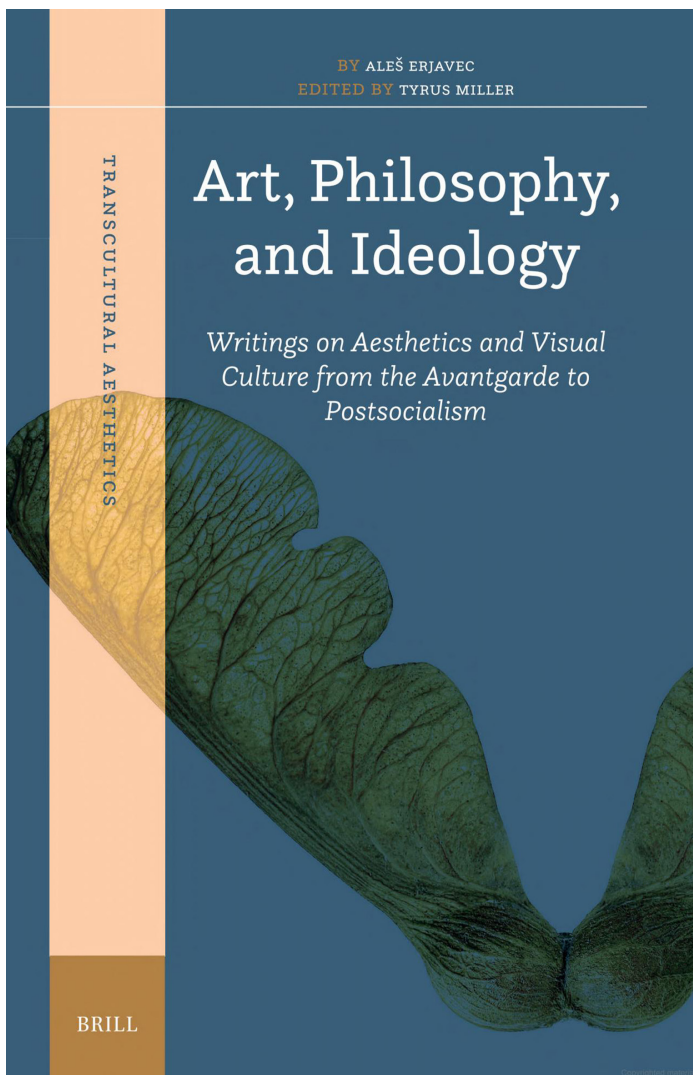
Erjavec's elaboration of Jameson's critical theory, philosophy, and aesthetics enabled the understanding of aesthetic debate as a critical and non-systematic theory of culture and its functional mechanisms in constituting plural fields of social functions and politicizing aesthetic autonomies. Erjavec's interest in postmodernity as a new paradigm of the era in the 1980s led to a reevaluation of the concept of aesthetics as a systemic philosophical discipline. He opened a hybrid field of theoretical confrontations of philosophical aesthetics with cultural studies, especially visual culture, media, and various arts (painting, photography, theater, architecture).

A significant role was played by the revision of ideas from Lyotard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In terms of philosophy as a critical theory of culture, Erjavec introduced an interpretation model for perception, i.e., the philosophy of perception of Merleau-Ponty, which had not been sufficiently explored in postmodern theory. By referencing Merleau-Ponty's work and Lyotard's writings, he engaged in one of the characteristic knots of confrontation between phenomenological philosophy, structuralism, postmodern theories, and theories of visual culture. This reframed the formerly post-structuralist and postmodern discourse significantly tied to the *linguistic turn* towards a *visual, optical, or pictorial turn*.

Erjavec's key innovation in the field of aesthetics is the hybridization of philosophical discourse that shifts from the context of 'pure' or 'autonomous' philosophical aesthetics to the areas of philosophical theory. He naturalized the aesthetic discourse through cultural studies, media philosophy, art history, and theory. With regards to methodology, his approach to aesthetics is predominantly philosophical-theoretical, with his objects of study being brought into various philosophical-theoretical debates. Moreover, he transitioned from a Marxist approach of reading *social necessity* to discussions of hybrid and heterogeneous differences, arbitrariness, and plurality within cultural and artistic production fields in contemporary society. The contemporary world is not a world of obvious *social necessities* but of complex and indirect interconnected practices of production, exchange, and consumption of visual appearances and

meanings in specific political conditions of individual and collective subjectivization. He demonstrates how subjectivization unfolds in the realm of changing ideologies, meaning social realities.

The indicated theoretical shift is complex, as it does not dismiss the interpretive potential of society-oriented theory. Instead, it shifts theoretical attention from the concept of social necessity to ideas of differences, arbitrariness, and motivation of material practices within a plural and hybrid culture. This shift is also highlighted by Erjavec's interest in left-wing American aesthetic theory (Jameson, Jay, Cascardi) and his detailed readings on otherness in Merleau-Ponty's promises of understanding the perceptual body and problematizing the boundaries of Marxism with Lyotard's discussions of discourse and figure.



Erjavec's approach is transitional in the intentional problematization of the stages of postsocialism as a specific postmodern formulation of context in relation to the contexts of late capitalism postmodernity and the Third World. Therefore, it can be said that Erjavec has executed three significant steps in the transfiguration of aesthetics:

1. Transition from philosophical aesthetics to contemporary critical philosophy of culture,
2. Development of critical philosophy of culture as a theory of postsocialism and postsocialist artistic practices, and
3. Evolution of critical theory of visual culture as a philosophy of culture and art.

In other words, the valuable contribution of Erjavec's studies lies in confronting the fetishism of cultural memory with the projective and emancipatory potentiality of methodology derived and reflected from the analysis of cultural and political traces of avant-gardes, neo-avant-gardes, postmodernism, and postsocialist art.

Professor Tyrus Miller has composed a collection of twenty-five studies by Aleš Erjavec and divided it into three parts: Part 1: Visual Aesthetics in Postsocialism, Postmodernism, and Contemporary Art, Part 2: Aesthetic Revolution and Avant-Gardes in East, Central, and Western Europe, and Part 3: Spatial Turns: Central/East European Aesthetics in National, International, and Global Contexts. This marks the most crucial areas and methods of his theoretical and research work in the field of contemporary aesthetics. Some of his most significant texts are presented there, such as "Art, Cognition, Knowledge, and Diagnostics" (1993), "Aesthetics: Philosophy of Art or Philosophy of Culture?" (2001), "Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition" (2003), "Art and: A Toothless Tiger, a Cuddly Panda, or a Snow Leopard?" (2009), "Aesthetics and the Aesthetic Today: After Adorno" (2010), "Eastern Europe, Art, and the Politics of Representation" (2014), "Revolutions and the Avant-Gardes" (2016), "The Avant-Gardes, Utopias, and Clothes" (2017).