

Professor Wolfgang Mastnak

Beijing Normal University 北京师范大学

University of Music and Performing Arts Munich

European Academy of Sciences and Arts / New York Academy of Sciences

Official foreign member of the Doctoral Dissertation

Manifestation of the “Non-Self Conception”

and Experience of a Catastrophe

in European Artistic Practices from the 15th to the 20th Centuries

Speciality 24.00.01 – Theory and History of Culture

Dissertation for the Pursuit of the

Academic Degree of *Doctor of Culturology*

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by

Grigoriy Rafaelyevich Konson

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Introduction

I feel honoured to have been invited to assess this doctoral dissertation as the official foreign member of Dissertation Council of Dr Konson's cultural research. I have read his dissertation with excitement and I am convinced that his highly inspired analysis and culturally philosophical synthesis has brought about an important new aspect to the understanding of the Western arts of the last centuries: Self-Conception and, particularly, Non-Self-Conception as a core issue of the spirit of ages, i.e., of the 'Zeitgeist', in the arts.

This assessment of Dr Konson's doctoral dissertation refers mainly to the English version of his manuscript. I was not involved in his culture-scientific research and assess hence his thesis from my very own interdisciplinary point of view. I do my best to adequately analyse his important work; nonetheless, there is the possibility that I misunderstand some of his thoughts and findings. This is, however, a common academic risk the field of philosophy and cultural sciences.

1. Terminology

In contrast to, e.g., scientific papers in genetics or neurosciences, some of the terms Konson uses in his dissertation are not standardised in the sense of a generally accepted definition. In addition to that he suggests new terms that also

form the core of his scientific findings and theses. It goes without saying that this fact involves linguistic considerations that also form an important part of the present assessment.

1.1 Non-Self Conception

'Non-Self Conception' is a very crucial term in Konson's dissertation. The Russian original uses 'Не-Я-Концепции'. Although throughout his dissertation, Konson's scientific work clarifies and substantiates this term, there is no actual definition of it in his thesis. From the perspective of the theory of sciences this is not a fault and there is the appropriate possibility to define a term through elucidated examples. Nonetheless, there are some aspects that might have been discussed more in depth.

The first problem concerns the term 'Концепция' or 'conception' which is, of course, a Latin term and is used in various languages with a very broad spectrum of meanings. It would have been helpful to avoid misunderstandings to more clearly discuss how this term is used in the present dissertation.

This problem also involves interdisciplinary issues, particularly whether the term 'conception' is used in a philosophical sense of 'idea', or in a constructivist sense,

or in a personality psychological sense. Depending on the semantic connotation of 'conception' the interpretation of Konson's dissertation might vary considerably.

It also would have been helpful to clarify the terms 'Я' and 'self'. Both the Russian and the English term are used both in common language and in psychology. Particularly in differential psychology and depth psychology these terms play an important role but are not used in single and homogenous way. Moreover, the understanding of the 'self' greatly depends on cultural traditions and socio-cultural practices. Of course, p. 10 clarifies the term according to William James (1890), but it remains unclear whether this definition is regarded as the overall definition for the whole thesis – reading the whole dissertation I suppose rather not.

Finally, it would have been sensemaking to clarify the use of the word 'non'. It is not clear whether this is an absolute 'non' in the sense of formal logics, or a somehow gradual 'non' or a symbolic 'non' such as in Buddhist philosophy that represents a certain totality as the opposition of the nothing (which is partly not so far away from the contents of Konson's dissertation). Or is this a psychological 'non' that signifies a sort of self-defence, despair, or escape into another world, here particularly the world of arts?

1.2 Catastrophe and experience

The same criticism applies to the terms of 'catastrophe' and 'experience'. Firstly, the word 'catastrophe'. The original Ancient Greek word 'katastrephein' means to turn down, to trample on, or to come to an end. In different contexts, however, the word has different meanings. E.g., in classical drama theory it signifies the fatal turning point in a drama. In everyday English language the word means both a disaster and a bad happening (such a minor, rather personal mishap). There is a certain lack of clearness how Konson uses this key-term in his dissertation.

The same applies to the term 'experience', in the Russian original used in the form of переживание катастрофы. Here three questions arise. The Russian word переживание means literally 'to live through' and hence refers to a very individual biographical event. By contrast, the English word 'experience' goes back to Old French where 'esperience' means test, proof or 'experiment' in a more scientific sense. Thirdly, the term 'experience' has become important in psychology and differentiates a rather meaningless perception of an actual situation from a subjectively important becoming aware of. Nevertheless, the dissertation of Dr Konson does not refer to these perspectives which makes the use of his terms a bit unclear.

1.3 Philosophical terms

In a culturally highly sensemaking way, Konson refers to relevant philosophical ideas and scripts. Nevertheless, sometimes the bigger philosophical view falls short, particularly due to linguistic problems. For instance, he refers to the philosophy of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. The Russian version of Konson's manuscript uses the term *посыл Бытия* which is a very adequate translation of what Heidegger means, however the English term (p. 3) 'prewsimes of Being' is not understandable and a quotation missing. Nonetheless, in that case also the German original would have been important, particularly as the interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy greatly needs linguistic hermeneutics (Heidegger created a very special way of expressing his thoughts through language).

2. Interdisciplinary requirements

Although this doctoral dissertation clearly belongs to cultural sciences, its core topics, namely the notion of 'non-self conception' touches upon psychological issues. As already mentioned in part 1 of this assessment, Konson's scientific work decisively calls for interdisciplinarity, particularly for psychological considerations. First of all, this concerns the notions of 'self' and 'self conception'.

Some parts of the dissertation explicitly involve psychological issues, e.g., p. 7. Konson deals with terms such as ‘obstrusive form of neurosis’ (here it is also not clear what ‘obstrusive’ means – probably this should be ‘obstructive’), ‘hallucinatory phenomena’, ‘obsession in the form of infernal images’, ‘self-identity’, ‘consciousness begins to live in two worlds’ etc.

It greatly makes sense that Konson brings in these highly relevant topics. Nonetheless, it would have been important to discuss them also from a psychological and psychiatric perspective. E.g., modern clinical psychology and psychiatry rather avoid the term ‘neurosis’ and the specification ‘obstrusive form’ is not clear at all. Furthermore, it is not clear at all how to differentiate the ‘hallucinatory phenomena’ from ‘hallucination’ and whether Konson refers to key symptoms of schizophrenia or a somehow non-pathological phenomenon of hallucination-like imagination or vision. The same criticism applies the consciousness in the ‘two worlds’. Is this a pathological, or a creative, or a cultural phenomenon? In the same way we have to discuss ‘self-identity’: there are many studies upon and different notions of ‘self-identity’ in psychology. Which are here meant, which are relevant?

Of course, the notion of the 'self' plays an important role in Konson's dissertation. P. 19 refers to Sigmund Freud and this famous theory of the self (his second fundamental theory). But in contrast to the original 'Ich – Über Ich – Es', Konson speaks about 'Other', 'Self', 'Supra-Self'. As there is also no quotation, it is impossible to know who transformed these terms which greatly differ from Freud's original.

As further pars pro toto of similar deficiencies, we look to p. 11 'This kind of agreement reveals the diabolical essence of an event inspired by the "hunger of self-love" [Friedrich Schelling] and the desire for "self-actualization" [William James].' From the perspective of modern psychotherapy this statement is somehow irritating. Under clinical conditions, a sane level of self-love (partly even a 'hunger') can be therapeutically indicated, and 'self-actualization' is even a principle in health psychology. In such contexts we cannot at all speak about a 'diabolic essence'. Discussing terms and statement from different scientific points of view would have been sensemaking.

Broadly speaking, culture is a phenomenon that can be analysed from many scientific perspectives such as psychology and anthropology. Of course, it is not obligatory to conduct interdisciplinary research, but it would have been up to

standards to at least mention the high amount of relevant theories in other disciplines.

3. Scientific method

Usually, a scientific dissertation has to clarify the scientific method and the relevant theory of truth. Particularly Karl Popper's fundamental work 'Logik der Forschung' is usually regarded as the cradle of the theory of science that deals with the question of what science is, what methods can be regarded as scientific, which notions of truth apply to what type of science, etc.

While some disciplines, such as evidence-based medicine, seem to be 'over-standardised' and for this reason already again stiff and on the way to become a petrified ideology, other disciplines are still rather far away from relevant meta-theoretical considerations (one of them is, e.g., music education).

Konson does not explicitly clarify his scientific methodology, the theory of truth, and the epistemology he refers to. Reading his doctoral dissertation, we find phenomenological approaches, ways of heuristic elucidation, comparison-based analyses and syntheses etc. The way he conducts his research gives implicitly answers. Nonetheless, there is no direct clarification of his methodological and science-theoretical position.

In addition to that, there are some passages and some arguments, where Konson uses a very strong, nearly poetic language. Particularly in these contexts it is not clear whether he gives rather his expert-opinion or whether he considers the statement as a scientific one, as one that holds (as sort of) objective truth. In case Konson publishes his doctoral dissertation he should take this perspective into consideration.

4. Formal issues & slight deficiencies

In general, the formal structure of the dissertation is logic and pertinent and satisfies the requirements for a doctoral dissertation. Nonetheless, there are some minor issues that have to be mentioned.

4.1 Overall structure & table of contents

The Russian version of the table of contents uses for the first 2 chapters consistently «Не-Я-концепция», while the English version displays first “‘Non-Self Conception” and then, for the second chapter, “‘Non-Self“ Conceptions’, which is not logic. Moreover, it is not logically systematic that only chapter three uses the term ‘problematism’ in the context of non-self conceptions, while the first two do not.

In addition to that, taking the enormous quantity of information into account, a more differentiated table of contents would have been helpful and more according to the academic conventions of a scientific treatise, particularly a doctoral dissertation.

4.2 Footnotes

Throughout the whole dissertation, i.e., the Russian and the English part, Konson uses the same footnote-indexing procedure. As a result, the footnote numbers of the Russian and the English version are not the same, which makes the simultaneous use of both versions difficult.

In addition to that the layout of the footnotes is sometimes a bit 'beyond standard', e.g. very long and unstructured information.

4.3 Quotations & language

Konson's doctoral dissertation has to be seen as a cross-cultural scientific work. Consequently, he also refers to quotations in different languages. Nevertheless, the way of quotation is sometimes not totally up to the standards.

E.g., footnote 16 refers to Hegel's famous treatise 'Die Phänomenologie des Geistes'. Konson quotes: Fenomenologiya dukha [Phenomenology of Spirit]. The

Russian transliteration into Latin letters is correct, also the English translation, but the title of the German original is missing. There are several similar examples in this doctoral dissertation.

4.4. Orthographic issues and style

There are relatively many orthographic mistakes in the English version of this thesis, e.g. p. 19 'turne out' instead of 'turn out' and 'as wel as' instead of 'as well as'. Sometimes the mistakes even make good understanding impossible.

Really problematic become things when names are written wrongly. E.g., concerning the German philosopher Immanuel Kant: the Russian version brings the correct translation as И. КАНТ, but the English parallel passage (p. 17) writes 'Immanuel Kant' - the double consonant is on the wrong place. And p. 19 writes 'Siegmund Freud' instead of 'Sigmund Freud'.

4.5 Quantity versus quality

The present doctoral dissertation contains a myriad of relevant information, a nearly boundless world of ideas, statements, and philosophical aspects. Nonetheless, sometimes the quantity lacks a bit in-depth-analysis.

E.g., the dualism of body and soul is a core issue of the Occident. Around p. 14,

Konson refers to a lot of relevant key-figures in Western cultural and philosophical history such as Plato, St John of Damascus, Albert the Great, Augustine Aurelius, Pierre Abélard (in the dissertation without the French 'é' though). These quotations have logic, but his way of comparing their positions and elucidating differences and similarities seems partly slightly superficial or a bit beyond the whole spirit of the philosophies referred to. Some passages rather read as an exciting scientific essay, but not a PhD-dissertation.

This problem also occurs with regard to the scientific backgrounds of the quoted authors. E.g., Konson quotes Max Weber, William James, Carl Rogers etc. – but the reader, if he/she is not familiar with their biographies, does not know, how to interpret the quotation and how to evaluate their contents: is it psychologically, philosophically, theologically etc. meant? Usually in such a scientific work just quoting without clarifying and discussing the scientific value and essence of the quotation makes understanding of the whole synthesis difficult.

5. Substance and perspectives

It is not the duty and not possible to appraise here in form of an 'assessment-summary' the huge information and the robust core of this doctoral dissertation that mainly focuses on literature, visual arts, and music, but (surprisingly) not on dance and the various genres of drama.

Konson brings together an enormous wealth of perspectives from different disciplines that shed light on the phenomenon, spirit, and essence of the arts and strengthens his central hypothesis about the experience of catastrophes and non-self concepts in arts-creating processes. Sometimes it is hard for the reader to immediately understand Konson's way of thinking and his line of argumentation. Nevertheless, the whole œuvre convinces.

Particularly the conclusion (from p. 270 on) brings a clear extract of his work. Here he differentiates the various genres of self-conception, such as the Christological self-conception versus the anti-Christ and the 'absurdic' (diabolic) non-self conception.

In addition to that, Konson suggests a somehow pseudo-mathematical formula to estimate and 'calculate' the ratio between the different factors of self- and non-self conception.

The conclusion has a surprisingly strong Christian accent that raises the question why Christianity did not appear in the title.

The thesis closes with a philosophically extremely dense paragraph that claims a

great deal of interpretation itself: В такой нацеленности сконцентрирован трансмиссионно-позитивный смысл авторской рефлексии на катастрофическое в жизни, что в конечном счёте служит укреплению защитного пояса культуры: ноосферы (разума) и пневмосферы (духа).

There is, finally, the question about the highlighted dualism. The English version writes 'reason' and 'spirit'. Maybe the Russian words referred to (разума and духа) have a different meaning, pointing to the complementarity of the understanding cognition and the spiritual mind including the awareness of the soul. Thus, the conclusion is mystical itself. At this point, however, Konson leaves the sphere of sciences and points (implicitly) to the impossibility of full discovery of the arts. Here, we totally share our opinions.

6. Epistemological value

A doctoral dissertation has to bring about new insights and enlarge the knowledge of the discipline referred to. In my opinion, Dr Konson's subtle research has a triple value concerning comparative cultural phenomenology, the cultural theory of evolution, and the field of culturally based health sciences.

6.1 Arts: Pluri-perspective discourse

Referring to Hegel's 'Phänomenologie des Geistes' (The Phenomenology of Spirit) and Schelling's philosophical considerations, Konson sheds light on phenomenology as a philosophical discipline. At the same time, he himself involves genuine phenomenological approaches to elucidate the characteristic appearances and essences of the arts.

Moreover, he compares and synthesises an enormous wealth of distinct aspects of experts from different scientific fields and creates a framework that helps us to converge towards a holistic view of the phenomenon of the arts. Already this, in a sense meta-reflective, scientific work, would be sufficient for a doctoral thesis. But Konson goes a big step further and suggests a new theory of the (Western) arts and their evolution throughout the last centuries.

6.2 Arts: Evolutionary driving force

The probably most important epistemological outcome of Konson's thesis is the discovery that the experience and awareness of catastrophes serve as a certain driving force for the evolution of the arts. Moreover, catastrophes and their very distinct and individual representation in the artists' minds lead to an arts-specific (e.g., symbolic) embodiment of the catastrophes within the objects of art. Thus, we can speak about a double function of the catastrophes: they inspire the arts

and they shape the arts (in 6.3 we will see that there is also a third, health-oriented function). This process goes hand in hand with what Konson calls the non-self conception.

The culturally important discovery of Konson is in contradiction with many a common opinion of the arts as pure joy that is far away from the hardships of life and the awareness of gigantic threats. What Konson brings to light has surprising similarities with biological evolutionary perspectives: crises and destruction also embody the power of creativity. In a nutshell, the arts are not a mere expression of (superficial) harmony and aesthetics as a pleasant beauty (in sharp contrast to beauty as a core ontological principle of existence), but their driving inner force is (often) closely interrelated with the experience of catastrophes and a certain self-abandonment, the 'non-self conception'.

Konson's new theory has great potential for further interdisciplinary studies on culture that may involve ancient philosophies (such as the Chinese book of changes, 易经), evolutionary genetics, etc.

6.3 Arts: health and implicit 'self-therapy'

Konson did not explicitly mention the hidden health-scientific value of his thesis.

It is not the duty of a doctoral assessment to draft further research that might be

based on the assessed one, but as the potential is important, I want to sketch some perspectives that greatly involve main fields of my own research in music- and arts-based therapies.

According to Konson's thesis, the awareness of catastrophes has a crucial impact on the spirit, essence, and shape of objects of art. At the same time, we can ask, from a psychological and arts-therapeutic perspective, about the driving force for the artists' creativity. There is a certain possibility, that the process of creation involves a certain form of self-therapy.

However, it would be inadequate to just narrow these procedures down to a sort of arts-based coping-strategy. It is more likely that we encounter a complex phenomenon that includes (maybe) a triple mechanism: genuine therapeutic trauma processing, a philosophical widening of perspectives that break the catastrophes' destructive power, and the miraculous potential of artistic creativity that entails (sometimes) a certain trauma-immunity: creativity as another mode of living (Konson also speaks about two worlds in his doctoral dissertation). In this context, this arts-psychological perspective touches upon Konson's dual theory of self- and non-self conception.

Finally, we have to ask if the fact, that many pieces of arts embody a certain experience and processing of catastrophes, can be helpful for common people. If so, experiencing the arts involves aspects of public health. Broadly speaking: Konson's thesis and particularly his core findings have much potential that transcends the limits of his own discipline, the cultural sciences, for which he is about to attain a (second) doctoral degree.

Assessment: excellent

Research is in a steady flow. In addition to that, assessing scientific research never can be regarded as absolute, but always and unavoidably involves explicit or implicit criteria and points of view. From this perspective, all criticism in this assessment has to be seen as relative. Appreciating the extremely high amount of scientific work that particularly involves cultural philosophy and the sciences of arts, I estimate the quality of this excellent doctoral dissertation as 95 of 100.

The doctoral dissertation 'Manifestation of the "Non-Self Conception" and Experience of a Catastrophe in European Artistic Practices from the 15th to the 20th Centuries' for the Pursuit of the academic degree of Doctor of Culturology meets the requirements established by the Order from 01.09.2016 № 6821/1 "About the Procedure for Awarding Academic Degrees at the Saint Petersburg State University". Grigoriy Rafaelyevich Konson undoubtedly deserves the academic degree of Doctor of Culturology: Speciality 24.00.01 – Theory and

Prof. Dr. Dr. Dr. Wolfgang Mastnak 老马教授、博士生导师、主任
北京师范大学艺术治疗研究中心 Research Centre for Arts Therapies
19 Xijiekou Outer St, Bei Tai Ping Zhuang, Haidian District, Beijing, China, 100875

History of Culture. Paragraph 11 of Annex 1 to the above-mentioned Order was not violated by author of the Dissertation.



Professor Wolfgang Mastnak

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