

Art and Aesthetics in Human Life: An Interview with Jana Sošková

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Jana Sošková, Professor at the University of Prešov, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Aesthetics and Art Culture, is an important scientific personality in Slovakia. In her research, she works within the field of the philosophy and aesthetics of art and has greatly contributed to the development of Slovak aesthetics in the wake of a Kantian-inspired approach to artistic creation and to the problems of contemporary art.



You studied philosophy, German language and literature in Prešov, Slovakia, in 1969-1974. Could you tell us what motivated you to choose this field and why you subsequently moved to aesthetics?

Since childhood I have loved to read, ideally anything that came into my hands – fiction, historical works, and gradually also scholarly texts. In high school, I became interested in philosophy in addition to foreign languages – German, English, Latin, and Russian were compulsory. My liking for philosophy mainly developed through the study of philosophical texts. The reason was simple: philosophy offered me a picture of the world as a whole – nature, society, human thought and feeling; the order of things in past history and in the present. It allowed me to reflect on the logic of statements, their truth and falsity, but also on the verifiability of knowledge and its validation. I got my basics in philosophy during high school and continued to develop them following my own motivation to learn more about the thought of the authors I was reading.

Paradoxically, during the five-year program in philosophy at my university, we only had one semester of aesthetics. However, when revisiting the works of

philosophers up to the 20th century – as my father, who himself was not a philosopher, had advised me to do – I suddenly had a quite clear idea of the kind of problems that aesthetics raises as a philosophical discipline. Not only did I like the way in which aesthetics investigates the arts, but I was also very interested in experiencing art more directly, and was not afraid to spell out my own point of view about it.

In the former political regime, despite everything, studying was good. We had plenty of books to read and our teachers allowed us to express our ideas. Some of them were very inspiring. I also had a chance to study at the University of Greifswald, in Germany, which greatly influenced my vision of the world. It allowed me to get in touch with many different cultures and nationalities, and this largely affected my own world view. This experience of multiculturalism shaped me and changed my relationship to the artistic production of other nations. Art back then represented an important means of communication through which borders could be blurred.

Which thinker most influenced your philosophical thinking and why did you eventually decide to pursue a career in aesthetics?

My interest in art was certainly profiting. I was active in recitation competitions and I would often go visit theatres, galleries, and movies. It was, however, mostly by reading philosophy that I was driven to investigate more theoretical approaches as regards the arts. This curiosity directed me towards aesthetics, although my interest in aesthetics and in philosophical aesthetics only deepened with time. As a university student, I read not only Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, but also the Critique of Judgement and similarly Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics.

Another important role in my education was played by the compulsory Latin class that was part of the German studies curriculum, and brought me to read and translate Latin texts. In the library of Prešov Evangelical College I found a work, the *Compendium Aestheticae*, written by Michal Greguš (a teacher and later the headmaster of Prešov Evangelical College). I translated part of this book, especially where Greguš referred to Kant, which helped me to pass the Latin course, but more importantly, also gave me a chance to get to know Greguš' work, a work I returned to many times later on in my life. The *Compendium Aestheticae*, published in 1826, was in fact the first comprehensive and professionally written textbook on aesthetics in the territory of what was then Hungary. My continuous re-reading of Greguš' *Compendium* throughout the years has convinced me of its relevance as a timeless work that can have theoretical applications even today.

My final dissertation was also conceived within the framework of aesthetics. After graduating from college (1974), I began working in the philosophy department, where I taught aesthetics, among other disciplines. I supervised theses with a philosophical-aesthetic orientation and theses in the philosophy of art. In 1994, the Department of History and Theory of Aesthetics was founded at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Prešov in Prešov. Later on, the department was transformed into the Institute of Aesthetics and Art Sciences, where I have been working until the present day.

In your research activity, you initially addressed the relationship between art, religion and philosophy. Eventually you devoted all your efforts to aesthetics. What was your motivation for doing so?

One main motivation is my interest in the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant, who has always exerted a strong appeal on me. I was particularly interested in his recurring idea that aesthetic judgment is a free, subjective judgment, and yet it can have general validity. This is precisely the position that suited me the most in aesthetics. Unlike Hegel – who, by defining what beauty is, also expects his theory to be respected by artists in their search for the ideal – Kant’s aesthetics seemed to me to be more liberal. Nowhere does Kant prescribe how the artist should create (while Hegel does!). Kant provides room for more individual freedom, the same freedom he provides the artist with.

In Slovakia, but also in the broader Central European environment, you are known for your study of the history of Slovak aesthetics. What was the impetus for you to start looking more deeply into Slovak aesthetic thinking?

I believe that it was the experience of my study period abroad what ultimately contributed to my willingness to explore the scholarly literature originating in our territory. With huge dedication, I devoted myself to the study of Michal Greguš, Karol Kuzmány, Andrej Vandrák and Svätopluk Štúr. Each of these authors is unique and distinctive and all their works are worth reading. Greguš interpreted Kant excellently, but at the same time he also went further by providing an even more convincing explanation of aesthetics as applied to the arts. What I share with Greguš is a respect and an understanding for Kant’s aesthetics; Kant’s contribution, I think, is still unpaired in its attempt to account for the reception and judgments about art and the validity of those judgments, an attempt which can be fully applied to 20th and 21st century art as well. Compared to other authors, Štúr described the nature of modern art very analytically without condemning it and also showed a possible way to appreciate and assess modern art, including Czech and Slovak art. Both thinkers acknowledge and respect the artist’s right to decide on how to make their own art, but also recognise the perceiver’s right to judge the artistic creation without imposing their own approach on other recipients. In a nutshell, this is what I find fascinating about Kant, Greguš and Štúr.

Your field of interests is very broad. Among other things, you have investigated the problems of the interdisciplinary relation between art, aesthetics, philosophy and other sciences; questions related to the aesthetics of art, as well as the critical and theoretical examination of the notion of the end of art. Which of these topics has never left you during your academic career?

All these topics were important to me, but recently I have been very intrigued by the idea of the end of art. In my opinion, the end of art occurs every time aesthetic theories are unable to respond adequately to the dynamic changes happening in art, and aesthetic theorists and art historians cannot make sense of these changes. Our most recent grant at the Institute was focused on

exploring the problems of the end of art in aesthetic, art historical, as well as philosophical theories throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Although the topic was defined negatively by referring to the 'end' of art, the aim of the project was in fact to look for methodologies that would prove this notion as but a temporary and transitory concept. In the phase of the 'end of art', aesthetics searches for more adequate approaches and methodologies that might be able to pinpoint emerging art forms as ways of creating art that do not resemble any previous stages in art previous development. At the same time, via new languages and forms, the traditional forms of art making, appreciating and evaluating art, and art's self-reflective impact on both the creator's and the recipients' thinking and feeling are preserved.

By examining what happened in people's experience of art in the last century we may be able to anticipate possible changes and developmental transformations both in the creation and in the perception of art in subsequent periods. The so-called 'end of art' is always a temporary problem, one that vanishes away as soon as theorists, artists, and critics start recognizing the changes in art and in art's reception and are able to anticipate art's next developments.

What is your view of contemporary art and society as an experienced Professor? What do you think is the biggest problem of contemporary art?

Looking at the history of art, we can assume that art will exist on this planet as long as human beings exist. The forms of art, the nature of its expression, the way of receiving and appreciating it, however, will certainly transform over time, as we learn from existing theories on the history and prehistory of art. The language of art, the techniques of its creation, the way art is perceived and judged, as well as art's place in the life of individuals and societies may all change, but we know that these changes have always happened ever since the prehistoric age. Sometimes images acted as warnings and were perceived and judged as such. Other times, these images were seen as a proof of some incapacity of the artist or the absence of art altogether.

Theoretically, it cannot be ruled out that the end of art may recur in the future. A time may come in which we won't be able to distinguish art from other objects or identify the specific language of art; understand the intention of the artist or the impact of art reception in the mind of recipients; or identify what is in front of us an intentional art object, rather than a signifier of reality.

Several scientific events attended by philosophers, aestheticians, artists, art critics and other experts alike have been focused recently on the essential question of what art should be, how art should be perceived and judged, why society needs artists and art at all, and whether, in the age of digital media, it is still necessary to create art or to appreciate and evaluate it.

My intuition leads me to the opposite conclusion: the more virtual reality penetrates into people's life and is taken and accepted as the 'true reality', the more we need art as we are used to conceive it traditionally. Through art, we

can learn to distinguish more accurately the real from the ir-real, probability from illusion and improbability, truthfulness from falsity. The aesthetic appreciation of art tends precisely towards this freedom of feeling, thinking, and judging, which can also provide a positive basis for action.

You are a member of many editorial boards in Slovakia and abroad and a member of various committees, and you also have acquired extensive experience from your long-term work in academia. In your opinion, how has the status of aesthetics and aesthetics as a discipline changed in recent years?

Coming back to my previous answer, let me briefly comment that I think society is in urgent need of aestheticians nowadays. It seems to me that a person who is able to make aesthetic judgments is one who is aware of the distinction between the real world and the imaginary one and is also capable of differentiating between reality and its interpretation. An aesthetically thinking person knows how to distinguish between reality and 'images that look like reality'. These images are not only created by artists, although they have some primacy. This kind of images are also created by politicians and other people who want to have an impact on their audience, for example businessmen who want to sell a product, or politicians who want to get power, and so on. Learning how to deal with one's own imaginary and feelings (regardless of whether these have been evoked by an existing reality or by a work of art) is equally a discovery of aesthetic potentiality, and aesthetic responses do not only evoke unconscious and spontaneous evaluations in the forms of 'like' or 'dislike' reactions; aesthetic responses rather have their own reason - i.e., they are not isolated from thinking, although they are based on feeling. This connection is often forgotten. The 'aesthetic' is automatically considered 'unreasonable', but this seems to me to be one of the greatest misunderstandings of the principles of aesthetics – both of aesthetic perception, judgement and thinking.

Since prehistoric times, artists have created their works as statements about the world, nature, human beings, their own viewpoints, nightmares, mistakes, downfalls and triumphs. Contemporary art, I think, does the same. The question is whether contemporary recipients are willing to accept the artist's offer to enter into dialogue with the work, to think and feel through the work and reflect on the relationship they may have with the work's author. This may lead them to engage with something that lies beyond or behind the artwork itself, a reality that exists here and now, but that discloses a world of different possibilities that might or might not be.

What would you recommend to the young scholars of aesthetics, given your long career as a researcher and a teacher?

I am pleased when students ask questions and we can discuss them together. The greatest reward and satisfaction for me is when I see that students have their own opinion, that they can argue for and defend it with their arguments, and that they can analyse different theories but also have a personal position that they know how to support, verify and refine.

There are people who have cultivated aesthetic sensibilities and spontaneously apply aesthetic criteria in their job, which may not be related to aesthetics at all. Knowledge of aesthetics can contribute to address problems in different fields, and the knowledge students gain from studying aesthetics can be used in communication with people, art, other cultures, and so on. I think that everything depends on how the young colleagues, the graduates of aesthetics, will put their own minds in order. They have to ask themselves many questions about what they study and why they study it, what the knowledge they get offer them, how they think what they read, which authors they identify with, which ones they criticise, and what they actually want to do and achieve in their research life.

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