

New Work for a Theory of Aesthetic Revolutions. A Kuhnian Shift from the Philosophy of Science to the Philosophy of Art [Review of Oana Șerban, *After Thomas Kuhn. The Structure of Aesthetic Revolutions*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022]

To look at the philosophy of art and artworks as a source of inspiration for reshaping, evaluating, and recharting philosophical concepts from the philosophy of science (PoS) has become recently a fashionable and recognizable trend in the field of general philosophy of science. For the sake of illustration, take the following examples. Steven French contends that his claim that *there are no such things as theories* (but “theory-shaped bits of scientific practices”) mimics Cameron’s so-called artwork eliminativism (French 2019, p. 192; cf. Cameron 2008, p. 295). Similarly, how a model represents, i.e., “from a certain point of view”, *via* distortions and selective resemblance its system target is said to share relevant features with how the techniques of representation in painting works (Massimi 2022, p. 34). The analogies (e.g., theories *as* artworks, scientific representation *as* representation in art) at play in both examples drive the philosophers of science to rethink our philosophical-scientific concepts, by finding new illuminating commonalities between science and art. This back-and-forth exercise, from the philosophy of art to the philosophy of science, is tacitly resting on assumption that such an exchange can work out on the basis of a presumed structural similarity.

Oana Șerban’s *After Thomas Kuhn* book is a philosophical exercise of this back-and-forth sort, but, surprisingly, taking Kuhnian philosophy of science as a point of departure for developing, *by analogy*, a Kuhnian approach in the field of the aesthetics and history of art (p. 1).¹ Her project can be understood by the reader as a mirror image of the back-and-forth current trend in PoS, with the theoretical orientation of *After Kuhn* being inversed. Oana Șerban’s philosophical focus is directed from the philosophy of science to aesthetics, and not vice-versa (as is the case in the above examples). *Mutatis mutandis*, Oana Șerban believes in a fruitful mutual exchange between those fields in terms of *commuting* aesthetic and artistic paradigms and revolutions with scientific paradigms and revolutions on the basis of “structural similarities” (p. 4) (e.g., the same mechanism of “paradigm shift”) (p. 7). The author does not just commute bit by bit the Kuhnian vocabulary in the field of art and aesthetics (e.g., style as paradigms, artistic rationality as scientific rationality, aesthetic truth as scientific truth). The reader can read the first and second chapters for such revealing comparisons (see esp. p. 23, p. 35, p. 47), but the major contribution of *After Thomas Kuhn* is to reimagine the dynamics between artistic and scientific practice through Kuhnian lenses under the form of a coherent theory of aesthetic revolutions.

¹ The page-references between paratheses are to Oana Șerban’s book.

Oana Șerban's Kuhnian theoretical construction of aesthetic revolutions has to satisfy certain requirements ("the five standards of theory choice") (p. 1). The purported theory should be "accurate" because it can be verified against "the empirical stances of the art world" (p. 2). Second, the alleged Kuhnian theory should be "consistent" – not only internally consistent with respect to the "principles, values, and norms" of a given paradigm but also externally consistent "with other theories devoted to progress and change in art" (p. 2). Third, it shall be having a "broad scope" in the sense that the theoretical framework does not have to be restricted in terms of "its role and applicability" to the world of art. (p. 2). Fourth, the candidate for a Kuhnian theory shall be "simple", i.e., easily rendered and formalized (p. 2). Last but not least, Șerban's framework shall be "fruitful" – it has to extend the boundaries of "our knowledge on artistic paradigms" and its relation with the Kuhnian structure (p. 2).

Oana Șerban's Kuhnian approach to the commutability problem (called a "puzzle" or "meta-puzzle" of aesthetics, as an echo to Kuhn's terminology) (p. 18), (p. 103) can be elegantly summarized into the following four core claims:

(1) "Structurally, the mechanism of paradigms shift is identical with that engaged in science" (p. 216); while the progress in science is linear, the model of progress in the domain of art is cyclical (cf. p. 216);

(2) Artistic revolutions are "expressions" and outcomes of aesthetic revolutions (p. 216);

(3) The relationship between art and politics is contingent, and political factors contribute to the "exhaustion" and "dominance" of a given aesthetic paradigm over its rivals (p. 217);

(4) Aesthetic validity claims are "politically shaped, influenced and changed" (p. 217).

After Thomas Kuhn is dedicated to presenting, exploring, and elaborating these four claims, which can be taken in a non-reductive manner as the main ingredients of Oana Șerban's Kuhnian framework. Along this review paper, I shall argue that the entire structure of *After Thomas Kuhn* is lifted on the pillars of these four claims – while the first four chapters spell out the theoretical commitments of the first two claims (the mechanism of paradigm shift in the scientific *versus* artistic practice, the nature of progress in both fields), the last two chapters articulate extensively a general theory of aesthetic validity (the evaluation of the dominance of paradigms in terms of validity claims) by exploring its strong political dimension (political factors leading to the exhaustion or dominance of a given aesthetic revolution). At the end of my critical reconstruction, I will sketch how the reader can evaluate Oana's Șerban four-folded theory of aesthetic paradigm in light of the five standards of theory choice, highlighting the inherent advantages of her Kuhnian thinking commuted to aesthetics.

However, a brief methodological remark should be in place. Claims (1) – (4) do not exhaust the argumentative content of *After Thomas Kuhn*. For instance, the book can be read not only as a plea to develop a Kuhnian theory of aesthetic paradigms, but equally as a detailed examination of how the very idea of commuting and testing the Kuhnian model of revolution structure in aesthetics and art came into being as a philosophical and historical challenge for philosophers, historians, and sociologists of art, of reshaping the history of art "on philosophical and sociological grounds that explicitly claimed Kuhnian origins" (p. 4). Such examples are the (historical) details of the "Kuhn-Kubler dispute" (p. 42) and of the "Kuhn-Kubler-Hafner dispute" (p. 113) about how this challenge could be solved, which are extensively covered by Oana Șerban in her enterprise. While this historical contribution

to the state-of-the-art is beyond any doubt noteworthy, I'd prefer to stress the theoretical relevance of *After Thomas Kuhn* by looking at how a Kuhn-inspired theory of aesthetic revolutions stems out of this enterprise.

Chapter one, "A Theoretical (Dis)Agreement: Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions as a Tool for Reshaping the Relationship between Aesthetics and Art" (p. 20), begins with Kuhn's attempt of recasting "the historical and conceptual dynamics between the arts and science" (p. 22) in terms of the role performed by the "aesthetic considerations" in the artistic and scientific practice (e.g., as criteria of theory choice) (Kuhn 1977, p. 343). While in the realm of arts, "the aesthetic is itself the goal", in scientific practice the aesthetic element ("considerations of symmetry, of simplicity and elegance in symbolic expressions") performs an instrumental role, as "a tool: a criterion of choice between theories" (Kuhn 1977, p. 342). In this respect, Oana Șerban interprets Kuhn's argument as an attempt of "aestheticizing a scientific discourse" (p. 22), leading to the conclusion that "by their teleological structure, scientific and artistic knowledge can hardly meet" (p. 22).

The problem with Kuhn's argument, in Șerban's view, is that Kuhn's own model misidentifies aesthetics with arts, while a sharp distinction between these fields of study shall be in place. The rest of the chapter is nothing but a plea to a clear-cut separation of aesthetics, described in terms of aesthetic paradigm (since "paradigms are engaged exclusively in aesthetics") (p. 42) from art/history of art, amendable in terms of style of visual representation and expressions ("styles are particular to the realm of art") (p. 42). In this vein, the nature of aesthetic perception shall be assigned to aesthetics, and "the nature of the formal language" that describes the perception *per se* shall be part and parcel of art (p. 41). Accordingly, the constitution of the aesthetic subject belongs methodologically, as a subject matter, to aesthetics, whereas "the pedigree of the object will be owned by the arts" (p. 41).

The supposed conceptual discrimination between art and aesthetics, whose theoretical relevance Kuhn could not foresee, is the first ingredient of Șerban's Kuhnian framework of aesthetic revolution. Claim (1) rests on this very assumption: paradigms belong to aesthetics (defined as "ideological constructs of concepts, tools, and methods"), so talking about mechanisms of the paradigm shift, as in the case of claim (1), refers exclusively to the realm of aesthetics (p. 41). Styles, pertaining to art, are outcomes of aesthetic revolutions due to the fact that "artistic movements reflect merely expressions of such paradigms and their continuous historical change" (p. 42). Rather than a paradigm shift, Șerban prefers to talk in art about style shifts. Surprisingly, the reader has here not only a restricted concept of the paradigm shift, but one can observe the striking *priority* that aesthetic paradigms have over artistic styles since the former precipitates the latter (formulated through her second claim). Later on, in the third chapter, the author will substantiate this distinction by making it subject to two additional dichotomies: aesthetic *versus* artistic contents, respectively aesthetic *versus* artistic objects, which underlie the conceptual discrimination between art and aesthetics.

With this interplay in mind, Oana Șerban looks, in the second chapter, at George Kubler's usage of the concept of style in the field of art, reading his *magnus opus The Shape of Time* as a counter-reply to Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolution* (p. 42). Her interpretation of Kubler's project emphasizes the use of Kuhnian *leitmotifs* at work in *The Shape of Time*. Kubler's concept of style refers to "a system of formal relations" (Kubler 1962, p. 7), the artistic style being enunciated concretely either as "a common denominator among a group of objects" (Kubler 1962, p. 3) or as "the impress of an individual ruler or artist" (Kubler 1962, p. 3). Accordingly, the concept of style in art

emerging from Kubler's *The Shape of Time* refers to "serial patterns", being concrete expressions that stand as "a certain variety tributary to the power of authorship" (p. 45). Şerban uses this occasion to highlight how (political) authorities and authorships shape the aesthetic validity of a given style, a claim to which she returns in chapters five and six. Kubler's example of such "political implications in the canonization" (p. 45) of style is "style Louis XVI" (Kubler 1962, p. 4).

Next, the author depicts the driving biological analogies at stake in Kubler's project (cf. pp. 47–48), comparing artworks with genetic mutation and prime objects, respectively styles with form classes, which evolve (similar to biological species) in series and sequences, whose structural constitution is similar to that of a paradigm (cf. p. 55). By borrowing a Kuhnian concept, works of art are regarded as solutions to a puzzle/problem, have an exceptional status as "prime objects", and whose existence remain different from that of an ordinary object in the manner in which "mutant genes differ from the standard example" (Kubler 1962, p. 40, p. 56). The prime objects are further clustered, once the solution is accepted, in chains of sequences. In this biological language, "a masterpiece might reflect the state of exception" from a series and sequences of solutions (p. 55), as a mutant gene does to a given biological species. Styles are multiple sequences of this chain, which can be clustered in "open", "closed", and "linked" "components of an impressive chain" (p. 55). In this vein, "style supervene on "formal sequence" (p. 54). In this place, Şerban suggests that historians and philosophers of art involved in the commutability puzzle should take this battery of analogies from biology and lead them "to a new level of critical inquiry" in order to extract from them "one or several models of theorizing" about Kuhnian aesthetic revolutions (p. 85).

How this presumed new level could look is a question whose theoretical resolution is constructively sketched in the third chapter under the form of the concept of "aesthetic validity" ("Kuhnian Premises for the Theory of Aesthetic Validity") (p. 86). This chapter sheds light on the mechanism of paradigm shift (see claim one) involved in bringing about an aesthetic revolution - the supposed mechanism refers to "the necessity, the predictability, and the ideology behind it" (p. 89). First, the concept of validity rests on a kind of necessity which "a paradigm shift calls in order to overcome two incommensurable bodies of knowledge" (p. 101). Second, the predictability stipulated *via* aesthetic validity refers to the "possibility to anticipate a dominant paradigm" (p. 101). Aesthetic validity becomes an issue about how certain aesthetic paradigms are exhausted and disclosed by new dominant ones, as a way of revealing the necessity involved, as a transition from the old to "the new" (p. 89):

"The new" must be understood in terms of validity: the paradigm advanced by a revolution corresponds to a new set of exigencies that tend to bring the puzzle of problems from a certain domain closer to a definitive and irreversible solution" (p. 89)

Aesthetic validity shall be distinguished accordingly from an artistic kind of validity, completing Şerban's pairs of distinction between aesthetic and artistic paradigms/contents/objects. Perhaps, "the absence of this clear distinction is what destined even the most coherent attempts of commuting the Kuhnian model of scientific revolutions to art to failure" (p. 89). Oana Şerban appreciates this lack of rigour as a philosophical omission (cf. pp. 89–90). Strikingly, the concept of "aesthetic revolution" and its artistic counterpart are constituted around aesthetic validity (see first two claims) (p. 101). While aesthetic revolutions aim at the reframing of the normative and axiological constitution of aesthetics, "their related visual representations determine the artistic revolutions as their expression or appendices" (p. 101).

But at the heart of the concept of validity lies the problem of whether aesthetic paradigm shifts involve to the concept of progress, and if so, which concept of progress is appropriate for describing *via* the Kuhnian model the dynamical change of the art world. Chapter four (“Good” and “Progressive” Art”) takes up the challenge of identifying “some operational meanings of progress” in order to unearth the structural similarity between aesthetics, art, and science (p. 102). The main contribution of this chapter is to deconstruct the multiple albeit incompatible narratives of progress, covering the metamorphoses and mutations to which the concept of progress was subject along the history of philosophy:

“Between evolution and finality, progress has also been overrated or underestimated in the philosophy of the nineteenth and the twentieth century.” (p. 103).

The conclusion at which Şerban arrives is that the concept of progress (and its historical mutations) is not a monolith, but hides an entire cluster of concepts of progress, an inference which Şerban draws in order to disambiguate the artistic progress from the scientific one (cf. p. 134). In light of this historically critical stance toward progress, the author highlights that while scientific progress refers to linear, convergent paths of preserving knowledge, the progress inherent to Kuhnian paradigms is possible because previous theories are superseded, henceforth declared “obsolete” and “renewed” (in further paradigmatic frameworks) (p. 134). In the opposite corner, Şerban provides a concept of progress specific to the fields of aesthetics and art that goes beyond the naive model of “the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns”, in which the past heritage is found obsolete and, thus, rejected for being superseded by the new (p. 104). In fact, the Ancient (“the past”) is used “as a visible referential for current innovations” (p. 134), and artistic progress seems to rest on a cyclical model of progress, which can be further analysed in terms of periods of growth and decline (cf. p. 124). In a rather marginal side-note Şerban makes a bold claim that sums up not only her view on the matter of artistic progress but paves the way for how aesthetic validity relates artistic progress with aesthetic paradigm and its artistic counterpart:

“Whenever an artistic revolution is present, the laws of a previous paradigm have been violated, neglected, and overrated. In this sense, every artistic revolution is transgressive, meaning that it forces the limits of the norms on which a previous paradigm depended, in order to make room for a new one. Transgression invalidates former paradigms.” (p. 114)

To talk meaningfully about the manner in which current aesthetic paradigms *invalidate* (transgressively) previous ones, philosophers and historians of art have to properly define the concept of aesthetic validity, a claim made already in the third chapter of *After Thomas Kuhn*. However, its introduction to the problem and puzzle of the commutability of scientific paradigms in aesthetics and art requires an exhaustive philosophical and historical analysis, which Şerban delivers in the fifth chapter (“Aesthetic Validity and Its Discontents”) (p. 135). Traditionally discussed in the debates about the nature of artistic truth (“the rightness and truthfulness of an artwork”) (p. 135), the concept of aesthetic validity is extended, reframed, and reappraised within Şerban’s Kuhnian theory of aesthetic paradigms.

Similar to the former chapter, Şerban sketched this time a presumed historical genealogy of aesthetic validity in which various models of it are extensively assessed, scrutinized, and compared with each other. Briefly speaking, the author discussed at length Hafner’s model of validity claims (as being appraisable in terms of right and truth, respectively as “spiritual” and “material” kinds of aesthetic validity) (p. 143); Clignet’s sociological model of Kuhnian paradigms within which validity claims are formulated in terms of “normal and revolutionary practices” being given the already established dominance

of a paradigm (p. 169); Habermas' pragmatic model of aesthetic validity (understood as "aesthetic knowledge") which reconnects the aesthetic discourse with the moral ("moral-practical knowledge") and scientific ones ("empirical-theoretical" and "technically" useful knowledge) (p. 185)

The outcome of this genealogical *detour* is to highlight the need for appropriate standards of (inter- and intra-paradigmatic, I would add) aesthetic validity in order to enable theorizing successfully with Kuhnian lenses in the philosophy of art. The main moral of this historical *excursus* is that "the concreteness of a political layer incorporated in the purposed structure of aesthetic validity lack" (p. 191). The previous attempts (such as Hafner's or Clignet's models) of specifying criteria of assessment for aesthetic validity claims neglected "the political explicit component" (p. 191), that is, the role performed by political ideologies and practices "in the constitution of aesthetic paradigms and the protection or prohibition of certain artistic paradigms" (p. 192).

The last chapter of the book ("A Political Theory of Aesthetic Validity: Completing Kuhn's Puzzle of Revolutions") (p. 193) is meant to fill this explanatory gap in delivering a political interpretation of aesthetic validity. However, the main merit of the sixth chapter lies in the wrapping up of the arguments and theoretical pieces put forward in the previous chapters. The manner in which these components are melted together, taking the form of a coherent framework, is beautifully illustrated with the example of the avant-gardes. In surveying the emergence, development, and overall influence of avant-gardes in the 20th-century artistic field, Șerban pointed out that "each avant-garde is the unitary expression of an aesthetic revolution and a related, correspondent, artistic movement" (p. 204).

Examples of avant-gardes taken into consideration are Dadaism, which is to be historically situated at the origin of the avant-gardes (understood as "a cultural revolution"), Surrealism, Futurism, and Situationism (cf. 209). Considering the example of Futurism, the author describes its aesthetic paradigm as a "cultural agenda", having Marinetti as one of its leading theoreticians, pleading for a critique deconstruction of modern society, influenced initially by Marxist perspectives, putting a strong emphasis on artistic nationalism, and "evolving as a partisan of technology and industrialization" (p. 207). Concerning its related artistic movement, the author points out how the "formal language was inspired by principles of divisionism, that decomposed light and color into nuclear entities of dots, gathered by a Bergsonian intuition engaged in the aesthetic experience" (p. 205). The painting of *The City Rises of Boccioni* is a paradigmatic example of this kind of Futuristic style/formal language (p. 205). Based on this very case study, Șerban stresses that "the structural correlation between Fascism and Futurism is quite evocative" for her political reading of aesthetic validity (p. 208).

The parallel between Futurism and Fascism enables the author to stress two important points about the (troubled) relation between art and politics (see the third claim of the theory). First, aesthetic validity is a "politicized concept" since any given "aesthetic content is valid as it subscribes or contradicts a political regime" (p. 208). Second, the avant-gardes have "two alternative destinies": either exhibiting an attitude of obedience or as a movement of counter-revolution. In this sense, a political theory of aesthetic validity embodies two "cultural reflexes": a totalitarian, authoritarian, and repressive one (the example of Futurism), and a libertarian, anarchic one (the example of Situationism) (p. 217). Accordingly, the historical contingency between art and politics shows clearly that the mechanism of the paradigm shift in the case of avant-gardes is "depending on their autocratic or democratic tendencies" (p. 222).

Now, having this theoretical framework at our disposal, the reader can be warranted to ask herself in which sense Şerban's Kuhn-inspired theory of aesthetic paradigms satisfies "the five criteria of theory choice" (p. 2). First, the four-folded theory of *After Thomas Kuhn* can be said to be accurate if one could falsify its central claims against the history of art. Consider the claim stating the relation of aesthetic paradigms with their artistic counterparts. This particular thesis is accurate if, by examining any moment of art production from the history of art, we are successful in identifying at play in the examined instances such artistic styles which are subordinated to aesthetic paradigms. While an attempt of falsifying its main claims transgresses the boundaries of the current review, the reader is justified *prima facie* in believing that Şerban's Kuhnian theory can be a promising contender for accuracy. Such an attempt will prove to be certainly a tenable working hypothesis for historians of art.

Second, the criterium of consistency is easily fulfilled. In terms of internal consistency, the approach provided in *After Thomas Kuhn* succeeds to provide a coherent explanation of the concept of aesthetic paradigm, its artistic counterpart, and its structural similarity with the Kuhnian structure of scientific revolutions. In terms of external consistency, Şerban provides a concept of artistic progress, understood as cyclical evolution, that is compatible with the discernible patterns of change in art: i.e., the norms of *past* paradigms are transgressively *invalidated*, but in a sense which permits the past to function as a (canonized) reference for further paradigms.

Third, Şerban's approach seems to have a broad explanatory scope, not being, henceforth, restricted solely to the realm of art. Cases in which scientific validity depends on political factors can be founded, by analogy, in the sociology of scientific knowledge. In such sociological studies, Steven Shapin argued famously that the scientific interest in phrenology (which is to be regarded, according to our current paradigmatic standards, as a pseudoscience *par excellence*) can be related to the social interests of the "working and middle-classes" in the 18th-century milieu of Edinburgh, whose reception and validity is due to social and political factors (a given division of labor) (Shapin 1975, p. 226). *Pace* Şerban's concept of validity, we could read Shapin's case of study as an instance in which the validity of the scientific practice is related to political factors, i.e., to a dominant political authority. So, Şerban's third claim regarding the contingent nature of art and politics can be commuted, to a certain degree, to science, an example that shows us non-trivially that her approach is neither restrictive nor restricted.

Fourth, the theory of aesthetic paradigms is simple in a syntactic sense because the framework relies on few terms (e.g., aesthetic paradigms, artistic expressions of such paradigms, cyclical progress, aesthetic validity), a pair of related distinctions (e.g., aesthetics vs art, aesthetic object/content vs artistic object/content) to account for the patterns of change in art. Lastly, the sketched theory is fruitful for at least two reasons – not only it manages to reinforce the distinction between aesthetics and art on the basis of aesthetic paradigms, but provides, foremost, useful philosophical tools through which theoreticians can extend the current knowledge of the relation between art and politics. In this specific regard, the author extends *fruitfully* her framework to (the anti-normative) field of contemporary art by looking at the mechanism of artistic capitalism, which "submits its content to norms, expectations, and commercial concerns of the art market" (p. 229).

After Thomas Kuhn is an outstanding addition to the state-of-the-art, a back-and-forth exercise that crisscrosses multiple disciplines, niches, and literature, having the potential of delivering a stable point of reference to any philosopher, historian, or sociologist of art

engaged in the Kuhnian meta-puzzle of commutability. The take-home message for the general reader can be that the relationship between art, aesthetics, and science is not given *sub specie aeternitas*, but it has, historically speaking, a heterogenous, pluralistic nature, whose existence is admirably and extensively depicted in the pages of *After Thomas Kuhn*. The book is nothing but an invitation of recasting this heterogeneous relationship in terms of Kuhnian scientific, aesthetic, and artistic paradigms.

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