

Review

by Prof. DSc. Angel Valentinov Angelov

for the habilitation thesis presented by Assistant Professor Bogdana Paskaleva, PhD,
“Dressing up Nudity. Image Transformations in the Story of Narcissus and Echo”

Assistant Professor Bogdana Paskaleva, PhD, applies for the academic position of Associate Professor in professional direction 2. 1. Philology in a competition announced in SG no. 61 of 02.08.2022.

The candidate receives a bachelor's degree in Bulgarian Philology in 2009, a master's degree in Literature in 2010 at the Faculty of Slavic Philology of the Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'. In 2015, she defends her doctoral dissertation on the topic “Image, Similitude and Symbol at Nicolas of Cusa” with a scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. PhD Todor Hristov. The topic and elaboration of the doctoral dissertation do not coincide with the habilitation thesis presented by PhD Pascaleva. Since 31.X.2017, she is a Chief Assistant at the Department of Theory of Literature, Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'. B. Pascaleva points out four long-term stays in scientific institutions in Germany and Italy. Her teaching activity in the Department of Literary Theory includes seminars on Western European and ancient literature, optional seminars on themes and works from Greek and Roman antiquity, among which are Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. She is also an organizer of interdisciplinary scientific seminars. During the five years she is a member of the Theory of Literature Department, B. Pascaleva participates in five scientific projects, one of them in Germany. PhD B. Pascaleva has a significant publication activity, among which I note her translations from German, Italian, Latin and ancient Greek. The works that serve as primary material for her habilitation are studied in the original languages. I point out this traditional, but now rare, philological dignity in Bogdana Pascaleva's research activity – to rely on her own knowledge of the original text. A treatise by Leon Battista Alberti is the subject of her thesis, and she is the translator of two of Alberti's treatises.

“Dressing up Nudity. Image Transformations in the Story of Narcissus and Echo” consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, an appendix, a bibliography in six languages, indexes of names and concepts, summaries in Bulgarian and English.

Pascaleva's main goal is to create a new and theoretically grounded concept of an image; for this purpose, she seeks to determine the structural characteristics of the image, regardless of what type it is. The main concept that gives rise to her reflection on the image – the hyper-icon – is introduced by William Mitchell. A hyper-icon is a generalizing concept of an image, including all possible types of images generated by different sources. For Pascaleva, however, it is not a generic concept, it does not refer to images as species, but “postulates their network (or family, according to Wittgenstein) connectedness” (p. 279). Although she adopts Mitchell's definition as her own, Pascaleva points out the immanent danger in this way of defining the image, “when the image is understood so broadly, the unity of its concept is about to disintegrate ... to become a history of itself, even as it has already disintegrated and dispersed into different disciplines, between which there cannot be a community of methodology, nor even of the conceptual scheme, which would have to reconcile incompatible parameters” (p. 22).

Related to the question “what is an image” is the question: which scientific disciplines can investigate the image problem thus posed. If I understand Pascaleva's position correctly, for her scientific affiliation should not limit knowledge, even if it belongs to a certain scientific discipline at that moment. “As we will see, this (non)discipline can appear under different names, be part of different theoretical projects, the common denominator of which is precisely the openness of the thought paradigm to extra- and transdisciplinary elements” (*italics B.P.*, p. 19). In short, it is about experimentation and the kind of adventurous attitude inherent in scientific activity. However, is it about disciplines, the author asks, or at the same time about a research attitude, able to freely define its subject without presupposing its approach to it, in which the desire will be: subject and approach to be transformed in the course of the research. We cannot ignore the fact that scientific disciplines exist in institutions that most often seek to regulate knowledge, to make it perspicuous. The “institution – knowledge” relationship is not unproblematic.

In the introduction, B. Pascaleva reviews paradigms and research concepts for the image from the end of the 19th century to the second decade of the 21st century. She declares her attachment to Warburg's concept, but renounces her own theoretical and generalizing concept of the image. I consider this approach – the study of works and concepts in different historical periods to be cognitively promising, but it does not correspond to Pascaleva's stated initial intention to create a new theory of the image.

“Thus, in the context of this complex network of methodological interweaving, we will approach locally, singularly, in the form of descriptions of individual cases, in which to look for the image as a specific operator of the production of meaning. ... the image as an operator in the process of meaning production ... will break away from its materiality in order to show the need for the quality of in-betweenness, it will become a pure surface and will have to prove its functionality in the meaning-making processes precisely as a pure surface, which can also be called transparent, or else described with the metaphor of the garment, the drapery and the veil” (p. 25). I note the combination of analytical language with metaphors such as “garment, drapery, veil” that is characteristic of the entire book. B. Pascaleva is aware of this and tries to give conceptual status to the metaphors through which she defines the image.

The book is indeed composed of “descriptions of individual cases”, but in the course of the description Pascaleva reaches generalizations that go beyond the singularity of individual works and concepts, so as a result she really creates her own concept, or if we prefer a more moderate definition – B. Pascaleva reaches a clear and internally consistent understanding of the image. It could be tested and applied, with the inevitable change, to other works and eras, not only to studied in the monograph material, although at the end of the study Pascaleva states that “she does not claim to build a complete or systematic methodology, which may be applicable in other situations, or universally applicable” (p. 243).

The material she uses is from the 1st century B. C. until the beginning of the 20th century. Pascaleva seems to be more traditionally minded (her doctoral dissertation discusses material from the 15th century), which is why the field of mental images and cognitive studies, as well as media images, are not part of the study. What has just been written is not a requirement, it is even less a criticism, because the material analyzed in the book is extensive enough, in connection with which I note one of the qualities of the author: the ability to organize material from different eras, to create between the parts of this material connections that allow her to explore it with her own look. She succeeds in clearly presenting an equally significant body of critical literature through which to develop and support her own understanding. From the critical literature, Pascaleva chooses works that she does not want to criticize or only mentions in passing about one or another situation with which she does not agree. Her attitude is critical affirmative, she does not ground her understanding through

polemic but through building; not fighting, but talking and finding similarities in the formulations: a rare quality!

The definition “operator in the production of meaning” emphasizes the mediating functions of the image, which she calls mediality. “In this case, by operator we mean an instrument or a production technology to which the function of an agent, of an active cause, could be attributed, without, however, being necessarily related to any corresponding objective cause” (p. 28). For this formulation, as well as for the whole approach carried out in the monograph, Pascaleva points out that she is indebted to “The Logic of Meaning”, 1969, by Gilles Deleuze.

In Ch. I B. Pascaleva discusses the place of the story about Narcissus and Echo in the composition of Ovid’s “Metamorphoses”, as well as the question of the lack of sources of this story before Ovid. However, its purpose is not historiographic, but reconstruction of the theoretical landscape in the background of the narrative (as it is metaphorically expressed on p.43). One adoption of the narrative of Narcissus is in *The Romance of the Rose*, 1225–1230; 1270s, which Pascaleva only mentions in connection with the discussion of this adoption by an Italian philosopher (p. 37). It does not offer an interpretation of the proximity and difference between the two narratives. Her attention is directed to the analysis of theoretical writings and the theoretical attitudes of artistic texts (p. 242), and not so much the juxtaposition of their artistry. “Metamorphoses” contains ... a complete system of theoretical attitudes towards the image...” (p. 38).

Indeed, Pascaleva discusses in the course of her research the reflection on Narcissus and Echo by thinkers from different eras, and not the assimilation of the two images in different arts. Her research interest is theoretical and, by the logic of this interest, she seeks her own understanding, not just a history of diverse reflection on the image.

I will note the thorough analysis of the “Treatise on Painting” as well as Alberti’s earlier treatise, “Elements of Painting.” In the way Leon Battista Alberti interprets the myth of Narcissus (in “Treatise on Painting”, 1435), Bogdana Pascaleva finds confirmation for her thesis that the image, whether visual or verbal, is an edge, a boundary surface. Her conclusion is: “the line delineating the boundaries of the surface ... is constitutive – the limitation is the setting of parameters, i.e. the giving of a surface at all” (p. 54).

The image, defined as an edge and a boundary surface, brings her to another central claim – that of the ‘splitting’ of the subject. “In the Echo episode, this erogenous split is paralleled by the speech split. Thus, the key to the constitution of the image – be it visual or verbal (sound) – turns out to be the presence of this specific edge in the sense of a boundary surface” (p. 44). I summarize the meaning of the definitions that B. Pascaleva gives to the image: it is a subject, an actor. This characteristic of the image – to (act) appears in her analysis of Alberti – “of its own will (*sponte sua*)” and “in the pictorial act the subject is the image itself” when summarizing Bredekamp’s position.

Echo’s seeming inauthenticity makes the utterance of desire possible (p. 226). In parentheses, I point out that the problem of desire (whose relevance in the last three decades does not decrease) is discussed by the author, but somehow hidden. The explanation for this is at the very end of her monograph: “Desire stood in the shadow of all the veils of meaning which the present analysis unfolds. But the topic of its nature, conditions, functions and manifestations is a topic for further research” (p. 246).

For Pascaleva, it is important that for Alberti the surface is the covering itself, which coincides with the surface. “For Alberti’s theorizing view, nudity and surface dressing apparently coincide. The covering is the very bareness of the surface.” The picture (*pictura*) will in its turn prove to be a composition of surfaces. However, is a picture the same as an image?

“However, the artist can afford only a single surface (*unica seu tabulae seu parietis superficies*) to represent the section of the pyramid” (p. 59). Interpreting Alberti, Pascaleva privileges the gaze, the act of looking, which is another way of talking about the power of the subject dominating reality. “This displacement of the illusory effect of painting from the object to the very act of seeing—painting is not a simulated object but a simulated gaze—is epitomized in the idea of the plane as a cut of the visual pyramid. The cut is transverse, and in fact implies the idea that all vision is such a cut, only a natural one” (p. 59).

Whether we place the emphasis on the gaze or on the object is a matter of choice and justification, but in both cases technical skill is needed to create the material image on the plane. Pascaleva refers to the study of Elena Filippi, according to which the link between the figure of Narcissus and the invention of painting is Alberti’s practice of lineal perspective, through which the position of the central ray (the

vanishing point) is determined. Thus, according to Filippi, it is Narcissus' gaze in front of the mirror that anchors the point of view for the viewer (Filippi 2020). This research supports Pascaleva's conclusion.

The problems of ch. II "Back to Lucretius: Image Matter" are richer than the title indicates. It begins with a detailed and insightful interpretation of the story of Narcissus and Echo; Pascaleva then points out its connection to other narratives in *Metamorphoses*. The interpretation of figures and images that match and differ in function – the lake, the water, the look, etc. create a medium of meanings that allows the author to make the transition to Lucretius' *The Nature of Things*. The analysis of the materiality of the image in Lucretius is summarized through the metaphor term 'veil', which Pascaleva emphasizes is a permeable border; hence she concludes that the image has a medial nature. By analyzing the images of chimeras, clouds, dreams in several images from the middle and the end of the 15th century, as well as in the treatises of Antonio Averlino and Leonardo, Pascaleva expands the research context. In the course of the research, Pascaleva adds new and new sources – pictorial and textual, without losing focus on the main problem of her research attention. It turns out that even the appearance of the same concepts, works and authors does not repeat what is already known, but deepens and enriches what has been achieved, because Pascaleva manages to create heuristic connections between the already analyzed and the new material. There are also deviations, as in the introductory part of ch. III, but they serve Pascaleva to create a brief, albeit logically optional, background to her approach to the subject of Saussure (pp. 125–160).

The actual analysis in Ch. III begins with the part about the materiality of sound (p. 160) and especially with the analysis of the semiotics and the semantics of the image. Relying on Emile Benveniste and Darin Tenev, Pascaleva draws the following conclusion: Saussurean semiotics with its initial premises rejects the need for an opposition between semiotic and semantic. For her, the logic of language functioning suggests that semiosis is not a substitutive or representative procedure, but is precisely the process of differentiation, distribution and redistribution of signifying units (values) and organization of their possible constellations (175–176). The discussion and review of many critical studies on the "Course..." as well as on Saussure's linguistic methodology are steps towards the general aim of the study – to substantiate the interweaving of image and word. Narcissus and Echo, believes Pascaleva, exist only together, but not as the two sides of a common system, but as a

mutual interweaving and scattering. “This medial structure we describe through the figures of the garment and of the edge. It is precisely its mediality that makes communication possible.” In contrast to many other interpretations, Pascaleva argues for an interpretation in which “the story of Narcissus and Echo has a happy ending” (p. 12).

The final chapter, “Scattered Echo, Split Image. A Quick Look in the Mirror. The Work Image” confirms, but more eloquently, B. Pascaleva’s ability to carefully read Ovid’s Latin text, to discover morphophonetic and syntactic features from which to draw conclusions that support her main thesis about the image: the episode with the love and death of Narcissus is developed on two levels: the first is phonetic – in the repetition of the sound combination *ora*, which is linked to the edge, the face, the mouth, but also to the echo-sounding of *amor*, love; the second is the level of the narrative and its stylistics – thanks to the surface figure (p. 240). In the same chapter, Pascaleva analyzes other interpretations of the story of Narcissus and Echo and manages to see in the own direction of these studies elements and even problems that the authors themselves did not notice. The fourth chapter is written with an inspiration, which in itself suggests a happy ending to the story of Echo and Narcissus.

In several places in the book, the author questions why another interpretation of this much-interpreted story from *Metamorphoses*. The answer is that Ovid’s account, like other accounts in the *Metamorphoses*, offers a hidden reflection on the problem of the image, verbal and visual. “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* can be interpreted as a series of possibilities for the reconstruction of an entire poetic theory of poetry...” (242–243).

I would like to add an obvious, as it seems to me, answer: our preoccupation with European antiquity, of whatever period and geographical space, with whatever of its life forms, affirms our belonging to an imagined homeland; its knowledge and transformation, its renewed relevance, in which its sustainability lies, also depends on us. But perhaps ‘sustainability’ is not a term-metaphor that Bogdana Pascaleva would use in a research plan.

Among the contributions of the study is the appendix “Ovid in Saussure’s Notebooks” (pp. 247–253). It is typed in small print, as if it were something secondary, which it is not. Neither the problem, nor the way in which B. Pascaleva presents it, is less important than the research up to this point. I note both indexes,

which are an expression of respect for the readers; they require time to be made, and the concepts also require selection. It may happen that something that is important to a reader (or a reviewer) is not listed, as is the case with 'picture'. Although the concept has only 46 uses, it is still essential for the way Bogdana Pascaleva defines the image.

Bogdana Pascaleva declares her critical connection with the research environment in Bulgaria. Not only with her, but also with her. Her research can easily be part of an international scientific exchange, but not as an imitative globalist Americanism, but as an achievement of a dynamic scientific environment that, creating its own concepts, assimilates concepts, sources, ideas created in other scientific environments.

Conclusion:

With complete conviction, I will vote to award the academic position of *Associate Professor* to Assistant Professor Bogdana Pascaleva, PhD, in Philology 2.1. Literature of the peoples of Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia (Western European literature).

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