

## **Posudek vedoucího na bakalářskou práci Heleny Hájkové Framing of the Dangerous: The Artwork between New Materialism and William S. Burroughs**

### **General**

Helena sets herself the task of formulating an understanding of artworks from within a new materialist philosophy, specifically that of Elizabeth Grosz, and to apply or extend it passing through William S. Burroughs's shotgun paintings and thoughts on art. To my knowledge, while these seem like a perfect fit for a variety of reasons, such work has not been done before. Furthermore, when it comes to Grosz's philosophy, even though she concerns herself explicitly with art, the reception of her work deals with the topic only exceptionally. From the outset then, Helena's project is original in its conception. On a side note, given how deeply indebted the Australian philosopher's work is to that of Deleuze & Guattari, I will try to keep this text legible for non-Deleuzians and refrain from using their conceptual infrastructure and terminology.

Much of the thesis is a thoroughgoing, concise and clearly argued summary of many of the references (idiosyncratically) mobilized by the materialist feminist. Importantly, because we are, following Grosz and Helena, moving in the field of ontoethics, even an conceptual overview would have to already demonstrate the import and impact of philosophy, and the differences within philosophical projects, on thought and the world at large. That is, a writing that makes the force of philosophy felt. Helena more than succeeds in this regard, much like in any other I can imagine.

In order to do so, a – for a modern reader wholly other – conceptual infrastructure has to be formulated, one where specific understandings of even common terms (like art, evolution, human, animal) have to be clear in their difference. The challenge, given the format of a Bachelor's thesis, or any writing really, is to pick and choose terms, concepts and philosophical personae that are most important for the argument presented; for as with any great thinker (i.e. those that don't simply tacitly assume common sense to be self-evident), the amount of influences and variety of readings actualized by Grosz far surpasses the length of one book, much less a thesis. Again, Helena manages to admirably streamline all that appears necessary, from Nietzsche to Uexküll to Irigaray, from nature/culture to immanence to deterritorialization, to provide a uniquely productive understanding of the world, art and the (post-)human, that immediately brings a reader into the most cutting edge contemporary research in post-disciplinary philosophy.

The thesis then does many things, in line with Deleuze-Grosz, apart from introducing a (new) new materialist account of (post-humanist) agency in art/body encounters. The role of Burroughs is important insofar as it makes philosophy more concrete, fills the text with extra-textual imagery (or at least the potential for such encounters); it does the work for the reader to become more aware of, more attuned to one's surroundings in a world as lived. In this sense, following Grosz as understood by Helena, these pages are about openness, about recognizing it or making it possible in places where only sameness is typically recognized. Thus, the work is about the future, or rather, how to make other futures possible, which again is one of the main shared post-disciplinary themes of this day and age. To get there, it is of great import to write texts that can enact connections that have not been there before. And I think that Helena is doing precisely this – to show some paths, connections between Grosz's project and art, or a specific artist, that is to open trajectories, cross-pollinations etc. Which is after all what the work of philosophers should do – create concepts that make possible something that has not been here yet (actual).

The only minor caveat I have is that I would have enjoyed a clearer separation between Grosz and Burroughs. After all, one is primarily an artist and the other a philosopher, or even Burroughs the thinker and Burroughs the artist; the two, at least if we follow *What Is Philosophy* (a book referenced in the thesis), doing different things.

Lastly, because I myself am interested in tracing new non-Christian cosmologies that would fit our material conditions, the traditions engaged herein are radical in that they attempt to formulate thought that does not ignore the Darwinian revolution or the sciences in general, in favor of a re-Christianized notion of an independent human being as is typical in all of those humanisms from all kinds of phenomenologies through analytic philosophy to even deconstruction and many (post-)Marxisms. As such, Helena's work is important because it brings closer the possibilities in a humanities that is not a separate science, in thinking that is non-hierarchical and experimental and might finally yield results to tackle the immense challenges of our current times, instead of ignoring them in favor of fantasies long proven to be powerless in face of the world.

## **Evaluation**

I will not summarize how I understand the argument to work, as it is rather self-evident. Rather, I will focus on one central point where I detect Helena's own very original contribution and source of actual philosophy, i.e. creation of concepts.

This mostly relates to the role of danger, endangerment that is inherent in Grosz's philosophical project but in general relegated to the margins, as she focuses on the joyfulness of encounters. Meanwhile, Helena already in "Chapter 1.5. What Is Dangerous To Life?" already raises the issue, which is expanded in chapter 2.1 ff.. Life in order to sustain itself operates in forcefields of exposure and attraction, sustainability and change. Danger is a necessary component of sexual selection, where the emergence of marks of attraction is counteracted by lifeworlds in which these marks make a life more prone to be captured by other forces. This emergence is the 'more' that is being created, a process that is artistic and one that makes even art in a more reductive sense possible. It is not teleological or practical, it just happens as part of one of the two principles in life. In other words, without "standing out" (as an impersonal Darwinian process), one can't attract, but by standing out, one becomes more vulnerable. (On a side note, vulnerability also implies the need for others, whether human or not.) And to stand out, something new appears (the effects of which are uncertain). It is this point that takes on a radical emancipatory force in our world where the powerful do everything to "keep it all" and those with less power labor to acquire protection without the danger inherent to exposure. This is why, from some philosophies, the liberal deadlock is just a ride toward death. Danger and disintegration are to be taken as a necessary part of life, and only then can any substantial change occur. But this is not merely sad, for all is composed of sad passions and joyful actions, it depends on what death and danger make possible which renders any act, any event, any organism inalienably complex and never simply good or evil. Art here becomes that which, locally for there can be no universal object or practice, brings such a danger to life that it can evolve without either disintegrating fully (being captured by other lives) or being able to keep its (un)conscious, contemplative illusion of the world (based on previously perhaps sensible, but certainly no longer so, information) intact by not being endangered enough by a comparatively small encounter, only to be later annihilated by global events such as the Anthropocene extinction event, the unlikely rise of proletariat or some kind of machinic singularity or AI takeover. Mind-bodies as radically open and opening.

Helena further demonstrates, how an analogous operation was conceived discursively conceived by Burroughs, and that his shotgun paintings are attempts to produce artworks according to new new

materialist principles. And, for anybody who has had the chance to encounter Burroughs's art, whether literary or otherwise, the present thesis offers a plethora of engaging concepts to help address and creatively reshape what has been occurring in these encounters with the late American's artistic production. The openings brought about by the works engaged here and Helena's work itself of course far surpass whatever material has been worked with here.

## **Conclusion**

The thesis, much like Grosz's work is an ethics: "If you wish to change something, this is how you do it." (p. 10) Thus, Helena's work is a variant continuation of the work she engages and as such, as mentioned above, also an ontoethics. It does not fall into the old, pre-Nietzschean problems of representationalism and truth seeking that continue to plague all too much of allegedly contemporary research.

As to the formal aspects of the thesis, apart from occasional inelegancies and small mistakes (that always happen and are in no way a sign of sloppiness), Helena's language is immaculate. The mistakes, to be precise, include missing or inadequate commas and articles, as well as some typos (e.g. p. 17 "Grosz Argues" with a capital A). Given her analytical style of writing, a lot of the syntax and choice of words is repetitive. While I prefer more experimentally written work, it makes sense to first master the convention, before trying out something new. And within that framework I have no reservations and am excited to see how Helena's thinking, writing, creating will develop. It would be a privilege to be her supervisor again.

Her work even illuminates some of the complex entanglements of philosopher's, especially the feminist Nietzsche-Grosz relation, I was interested in but didn't yet have the chance to pursue myself. This is important insofar as Nietzsche of course plays a central role in any emancipatory project, which too often fall back onto naive, masculinist individualism, while the Grosz-Irigaray line elegantly reformulates the issue, while keeping its basic force present.

I will end with a question to ponder: how much of a coincidence is the perfect fit between Burroughs and Grosz's (new) new materialism (after all, Deleuze & Guattari, and others, reference him at times)? How productive would an encounter between Grosz and a random different artist be? Whatever results these questions may yield, this thesis makes me want to go out and do things, because the world is not set yet and never will be, which to me is the highest praise a text of any kind can have.

**I joyfully recommend this thesis for defense and evaluate it as *excellent*.**

Praha 26.8.2021

Mgr. et Mgr. Milan Kroulík