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"THE SALON OF NATURE" BY BORIS CHRISTOV AND MILKO BOZKOV: INTERMEDIALITY. INTERTEXTS. INTERPRETATION

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Abstract. The artistic collaboration of Boris Christov and Milko Bozkov has resulted in a verbal-visual project entitled "The Salon of Nature" which exists in two formats: the book and the exhibition. In its book version B. Christov's poems are combined with M. Bozkov's paintings and drawings reproduced along with the texts.

This study considers "The Salon of Nature" in the intermedial perspective and uses the close reading approach to outline the formal, constructive, functional and content features of the text-image interactions in the published version of the project. The article also demonstrates its main intertexts which could be grouped as mythological, neo-mythological and religious (Christian). As a result "The Salon of Nature" could be defined as an example of emblematic poetry in its modern version. It is a cyclically arranged intermedial work of art based on the iterative, hierarchic media-combination where the visual part performs the explanatory, though not merely illustrative function.

Keywords: emblematic poetry; intertext; media-combination

The poetry of Boris Christov invariably attracts the attention of Bulgarian researchers, but it's hard to find the works which analyse it in the intermedial perspective. At the moment, it's possible to point at only one article by Nevelina Popova "Boris Christov's Poetic World in Anri Koulev's Documentaries and Animations" (Popova 2020) dealing with the cinematographic re-coding of his poetry.

The intermedial approach, however, seems the most productive to study Christov's poetry of the 1990 – early 2000ies, because this period is definitely marked with the increasing interaction of the verbal and visual components in his works. His self-collaborative photopoetic projects such as "The Stone Book" (Hristov 2006), "The Book of Titles" (Hristov 2008a), "The Book of Silence" (Hristov 2008b) demonstrate that the new media can be instrumental to interpret

some of the established topics of his poetry such as the language of nature, the position of humans in the world, the relations of the humankind with higher powers, the artist's tasks etc.

The project entitled "The Salon of Nature" is a result of collaboration between Boris Christov and Milko Bozkov. It exists in two formats: the book and the exhibition. The book published by "Methodivs Books" (Christov, Bozkov 2020) contains forty short poetic texts by B. Christov combined with the reproductions of the one hundred paintings, aquarelles and pencil drawings by M. Bozkov. Christov's poems are published in Bulgarian and in English translations by John Hamilton. The exhibition was on display in Sofia City Art Gallery from November 30, 2021 till February 6, 2022.

The purpose of this article is to outline the formal, constructive, functional and content features of the intermedial interactions in the published version of "The Salon of Nature" and to demonstrate its main intertexts. Building on this, the study aims at suggesting a genre definition for this piece.

The intermedial nature of the project and its constructive peculiarities determined the choice of the theoretical and methodological guidelines for the study which is based on the close reading approach. It uses the typology of the intermedial interactions suggested by Irene Rajewski in "Intermediality, Intertextuality and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality" (Rajewski 2005) and Werner Wolf in "(Inter)mediality and the Study of Literature" (Wolf 2011). The functions of the intermedial interactions are outlined according to Roland Barthes' observations regarding the rhetoric of image (Barthes 1977). The markers that indicate the writer's intention to create a cycle or a sequence of poems come from Joseph P. Manley's (Manley 1977) and Rolf Fieguth's (Fieguth 2002) studies of cyclisation in poetry. The definition of photopoetry used in the article has its origin in the works of Michael Nott "Photopoetry 1845 – 2015, a Critical History" (Nott 2018) and Robert Crawford and Norman McBeath's "Photopoetry. A Manifesto" (Crawford, McBeath 2016). The main features of the emblematic poetry are described building on the formulations presented in the work of Elizabeth K. Hill "What is an Emblem?" (Hill 1970) and Dmytro Chizhevskyj's essays on Ukrainian literature of the 17th century ("Baroque in Ukrainian Literature" (Chizhevskyj 2003).

"The Salon of Nature" could be broadly defined as a project that consists of the two parts, the verbal (poetry) and the visual (paintings, aquarelles, graphic art) that are inextricably linked, though created by the two different artists.

Some formal features of its composition reveal B. Christov's intention to create a poetic cycle. The sequence of texts demonstrates the development of a certain plot and contains a number of recurrent images and notions which refer to the verbal and the visual parts of the project. The most important of them (a stone, a word, a world, and an artist) are introduced in the epigraphs which explain the project's main idea (the necessity of living in harmony with Nature) (Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 5).

Besides that, the verbal and the visual parts are tied by the common title and at the end of the book there is a numbered list of reproductions of the paintings paired with the texts (Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 96). It helps to establish the viewing order of the visual elements of the cycle.

As envisioned by Christov, "The Salon of Nature" develops a certain verbal/visual narrative. Initially, each poem was paired with the picture of the certain stone from his collection. Considering the media and the single authorship, these compositions could be defined as the self-collaborative photopoems. According to M. Nott, "photopoetry is a type of phototext that takes for its primary components the poetry and photography" (Nott 2018, p. 3). The interaction between them is usually very intense and couldn't be reduced to the mutual explanation of the texts and images: "In conjunction… visual and verbal images blend, clash, contradict, embolden, evoke and resist each other, creating photopoetic images…" (Nott 2018, p. 4) which introduce some new semantic perspective.

In his "Stone Book" B. Christov defines his photopoems as 'mythographies' (Hristov 2006), accentuating the peculiarity of their form and meaning. They represent the writer's own, non-antropocentric and highly textualised mythology. This concept goes well with the cyclic composition of "The Salon of Nature", because the mythological worldview usually implies that the world is clearly structured and functions cyclically.

Christov's world is a world presented from the point of view of alive and animated stones. The stones here are the bearers of harmony and sustainability while the humans bring in the chaos and destruction, at least till they understand their affinity to the stones as their equals in the frame of universe. Simultaneously, this world is presented as a book or text where stones are the enigmatic signs which humans should decipher and read if they want to transform the chaos into the harmony. So far, only the poets are able to understand this book of stones. As Edwin Sugarev puts it: Poets "translate it from the language of the elements into the language of the systematic creatures that the humans think they are" (Sugarev 2023)[1]. Thus the poets are positioned here as the "gatherers of stones" (Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 54) who are "able to assemble the Landscape anew" (Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 68) even after the collapse of the world.

This double representation of the world (chaos / harmony, reality / narration about it) correlates with the postmodern vision of the world as a text. It also reminds of the Baroque concept of the universe, which is essentially harmonious though seems chaotic to the imperfects human eyes and requires a special lenses to be properly understood.

The epigraphs textually and semantically connect "The Salon of Nature" with the abovementioned Christov's photopoetic pieces, especially with "The Stone Book" (Hristov 2006) and "The Book of Silence" (Hristov 2008b). All three books could be seen as a coherent myphographic ensemble which outlines the cosmogony

in "The Stone Book" and gradually proceeds to the eschatological motifs of "The Salon of Nature".

B. Christov passed his materials to the artist Milko Bozkov, who used them as a basis for his own artistic decisions, working successively with the texts, the images, and the complete photopoems (Dimova 2022)[2]. The artist reconsidered the text-image pairing and combined the poetic texts with his paintings, aquarelles and pencil sketches based on Christov's photopoems. Thus the visual part of the project further clarified the initial photopoetry, making its important semantic accents more palpable.

The conceptual coherence of the two parts is confirmed by the term "portraits" which Bozkov uses to define his paintings of stones in his preface to "The Salon of Nature" ("They had come to me… with the request to be portrayed, so that their faces laid upon paper, would remain long after their death" (Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 6) and in his interview (Dimova 2022). The choice of this term means that the artist's opinion matches that of the poet: Both of them perceive stones as the living beings, not just a still life.

The form of artistic co-operation in this case could be defined as "collaborative" (Nott 2018, p. 3), or, more precisely, as gradual, because the new project was grounded in the already existent one. The dialogic nature of this collaboration was confirmed in Bozkov's interview, where the artist accentuated his decision to adhere to Christov's laconic texts and photo images, though not to copy them (Dimova 2022).

The conjunction of the verbal and the visual components in this cycle allows to describe it as a media-combination, though due to the peculiarities of its initial artistic materials, the combination is more complicated than usual.

M. Bozkov's paintings and sketches resulted from his creative interaction with B. Christov's photopoems, which were the media-combinations in their own right. However, only the verbal part of them can be found in the new artistic entity. That means that the media-combination in "The Salon of Nature" should be defined as iterative and hierarchic: One media-combination (photopoetry) becomes a part of the other (photopoetry plus paintings and drawings), though the visual component of the former functions here only implicitly.

According to Roland Barthes, a text-image combination that forms a semantic unity, envisages the complementary relationship between its verbal and visual parts. The text consolidates and binds the message of the image. If the text is illustrated by a drawing, not a photograph, that implies the distinction of the significant and the insignificant features of a depicted object, because the artist focuses on highlighting the significant ones (Barthes 1977, pp. 38 – 39, 41, 43).

This form of verbal-visual interaction is typical for "The Salon of Nature", though paintings and drawings here are hardly illustrations *senso strictu*. These images do not visualise the main ideas of the texts, but highlight their important, though not

always prominent, semantic details. For example, the images may visualise the similarity of stones to the objects described in the poems such as a seed, a loaf of bread, a door, a hill, a skull, a page covered with letters etc. They offer their own explanations to the poems which could be hardly understood properly without these pictures. Watching them encourages the re-reading of the texts.

The constant interplay of the texts and the images in "The Salon of Nature" holds and directs the audience's attention. The readers are expected to co-operate with the authors in creating their own interpretations of the texts and the pictures.

M. Bozkov states that his paintings and drawings "visually comment" on B. Christov's poems (Dimova 2022). The explanatory nature of these commentaries and their focus on the certain images or ideas outlined in the poems allow to describe them as visual glosses.

Their layout regarding the texts also certifies this definition. The reproduction of the painting is always situated above the text. It visually accentuates the poem's most significant image through a prominent detail of the stone's "portrait" (e.g. a cross, a seed, a heart, a door) (Christov, Bozkov 2020, pp. 16, 42, 78, 86).

The reproductions of the drawings and aquarelles are situated at the same page below the text and to the right, on the next page resembling the marginalia. They specify the visual messages of the "portraits" offering some additional details through the graphic elements semantically related to the texts. Such type of interaction of the verbal and the visual parts is typical for the emblematic poetry.

Emblem is a special genre of intermedial artistic productions marked by the close interaction of the verbal and the visual elements that originated in Italian literature of the 16th century. During the next two centuries it gradually became known all over Europe. Technically the emblems consisted of the three main components: two textual (the title / inscriptio and the caption / subscriptio) plus one visual (picture / pictura). As E. K. Hill indicates, in the early emblems the picture was situated between the textual elements, so it was practically inlaid into the verbal part, revealing the initial "pictorial significance" of the term as a "mosaic or low-relief decoration" (Hill 1977, p. 261). The main function of the texts regarding the pictures was explanatory. They were mostly didactic and covered the secular and the religious topics alike. The main sources of their imagery were The Holy Scripture and classical mythology.

Dmytro Chizhevskyj names the brevity of poems, the symbolic nature of images and the impossibility to interpret them separately (a poem must contain "a reference to a picture") among the main formal traits of the emblematic poetry (Chizhevskyj 2003, pp. 197 – 198). The scholar also points out that "the main element of the picture and the poem" should be a metaphor, "an unusual, unexpected, impressive comparison" (Chizhevskyj 2003, pp. 204), some not-so-obvious conclusion rooted in the interaction of the verbal and visual parts of the emblem. Chizhevskyj indicates that the emblematic poetry requires the interpretative co-operation with the audience:

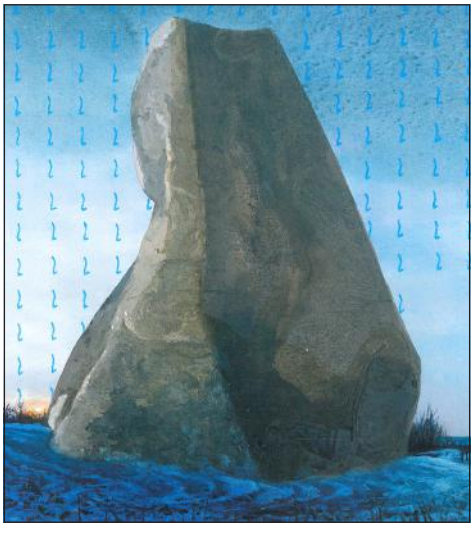
"these are the poems that lead the readers' thought to some other ideas, insights, images" (Chizhevskyj 2003, p. 204).

The main characteristics of "The Salon of Nature" make this project typologically close to the Baroque emblematic poetry, though it offers a reversed, more complicated version of it. The visual and the verbal components here switch their places and functions. The text now is "inlaid" into the visual parts that explain it: the painting becomes the title while the drawings and aquarelles become the captions.

The "portrait of a stone" (title) with its prominent visual details highlights the important semantic accents of the texts. The drawings and aquarelles, respectively, fully clarify the text, making sure that "the reader's thought would follow direction expected by the author" (Chizhevskyj 2003, p. 204).

The drawings may visualise some abstract notions mentioned in the texts, e.g. the immortality of soul. In the poem "I hear at night the voices of stones around the new building…" (Christov, Bozkov 2020, pp.36 – 37) the background of the sketch features the symbols which resemble the binary code that seems to unite the sky and the earth alluding to the concept of "digital immortality", the hypothetical possibility of storing the personality beyond the biological substrate. (Fig.1, Fig.2)





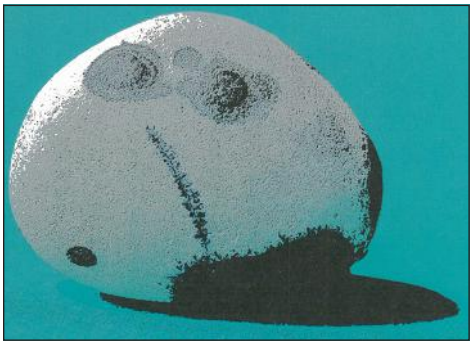
The repetition of the images of stones in various visual forms (painting, pencil sketches, aquarelles) is accordant to the repetition of the key notions of each poem, which, as D. Chizhevskyj indicates, was typical for the Baroque emblematic poetry (Chizhevskyj 2003, p. 203).

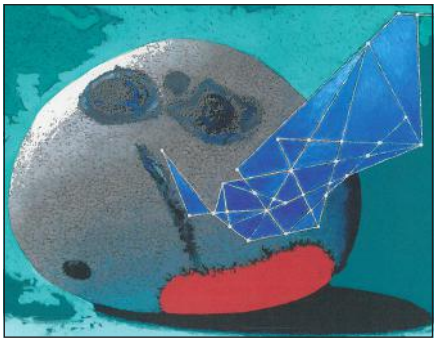
Besides, the repetition of the visual elements, e.g. the certain colours, fixes the constructive unity of the whole project and becomes an instrument to mark the semantic units and to form the micro-cycles inside the main narrative. The trio of poems dealing with the interaction of humankind with the universe (a modern version of the traditional theme of the relations with the supreme powers) is particularly illustrative in this regard (Christov, Bozkov 2020, pp. 70 – 71, 72 – 73, 76 – 77). While the texts mention Earth, the world, the universe (also referred to as "the infinity, the Milky Way"), the aquarelles are dominated by the various shades of blue from the sky-blue to the darkest "cosmic" blue with the dots of stars or a sketch that resembles a star chart.

The poem "In vain you worry the infinity, oh little man!.." (Christov, Bozkov 2020) is perfectly demonstrative. It is based on the idea of reflection of the big in the small represented through the likening of the dots on a ladybird's wings to a star chart or a picture of the universe.

In vain you worry the infinity, oh little man –
Indeed, have the constellations on the Ladybird's wings
Not revealed to you the Universe alighted on your palm –
And that you have already arrived?
(Christov, Bozkov 2020, p.70)

The portrait accentuates the resemblance of a dotted stone to a ladybird. The aquarelle stresses its cosmic associations, showing the projection of those dots to the star chart that emerges from the stone (Fig. 3, Fig.4).





As it has been indicated earlier, B. Christov's poems inspired by his collections of stones, are "translations from the speech of elements to the speech of the system beings" (Sugarev 2023). M. Bozkov's visual glosses help to understand which frame of reference is implied here. The prominent details of some images visibly demonstrate the references represented in the texts only as vague allusions. These often explain the intertexts of "The Salon of Nature", which, considering the

mythographic character of the project, represent the belief-related discourses such as religious (Christian), mythological (classical mythology) and neo-mythological (UFOlogy).

The majority of allusions point at the Holy Scripture. The clearest ones are connected with The New Testament (the mentions of crucifixion, the images of the cross, the Calvary, the corner stone, the bread as a metaphor of the holy communion, a mention of the blind leaders of the blind (Matthew 15:14). The positioning of the poets as the gatherers of stones alludes to Ecclesiastes 3:5. The mere concept of the poetry inspired by a collection of stones literalizes this ancient metaphor and makes it the symbolical base of the whole project.

Besides that, "The Salon of Nature" demonstrates at least two clear reminiscences from the myth of Sisyphus (Christov, Bozkov 2020, pp. 22 – 24) and its concept of the stone as an animated being echoes Democritus' theory of panpsychism.

The third important intertext of this project is formed by the various narratives about the contacts with aliens that become a part of modern mythology.

The interpretation of these intertexts in "The Salon of Nature" is determined by the non-anthropocentric character of Christov's fictional world. The images and plots of The Holy Scripture, ancient Greek myth and the elements of the UFO-related narratives are interpreted paradoxically in the texts and the pictures alike.

For example, the image of the corner stone ("The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner", Matthew 21:42) is usually seen as a metaphor of importance, significance and stability. But in the very first poem which ironically echoes the Declaration of Human Rights: "All the stones are born free and round" (Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 8), it receives a diametrically opposed interpretation. The author juxtaposes the round (natural) and angular (artificial) form as the symbols of freedom and slavery, explaining that being the head of the corner is "the slavish privilege" (Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 8). The drawing situated below the text shows a stone within a structure with a great number of sharp angles which constrains its natural rounded form.

In the poem "I hear at night the voices of stones around the new building…" the stones thrown away by the builders are interpreted as victims of human prejudice:

I hear at night the voices of stones around the new building
The rejected ones rage because the masons
Choose them not by their Soul, which is eternal,
But by their face which dies.
(Christov, Bozkov 2020, pp. 36 – 37)

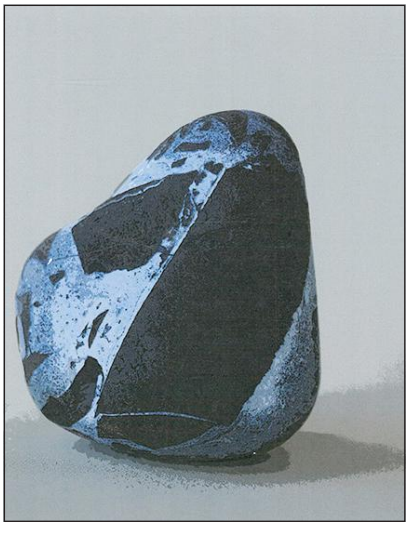
The drawing situated under the text represents a stone in the course of processing inscribed into a scheme which shows the formation of angles. At the same time the aquarelle on the next page shows the mutilated stone as a part of a landscape free of any buildings but containing the elements of binary code that visually alludes

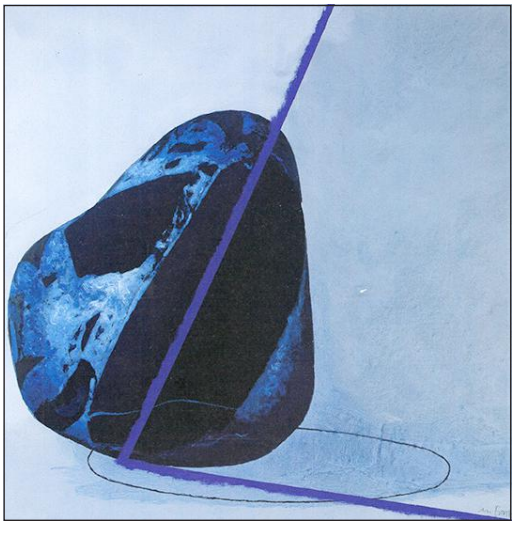
at the concept of digital immortality. Thus the visual elements help to establish the semantic connection between this poem and the first poem of the cycle accentuating 'the being thrown away' state as a form of freedom and the antithesis to "the slavish privilege" (Christov, Bozkov, 2020, p. 8) of being chosen.

In two poems that interpret the myth of Sisyphus the stone is depicted as human's grateful companion, not a tool of his tortures. However, according to Christov, the stone is tired of Sisyphus' "mythical grip" and dreams to travel on its own:

When it tires of staying awake, the Stone falls asleep
And in its dreams it sees how released at last
From the mythical grip of Sisyphus,
It surmounts the ridge of the mountain on its own.
(Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 22)

The painting paired with this poem demonstrates a stone with a palm print on it while the drawing shows a straight vertical line which crosses it out, visualising the upward movement (Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 23). (Fig.5, Fig.6)





In the other poem the meaningless toil of Sisyphus is presented from the stone's perspective as an act of gratitude and courteousness that lasts forever:

Sisyphus once helped the Stone to surmount the peak
And in gratitude it saw him back on his way
To the foot of the mountain… And this example
Of courteous dealing continues to the present day.
(Christov, Bozkov 2020, p. 24) (Fig.7)



Finally, in one of the three poems that explore the topic of humankind's interaction with the universe the painting demonstrates the resemblance of a stone to some alien face with the large eyes. The aquarelle inscribes the image of stone into a symbolic picture of the night sky along with an enigmatic object reminiscent of the alien spaceships. Thus the visual part of the media-combination accentuates the metaphorical representation of the stones as the messengers of some other reality (Christov, Bozkov 2020, pp. 72 – 73). (Fig.8, Fig.9)





Considering the above examples, the characteristic features of "The Salon of Nature" can be summarized as follows. The artistic collaboration of Boris Christov and Milko Bozkov resulted in a cyclically arranged intermedial project based on the iterative, hierarchic media-combination. B. Christov's poetic texts are combined with M. Bozkov's paintings and drawings reproduced in the book along with the poems. However, not all the visual elements of this combination are on display: The hidden part of it is B. Christov's collection of photographs of the stones as a component of his original mythographies (photopoems) which M. Bozkov used as a starting point to create his own images.

The project is deliberately complicated in terms of form and requires the interpretative efforts from the audience. Its composition is centered on the poems and the images perform the explanatory function. The dynamic interaction of the verbal and the visual parts ensure the complete manifestation of the most important semantic accents and the main intertexts. The topics explored deal with the moral challenges which touch upon the "eternal questions" (the place of the humankind in the world, the transience of time, and the relations with the higher powers). The set of these features allows to define the printed version of "The Salon of Nature" as a current version of the emblematic poetry.

NOTES

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