

PANAYOTIS MICHELIS' CRITIQUE OF DIALECTICS

Abstract

Panayotis Michelis focuses on Plato's and on Hegel's dialectics, because these philosophers put the question of art on the highest level of truth. He, however, argues that they pose a 'outside dialectics' on art, because they consider truth as metaphysical truth and then they maintain art fails more or less to manifest this truth. Michelis develops a dialectics of synthesis as a 'dialectics in art' and vindicates the place of his aesthetics between philosophy of art and history of art.

Keywords: Michelis P., aesthetics, dialectics, Plato, Hegel.

Preliminary note

Panayotis Michelis (1903-1969) belongs to the pioneers of philosophical aesthetics and of the theory of architecture in Greece. He was born in Patras in 1903; he attended the elementary and the middle school in his home town and the Humboldt Gymnasium in Zurich (Schwitzerland). Subsequently he studied in the Dresden Technical University and he finished his architecture and engineering studies in 1926. From 1941 until 1969 he was professor of architecture at the National Metsobion Polytechnicum of Athens. Philosophy of art and theory of architecture, interpretation of ancient Greek and Byzantine art, aesthetic consideration of Greek popular architecture became the main issues of Panayotis Michelis' teaching, research and congress papers in Greece and abroad.

Further, Panayotis Michelis was very active in establishing philosophical aesthetics as an independent kind of theorising in Greece. So, he founded the Hellenic Society for Aesthetics (1960) and served as its first president; he also founded its periodical *Annals for Aesthetics* (vol. 1/1962 ff.). Furthermore, he organised the Fourth International Congress of Aesthetics in Athens **and he edited its Proceedings (Actes: 1960)**. After his death, his wife, the painter Effie Michelis, founded the Panayotis

and Effie Michelis Foundation in 1979 in Athens and she served as its first president until her death in **1984**. The ideals of Panayotis and Effie Michelis continue to be sources of inspiration for further research in aesthetics. Panayotis Michelis' work remains a significant contribution to the recognition of aesthetics not only as a philosophical discipline and as a specific kind of theorising about art, creativity and aesthetic experience, but also as a place of intercultural communication and cooperation.

Introduction

Dialectics has a long history and encompasses a variety of concepts from Greek antiquity up to our time. Panayotis Michelis focuses on philosophical theories that considered art from a dialectical point of view. Although he did not set out to articulate an extensive theory of dialectics, critique and re-interpretation of dialectics are important aspects of his philosophy of art as well as of his theory of architecture. His main interest is dedicated to arts that were 'outside' philosophical aesthetics, such as contemporary architecture and Byzantine art. Panayotis Michelis develops his own philosophy of art as a philosophy of arts, since he always keeps the connection between theory and the arts. While looking for a way between philosophy of art and

history of art, he considers the work of art as the centre of dialectical relations leading beyond the facticity of the work of art towards social relations and human expectations. So, he emphasises the human experience expressed in art-works and, at the same time, the continuous creativity of the work of art in space and time.

Panayotis Michelis re-interprets dialectics as the dialectics 'in art', in order to explain the structure, the meaning and the human context of art. The main issues of this procedure are the autonomy of art, the history of art without metaphysical claims, art beyond its realised history, dialectics of synthesis, and the work of art as dialogue. He recognises that dialectics, as it is set out by Plato and Hegel, has investigated the broad interrelation of art to creativity, to achievements, and to the expectations of human life. In Michelis' view, both philosophers have raised the question of art on the high level of the question of truth. Nevertheless, truth is for them the culmination of metaphysics. In Plato's dialectics, the source of truth is the transcendent idea of the good, while the idea of beauty is the refuge of the power of the good. In Hegel's dialectics, truth is the self-conscious supersession of contradictions within the development of spirit, while beauty is the appearance of the absolute idea.

Plato's critique of art as well as Hegel's aesthetics is more or less restrictive towards the possibility that art manifests truth. Panayotis Michelis' way of theorising encompasses the meta-critique of Plato's critique of art as well as the refutation of Hegel's interweaving of art with the absolute spirit. This examination liberates those aspects of Plato's and of Hegel's dialectics that can be relevant for aesthetics after the critique of metaphysics. It is plain that Michelis' critique of dialectics goes along with the creative reception of its hermeneutic results. So, the limitations and the perspectives of dialectics are reconstructed and dialectics 'in art' can explore the question of art by taking into account the contemporary theoretical demands of aesthetics.

Meta-critique of Plato's critique of art

Panayotis Michelis criticises Plato's dialectics as underestimating the creative inspiration of poets and artists in favour of true knowledge provided through philosophy. He stresses that Plato, who was a philosopher-poet, was conscious of the limitations of dialectics and attempted to face them through poetic means, as myth and dialogue are. But Plato never abandoned the priority of *logos*. Yet Panayotis Michelis interprets Plato's critique of art as a theoretical account that puts a constraint on art in terms of the highest aims before assessing that art fails to accomplish these aims. He argues against Plato that art, not only philosophy, is also ruled through dialectics. In his view, philosophy and art constitute two different but equivalent paths to the highest values of truth and of beauty respectively (Michelis 2004: 115). The good, the true, and the beautiful are the highest values for Michelis' aesthetics. Although this solution is not genuinely Platonic, it is set out in the spirit of Platonism.

Michelis' creative interpretation of Plato's dialogues is similar. Plato's dialogues are unique, but dialogue itself is transformed into the intrinsic feature of the work of art. In fact, Panayotis Michelis characterises the work of art as the 'text' that 'tells the truth' without words. This 'text' is the link between inspiration and creation; it constitutes the dialogue between artist and spectator, between the artist and the human community. Since the work of art leads beyond the necessity of reality, it liberates the human towards emotion and further towards the appreciation of beauty. So, the work of art constitutes the relation between the good, the true, and the beautiful (Michelis 2001: 103).

Panayotis Michelis interprets the work of art in terms of a minimal ontology focusing on the richness of the work of art and not on the split between transcendence and immanence, as Plato did and tried to overcome through *mimesis*. In this way, Panayotis Michelis obtains an additional argument against Plato's critique of art. Yet he maintains that

the idea is not separated from the work of art, but it 'exists within' the work of art, it is immanent in the work of art. This turn towards the immanence of the beauty of the work of art goes together with the internalisation of the beauty of the work of art. Panayotis Michelis stresses that this turn is the revolutionary achievement of Plotinus' aesthetics (Michelis 2004: 5, 200; cf. Michelis 2002: 103). For, Plotinus criticised the conception of symmetry as the one-sided conception focusing on the external characteristics of the work of art. Further, Plotinus juxtaposed his own view concerning the immanence of the idea of the work of art. In fact, Plotinus considered the work of art as a bearer of truth beyond the surface and the sensuous experience. Michelis' conclusion is that Plotinus' aesthetics is the turning-point in the path leading from Plato's critique of art to Hegel's moderate appraisal of art.

Critique of Hegel's aesthetics

Michelis' critique of Hegel's aesthetics bears the characteristics of every pertinent critique. Since Hegel's aesthetics is the most comprehensive one and it unifies the theory of beauty and the history of art under strong metaphysical and logical claims, no critique can lead to an equivalent theory. So, aesthetics after Hegel 'lives' against Hegel's aesthetics, but it does not 'live' without it, or as if Hegel's aesthetics did not exist. Michelis' critique of Hegel's dialectics goes together with the creative reception of its hermeneutic results. Nevertheless, this critique concerns the core of Hegel's philosophy without Hegel's logic. Panayotis Michelis criticises Hegel's account about the unification of aesthetics and metaphysics as well as of art and the absolute spirit, because they restrain the autonomy of art and also of aesthetics. So, he detaches the beauty of nature and the beauty of art from the teleology of absolute spirit. For his moderate realism, the dialectics of the absolute idea that was 'established by Hegel' is a metaphysical exaggeration that must be refused (Michelis 2002: 365).

Anyway, Panayotis Michelis accepts that Hegel was the first philosopher who posed and investigated the relation between art and time. He stresses, however, that Hegel's metaphysical history of art does not offer the answer to the question of art. More exactly, it does not offer the solution of Michelis' attempt of establishing a theory between philosophy of art and history of art. Therefore, Panayotis Michelis argues for the separation of the history of art from the history of the absolute spirit. Certainly, the exploration of the history of art without recourse to the Hegelian absolute spirit is a theoretical account that emerged after Hegel's philosophy, when history of art took the way of an independent science. Panayotis Michelis not only endorses this development, but he also introduces new issues in philosophical aesthetics, as it is obvious for instance in his critique of Hegel's definition of the sublime. Besides, he underlines very often that, while Hegel connected the sublime with Christian art, Hegel came to a positive interpretation of Gothic art and to a negative evaluation of Byzantine art. Further, Panayotis Michelis opposes his aesthetic consideration of Byzantine art to Hegel's one-sided conclusion, and he introduces and investigates Byzantine art as an important issue of aesthetics (Michelis: 2006).

Finally, Michelis' critique of Hegel's dialectics of absolute idea or of absolute spirit leads to a dialectics without metaphysical claims. Michelis retains Hegel's terminology through a new semantics, even if he rarely mentions Hegel by name. Indeed, the dialectical moments of thesis, antithesis and synthesis or supersession, the struggle of the opposites, the contradictions or the dialectical movement are transformed into dialectical moments of 'the dialectics of synthesis', as Panayotis Michelis calls his own dialectics. It seems that Panayotis Michelis criticises Hegel's dialectics in order rather to define the limits of his own dialectics in view of Hegel's dialectics of absolute spirit. Admittedly, Hegel's aesthetics is a part of his extensive dialectics of the existing reality of the Absolute.

Yet Panayotis Michelis sets out his dialectics of synthesis only as a part of his aesthetics. For him, the elaboration of distinctions is more important than the formulation of oppositions. The spiritualisation of the sensuous and the sensualisation of the spiritual is the dialectical achievement of the work of art, as Hegel asserts and Panayotis Michelis endorses this view. Further, Hegel explores art as the supersession of contradictions; first of all, of the contradiction between spirit and nature. Hegel's statements are integrated within Michelis' dialectics of synthesis. Nevertheless, they are transformed to aspects of the finitude of the work of art that do not point to a metaphysical substance as the source of meaning of the work of art.

The main aspects of Michelis' dialectics of synthesis

Through his dialectics 'in art', Panayotis Michelis avoids the metaphysical burdening as well as the naturalistic reduction of the work of art. Maybe he intends to prevent the invasion of a radical Cartesianism into his aesthetics, which could argue for spirit separated from matter, for art without works of art. Michelis' dialectics of synthesis is the theory of the intrinsic movement of the work of art, which goes beyond the sensuous limits of its surface. Michelis analyses this dialectical movement in a chapter of his work *Architecture as An Art* (Michelis 2002: 199 ff.). In his view, dialectics is the dialectics of opposites and of relations, of unity and freedom, of the connection of the work of art with the artist, with the spectator, and with the human community. Dialectical synthesis, as Michelis defines it, means neither closure nor inertia; it is rather the dynamic nexus of coexisting opposites and relations that do not destroy the whole.

This nexus is created and restrained by spirit, while the work of art is the indispensable centre of interrelations. Yet spirit is the power of meaning and value; it is the essential characteristic of life. Spirit is revealed to the human, when the human starts from the senses and from sensuous things, he

or she goes beyond them, he or she feels and understands beauty, freedom and truth. Consequently, spirit is connected with free intuition that searches for a different value of things beyond the immediacy of the senses, beyond the first impression, beyond the everyday life. According to Michelis, it is exactly this free intuition and view that liberates the human towards emotion or towards the appreciation of the beauty of nature as well as of the beauty of art.

Certainly, the human consists of body and mind, but, as a unity, he or she is the subject of life, who has also spiritual needs. In other words, spiritual needs make up the content, the meaning of life. Indeed, Panayotis Michelis emphasises the spiritual character of the human, in order to indicate that art is indispensable for human life. In some cases, Panayotis Michelis uses the concept of economy, in order to assert that architecture has to introduce beauty into life and is not allowed to be contented only with the minimal covering of needs. As he maintains, architecture has to estimate human needs 'according to the measure of art'. Consequently, architecture has to respond to the spiritual needs as well as to the emotional need of the human for a home and not simply for a roof, for beauty and not simply for elementary functionality (Michelis 2002: 442 ff.).

Panayotis Michelis writes as an architect, as an artist, and, at the same time, as a spectator and as a philosopher; last but not least, he also writes as a poet. Although he often refers to all the arts, his thinking is orientated towards the activity of the architect. In Michelis' view, the architect fights for creating synthesis on different levels. He relates construction and synthesis, without making synthesis dependent on construction. The distinctions between construction and synthesis, between dependence and relation are very important for Michelis' aesthetics and theory of architecture. The 'morphological synthesis', namely the synthesis concerning the logic of form, presupposes the opposition between mass and material, it moves through the

transformation of mass to material of art and for art. Besides, architecture cooperates with science and technique, in order to create the solid work of art, whether it is a church, a representative building or a house. This complex activity is the struggle, the fight and the contest for the realisation of the idea of the work of this art. So, the work of art is the way and the result, the inspiration and its expression, the idea and its realisation.

Panayotis Michelis stresses that the dialectics of synthesis presupposes a morphological synthesis, but it is not identical to the latter. In Michelis' view, the final element of the dialectics of synthesis is the spiritual element, which is identical neither to the form nor to the subject of the work of art. The spiritual element points to understanding and self-understanding of the human. For this reason, Panayotis Michelis accuses 'morphocracy', namely the view of the dominance of form, because it leads to the exterior of the work of art, to which no interior element corresponds. He asserts that the work of art is more than its formal elements. For, the work of art is a 'monad' creating community and freedom and offering the spiritual enrichment of human life (Michelis 2002:199).

Further, Panayotis Michelis defends the transcendent validity of the work of art against the arguments about the 'end of art' or about the 'dehumanisation' of modern art (Apostolopoulou 1993). On the one hand, he maintains that art never comes to an end, because art and artistic creativity correspond to the higher needs of human existence. On the other hand, Panayotis Michelis brings to fore the silent dialectics of a contradiction between modern art and modern world. While modern world is without spirit and transcendence, modern art has

discovered 'the poetry of material', the dialectical interplay of matter and light (Michelis 1990: 16 ff.). This is manifested especially in modern architecture. Therefore, modern art rescues the openness of lived experience and still remains within the human context.

Concluding remarks

Michelis' critique of dialectics corresponds to his consciousness of theoretical demands and of methodology of aesthetics as well. His purpose is to bring to fore a connective line between ancient and modern theories and to investigate the realised art as an issue of aesthetics. His critique of dialectics leads to a significant re-interpretation of dialectics 'in art'. In his view, dialectics offers the key notions elucidating reality. Yet reality is a bundle of relations, connections and oppositions. In Michelis' view, the work of art is not only reality, but it also creates reality. Panayotis Michelis explains that reality is more than facticity, because reality has a meaning, a spiritual dimension without metaphysical exaggeration. Therefore, the reality of the work of art has a dialectical structure. Dialectics is the intrinsic dynamics of the work of art that creates in a permanent way the aesthetic component of human life. So, dialectics is a kind of creatio continua of the reality of the work of art. This is why Panayotis Michelis never accepted the views about the end of art. Moreover, he emphasised the innovative character of modern art manifesting the creativity of human spirit. His critique and aesthetic re-interpretation of dialectics are also important contributions to understanding art as an indispensable form of human creativity also in our times of uncertainty.

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