

BOOK REVIEWS · THE DISAPPOINTED WRITER

FOTEINI VLACHOU. THE DISAPPOINTED WRITER: SELECTED ESSAYS. LISBOA: EDIÇÕES DO SAGUÃO, 2019

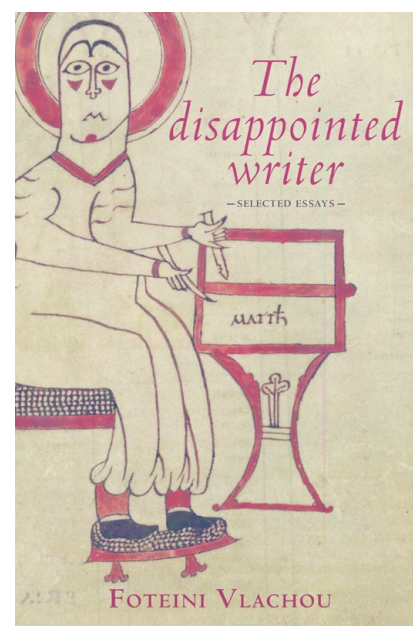
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The disappointed writer gathers essays written by Foteini Vlachou (1975-2017) during her prolific and unconventional academic and research activity, which, among other insightful achievements, put periphery at the centre of a critically and ethically committed art historiography, as Terry Smith emphasises in his introduction. The art historian centres his text on the final essay of the book “Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery” (pp. 333-352), which presented an alternative stance (time) to consider peripherality, and underlines Vlachou’s main contribution to this topical issue: “we should think of continuity and change in the history of art as occurring within a framework shaped less by the relationships between metropolitan centres and provincial outposts, more by relationships between unstable centres and several kinds of peripheries” (pp. XIII-XIV).

By considering “other temporalities” (pp. XXIII and 343-345), Vlachou’s challenging proposal resonates with Smith’s own reflections on contemporaneity, as the interview published in the current issue well demonstrates. However, Vlachou applies this alternative perspective in the revision of traditional historiography and in the analysis of creative practices from the past, proving its usefulness and effectiveness in undermining the canons and hierarchies of a history based in the binary relation between centre and periphery. Indeed, as she claims in her article (also quoted by Smith): “the periphery has the potential to subvert categories that have dominated (art) historical thinking since its inception (centre, canon, nation), while bringing to the fore the fundamentally unequal power configurations that have characterized the discipline and its various practices” (p. 335).

Vlachou’s own personal and academic itinerary outlines a geography that is in the margins of the main narratives of European art, but is nevertheless able to naturally assume its autonomy and relevance. Having been born in Greece, she completed her PhD entitled *Art in the European Periphery: History Painting in Portugal at the*



beginning of the Nineteenth Century, in the University of Crete, under the supervision of Nicos Hadjinicolaou, in 2013. In the course of her research, she settled permanently in Portugal. She integrated the IHA/NOVA FCSH, where she coordinated the research cluster “art in the periphery”. Before her premature death, she was preparing the book *Painting History, Monarchy and the Empire, Portugal c. 1799–1807* for Routledge. The collection of essays published in *The disappointed writer*, corresponds to these peculiar journeys in art history, but also testifies to the eclectic interests of the author, who was also a passionate cinephile.

Portuguese art, more specifically, Portuguese painting from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century was the territory that Vlachou elected to respond to the need to “narrate the periphery” (quotation in p. xxiv). Accordingly, in the chapter “The Empire in Transition and History Painting in Portugal”, the author looks into the complex textures of the political times that inevitably entangled artistic production. She is especially concerned with the “ruptures involving unprecedented events such as the migration of a Western monarch to a South American colony” (p. 97), which refers to the transference of the seat of Portuguese monarchy to Brazil in 1807, in the context of the French invasions. The phrasing of such event renders evident its uniqueness and the necessity of thoroughly examining reactions and consequences. In this case, as in others approached by the author in this book, crystallized readings that have neglected deeper involvements between political context and visual culture have blocked new and problematising approaches, more specifically: “the persistence of traditional historiography of art in Portugal that tends to interpret works by assigning them stylistic labels (romantic, neoclassic) or focus on monographic/ biographic approaches” (p. 98).

One of the most influential results of Vlachou’s renewed observation of the period is the definition of the “New History Painting” that has as protagonists Francisco Vieira Portuense (1765–1805) and Domingos António Sequeira (1768–1837), who were also leading figures of Portuguese painting in the transition between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. In different chapters the author highlights the “common ideological parameters” of both painters (p. 109), who attempted to convey the indissociable link between monarchy and the integrity of the empire as well as the redefinition of the “position of the aristocrat in a new world crystallized into visual ideologies, that were expressed in Portuguese history painting up until the departure of the royal family and court for Brazil” (p. 108). Those visual ideologies were diffused among a network of patrons, diplomats and artists, and materialized into a “subject matter exclusively from the Portuguese historical past, depicted in a way that stressed the – imagined – reality of the past” (p. 165) as opposed to the previous dominance of mythological or religious themes. Vlachou makes clear that this is a very specific episode in Portuguese artistic production and not simply a proto-Romantic stage.

By paying close attention to a neglected field in Portuguese art historiography, decorative history painting, Vlachou makes us recognize how canonical readings have undermined the way we look at a work of art or at an artistic corpus. Her analysis

of the decorative painting produced by Columbano Bordalo Pinheiro (1857-1929) is a telling example of the way a specific and undisputed narrative about a painter constructed around his celebrated tenebrist portraits obscured a significant aspect of his creative practice that, moreover, established a timely link with contemporary French production (pp. 213-235). Throughout the book, international articulations are emphasized; and more importantly, the centrality of the Portuguese context in the process of artistic creation and historiographic discussion is also argued, for instance in the impracticability of the Vasarian model for Portuguese historiography in the eighteenth century (pp. 45-47). Expanding the analysis of the Portuguese artistic panorama from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century towards neglected topics such as the late introduction of landscape as an autonomous pictorial genre in Portugal, the prominence of the tradition of the study of decorative arts, or the institutional history of the history of art, Vlachou concludes that “the history of art history in Portugal remains to be written” (p. 253). In the chapter dedicated to the teaching of art history in the Lisbon Academy of Fine Arts (pp. 253-261), she criticizes the “importation of a French-inspired model of art history” in the mid-twentieth century confronting it with earlier thinkers, writers and teachers, whose “nationalistic tone” suggested “a more suitable path for peripheral historiographies of art to follow, when dealing with the understanding of how the scientific object of art history was ultimately shaped in areas that may have, intellectually, crossed paths with the main centres of art history production, but that remained resolutely in separate spheres of activity and imperial priorities” (p. 261). Vlachou was not afraid to touch the margins of art history and bring them together in order to reveal, in a direct and engaging tone, fresh and compelling contributions to the discipline. *The disappointed writer* exposes an author with self-humour and a crude awareness of fleeting time, but resolutely committed to direct our look to obscured and neglected stories in their own time and context. ●