

# **The Contemporary Intaglio Printmaking in Slavic Countries.**

## **Hypostases of the Fantastic.**

### **PhD Thesis Summary**

In light of the research I have carried out, I consider that in Slavic countries fantastic printmaking is an artistic phenomenon that stands out through certain distinctive features. First of all, it is an art that does not mimic trends in Western Europe, but proposes itself as one of the trends in contemporary art. This is one of the very important things that need to be pointed out, because the printmaking art in question establishes a direction that is deeply rooted in the geographic space to which it pertains: Central and Eastern Europe. I am interested in a type of art that originates from the same geographic area as Romania and relates to the (art in the) West as a dialogue partner, not a model. The art of printmaking in Slavic countries imposes its own authentic, individual models, and the propensity towards the fantastic, combined with technical mastery, is one of its strengths.

I have attempted to prove my thesis by focusing my research on the particularities of contemporary intaglio printmaking in Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Bulgaria. Although they come from different countries, the artists surveyed, belonging to different generations and schools, partake of the same artistic ethos, expressing kindred visions and working on similar themes. Thus, I believe that the main aspects that are specific to this type of art are the ones examined in the chapters of this thesis.

To start with, in the chapter entitled “The Fantastic. Definitions and Perspectives,” I try to outline the various meanings, definitions and distinctions that fantastic art generally entails, by reviewing the studies of several authorities on this topic (René de Solier, Marcel Brion, Tzvetan Todorov, Albert E. Elsen, Roger Caillois, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, Gustav René Hocke). I then move on to explore (see, in this sense, also the chapter “Albín Brunovský and His School”) what are those terms that, under the umbrella of fantastic art, are applicable to the artistic activity of the printmakers I investigate. In the intaglio printmaking I have researched, there is a considerable attachment to realistic depictions. Of course, this realism is merely apparent: the shapes are continually morphing and metamorphing, which takes us into the sphere of fantastic printmaking. This is, therefore, the same paradigm to which the art of Albín Brunovský belongs, a paradigm about which Ľudmila Peterajová says that it is “the perfect illusion of reality and yet it is not reality”. It is the same kind of art that “glides from a vision that is close to life to the fantastic” (Ion Biberi), an art that is encountered in the works of Bruegel, one of the unrivalled masters of the printmakers under analysis.

Of course, this term cannot be applied strictly to all the artists mentioned above; some of them are situated closer to a type of drawing that deliberately evokes the “naïvite” of shapes (of medieval inspiration or of the folk-art type, but not necessarily). I have noticed, too, a certain preference for details among these artists, a penchant for oddness, the bizarre and the grotesque, an exuberance of the ornamental, all these elements reviving Mannerism in a contemporary form. At the same time, it may be noticed that the printmakers I have studied make reference to and engage in an artistic dialogue with elements of medieval and early Renaissance art and culture, especially from Germany and the Netherlands.

It is important to note that, throughout my research, I also came across other expressions referring to fantastic art, such as imaginative art, which is preferred by some artists and scholars. Moreover, within the broad framework of the fantastic there are also terms such as “fantastic realism”, “magical realism”, “Mannerism” and “Surrealism”, syntagms with which the printmakers I have examined are associated by their reviewers. In my thesis, resorting to the texts of scholars like Ľudmila Peterajová, Eva Trojanová, Ivan Jančár, Eva Petrová, Mirosław Ratajczak, Dagmar Srnenská, Martin Vančo, Karel Žižkovský, František Dryje, Arkadiusz Wagner, Michael Sokolov, Karl Vissers, Grzegorz Matuszak, Richard Noyce, František Dvořák and Katerina Kyselica I have tried to discern which of these terms are appropriate and how contemporary printmakers are seen by critics.

In the next chapter, entitled “A Bestiary. On Monsters and Fantastic Beings”, I started from the realization that many of the artistic universes discussed involve bestiaries, which rely, depending on the case, on the bestialization of humans or the humanization of animals. In particular, because of the motif of masks that fantastic printmaking often resorts to, man borrows the traits of animals and vice versa. In addition to this, in some cases, the flora acquires the characteristics of a bestiary, in a so-called “zoology of plants” (Jurgis Baltrušaitis). There is, therefore, a continuous transfer and a perpetual metamorphosis of the regna.

Some of the bestiaries have a correspondent in medieval art (by bringing into contemporaneity some emblematic creatures for the Middle Ages, such as *grylles*), others in popular culture or in mythology. Yet others are born from the artists’ sheer imagination, the results being reminiscent of the hybrids that only Rudolph II’s cabinet of curiosities could have accommodated.

Many of the fantastical creatures are, of course, created following the structure of hybrids. The importance of hybridization, as a special way of combining elements, has been

underlined by several art theorists. Among them, René de Solier asserts that “all hybrids stand as proof of the power to give shape and to assemble; of the will to intervene”.

I have illustrated the presence of beasts and fantastic beings in Slavic prints by analysing the works of the artists Roman Sustov, Peter Klůčik, Sergey Hrapov, Vladislav Kvartalny, Marián Oravec, Elena Novikova, Dušan Kállay, Desislav Gechev, Juri Jakovenko, Eugeniusz Get-Stankiwicz, Hana Čáková, Konstantin Kalynovych, Karol Ondreička, Nina Kazimova, Oleg Yakhnin, Katarína Vavrová, Yuri Borovitsky, Paweł Szadkowski, Jan Hisek, Marin Gruev, Jiří Anderle, Dimo Kolibarov.

In the chapter entitled “The Link with the Past,” I highlight, as the title suggests, the attachment to certain models and reference points in the European culture of the past and the contemporary artists’ dialogue with the old masters.

The first subchapter, “Paraphrases and References”, exemplifies the way in which the printmakers working in the fantastic tradition find their discussion partners in artists and artworks of the Middle Ages, of the Early Renaissance, from the northern areas of Europe (which, on the one hand, continued to evince features of Gothic art, while on the other hand, took the path of humanism) and of Mannerism (incidentally, Mannerism borrowed substantially from the fantasy of the Middle Ages). The artists discussed here are, therefore, equally indebted to the fantastic and to reason. We may detect in their art not only the presence of a fabulous imaginary, but also an outstanding craftsmanship and a grasp of humanistic notions. Among the Slavic printmakers who work in the fantastic genre, humanism meets the Gothic spirit against the background of postmodernism, however, considering that the attitudes of contemporary artists, namely their freedom to quote, is of postmodern extraction.

However, the examples that I have chosen do not refer only to the outstanding representatives of the above-mentioned periods. They entail a wider range of references to artists from different historical periods.

The ways in which fantastic printmakers have chosen to pay homage to the great masters are quite different: some resort to humour, others to fanciful constructions, others use some quotations to comment on immediate reality. However, they all integrate and adapt the works they paraphrase and their characters, so they very naturally appear to be part of their own fantastic universe, a universe that could only belong to contemporaneity. Regardless of their approach, the printmakers discussed here maintain their individuality and the authenticity of their own artistic visions.

Thus, we come across the masters Albrecht Dürer, Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel, Jan van Eyck, Johannes Vermeer, Arcimboldo and Leonardo da Vinci (as well as others) and their characters in the prints of artists such as Josef Dudek, Pavel Hlavatý, Sergey Tyukanov, Vladislav Kvartalny, Konstantin Kalynovych, Marin Gruev, Jiří Anderle, Oldřich Kulháněk, Jan Krejčí, Karel Demel, Nikolai Batakov, Nina Kazimova, Karol Ondreička, Peter Kocák, Katarína Vavrová, Eugeniusz Get-Stankiwicz, Hana Čápková.

It should be noted that “the boundary between the striking truth of things and matter and the abstract and surreal world of ornaments and arabesques” and that “almost mathematical precision, coupled with an irrational expansion of fantasy”, which Jan Białostocki and Otto Benech identify both in Gothic art and in Mannerism, are also encountered in the works of the Slavic printmakers of fantastic inspiration.

In the subchapter discussing the printmakers’ relation with myth, entitled “On Myths”, we discover two very important and representative tendencies for their art, namely: 1. their attachment to the erotic aspect of the story 2. freedom in the reinterpretation of myths, which, in some cases, is pushed all the way into the sphere of the parodic. We may therefore speak about a recontextualization (which also applies in the case of the literary works to which the printmakers under analysis allude and of the references to the sphere of fine arts): on the one hand, through a permutation of the emblematic characters and myths from one historical period to another, and, on the other hand, through an intervention in the course of the narrative, introducing characters that fundamentally change the character of the story (which often features hilarious situations). In fact, humour, irony and narrativity play a crucial role, being among the defining features of fantastic art in Slavic countries. I have exemplified this aspect with works created by Dušan Polakovič, Dimo Kolibarov, Peter Kocák, Elena Novikova, Dušan Kállay, Sergey Hrapov, Hristo Kerin, Eva Hašková, Miroslav Knap, Alexej Fedorenko, Peter Velikov, Yuri Borovitsky, Julian Jordanov, Hristo Naidenov, Hristo Kerin, Marin Gruev, Desislav Gechev, Günter Hujber, Roman Sustov, Elena Novikova, Katarína Vavrová, Jan Hisek, Eugenia Timoshenko, Konstantin Kalynovych, Kacper Božek.

In the chapter “The Relation with Literature” I analyse the importance of literary sources for Slavic contemporary printmaking. Because the references are very diverse and it would have been impossible for me to discuss all the references to literature that are present in the works of the printmakers I have researched, I have chosen to discuss particular cases and, in particular, to compare very different interpretations of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and *Don Quixote de la Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes. These are two of the most popular books and themes in the contemporary *ex libris*. Various studies have already been

devoted to them and have been the subject of important *ex libris* biennials, so in my research I only refer to some examples of intaglio printmaking from Slavic countries that bring their own fantastic contribution to these two literary works, which themselves comprise elements of fantastic and parody. The two subjects are so popular (also due to the collectors' preferences) that there are quite a few cases of artists whose universe comprises a considerable number of interpretations based on the two books.

Aside from *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, there are also protagonists of other ingenious stories that can be found in the *ex libris* bookplates of Slavic artists, and here I refer to "Puss in Boots" by Charles Perrault, *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, and *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

The special relationship that contemporary printmakers of fantastic extraction have with literature manifests itself also in the fact that various writers themselves, like William Shakespeare, become characters in the works of these visual artists. Franz Kafka is also present in the creation of Slavic printmakers, both through references to his work, particularly to *The Metamorphosis*, and through his own figure. The preference for Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is perfectly justifiable as long as metamorphoses are the most common phenomena in fantastic Slavic printmaking.

I have exemplified the relationship with the world of books by discussing works by Sergey Hrapov, Ivan Rusachek, Peter Velikov, Ruslan Agirba, Eva Hašková, Jiří Neuwirt, Milan Bauer, Günter Hujber, Vladimir Vereschagin, Juri Jakovenko, Peter Kocák, Dimo Milanov, Valentin Kovatchev, Konstantin Antioukhin, Nikolai Batakov, Sergey Tyukanov, Karol Ondreička, Hristo Kerin, Eugenia Timoshenko, Alexej Fedorenko, Dušan Kállay, Dušan Polakovič, Konstantin Kalynovych, Günter Hujber, Oldřich Kulhánek.

In chapter six, "The Memory of Place. The Image of the City in Contemporary Fantastic Printmaking", I show how, for some of the printmakers under study, the city in which they live becomes the setting in which the fantastic performance created by the characters that cross their universe unfolds, some of these characters being major figures in the history of the place, who are ascribed unusual features and dimensions. Thus, in the art of Przemysław Tzsykiewiz, miraculous things happen in the Wrocław captured by the printmaker – the medieval city is populated with a fantastic aquatic bestiary; Günter Hujber revives the history of his native city, Velké Losiny, making reference to the notorious presence of witches. Peter Klůčik integrates in his art the image of Bratislava, the city lying in the vicinity of a fantastic jungle or, in any case, on the border with a fantasy world. Just like in the case of Peter Klůčik, the imaginary of Dušan Polakovič is anchored in the space of the

Slovak capital. His characters often roam the streets of Bratislava. And not just those invented by him: artists and emblematic creatures may also be encountered in the same city. The leitmotif that indicates the presence of Bratislava is the city with four corners, its symbol. Some of the prints of the city involve an erotic dimension, given the presence of nude female characters. The memory of the city is not highlighted in Slavic printmaking only through buildings, but also through emblematic characters. While in the works of Nina Kazimova, Saint Petersburg acquires fantastic proportions and the historical reference is Peter the Great, in the case of Eva Hašková, Prague is often presented through fanciful lenses, emphasizing its relationship with Charles IV and with Rudolf II.

Further on, in the chapter “The Mechanical World, Voyager-Explorers and ‘Imaginative Constructors’” (the latter phrase belongs to Arkadiusz Wagner, with reference to Oleg Denysenko), we encounter the image of the traveller and the inventor who takes us into other worlds, both in a symbolic way, through allusions to other ages, and through the use of fantastic means of transport. The latter are mechanisms often grafted on the structure of some animated machines. Animism is, incidentally, one of the distinctive features of this type of art. Some artists achieve an unusual balance between the world of machines and the natural world, by creating a spectacular mechanical bestiary. At other times, printmakers become “architects” who erect grandiose, fanciful constructions. Some of these turn out to be fantastic representations of the Tower of Babel or Noah’s Ark – as revealed in the titles.

A common element that I have identified is the way in which the inventors of these mechanical humanized worlds or of the world of mechanised creatures present their creations: they forge the illusion of some pages of scientific and technical atlases. There is a (deliberate) difference between the way in which these prints are presented and what they represent. They have the allure of real pages of atlases (botanical, zoological, anatomical and technical) or are presented as genuine scientific researches, but in reality they are artifacts, the concoctions of their creators’ rich fantasies. Some of these artists give their works Latin titles (or titles in their own language), designating the insect or animal of reference (afterwards metamorphosed and mechanized). There is a discrepancy between the rigor with which references are researched and studied in depth and the way in which they are subsequently used and transformed into machinery, to serve the fantastic world in these Slavic prints.

The naturalness with which these printmakers approach the fantastic in their inventions as if these were facts and scientific findings is reminiscent of the naturalness with which mythical characters like griffins were approached in biological studies prior to the 17th century.

The mechanization of characters extends to the construction of characters from ancient mythology, elements that appeared only in the era of industrialization being used to that end. Thus, we encounter a fusion, a commingling between the ancient world and the mechanical world.

Another type is represented by those printmakers who conceive their works not as pages of zoological or technical atlases, but as maps of well-known or lesser known worlds.

It is important to emphasize that, in the imaginary of the printmakers I have investigated, aquatic boats and ships criss-cross the sky rather than the waters. The origins of these types of representations are found in ancient art. As we learn from the book of Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *The Fantastic Middle Ages*, the theme of the flying vessel, of the “ship (which) seems to have been built for moving through air than than across the sea”, was resumed in medieval art and, later, in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, Peter Bruegel and Pieter Huys, via the Hellenistic gems.

The works discussed in the context of this analysis belong to the printmakers Milan Bauer, Sergey Tyukanov, Artur Popek, Dušan Polakovič, Roman Sustov, Dušan Kállay, Artur Goliński, Dimo Milanov, Przemysław Tyszkiewicz, Vladislav Kvartalny, Miroslav Knap, Peter Velikov, Ivan Rusachek, Sergey Nesterchuk, Katarína Vavrová, Jacek Szewczyk, Krzysztof Skorczewski, Piotr Gojowy, Veselin Damyanov-Ves, Ilya Utkin și Aleksandr Brodsky, Jan Švankmajer, Alexander Aksinin, Desislav Gechev, Sergey Hrapov, Christopher Nowicki.

The next two chapters are devoted to case studies. Chapter eight deals with “Albín Brunovský and His School”. As a result of the research I have undertaken, I have discovered that there is an emblematic figure for this type of art, namely the Slovak printmaker Albín Brunovský, seen as a master not only by his former students, but by a larger part of the contemporary printmakers whose artworks feature fantastic elements. Albín Brunovský’s influence extends to the entire Central and East-European space and is not just limited to the so-called school that the artist created in Slovakia, his country of origin. Artists everywhere in the Slavic space (and worldwide) refer to him as a model, Brunovský being a true paragon in the world of printmakers. In this part of my thesis, I try to outline a few considerations on Czech and Slovak printmaking after the 1960s and to show the impact exerted by Albín Brunovský. I do this, on the one hand, by underscoring several important aspects of his work, reviewing scholarly studies and, on the other hand, by presenting in broad lines the individual artists under his wing and some of the particularities of their art (Peter Klůčik, Dušan Kállay, Dušan Polakovič, Karol Ondreička, Marián Oravec, Peter Kocák, Katarína Vavrová, Peter

Augustovič, Igor Piačka, Karol Felix, Igor Benka, Robert Brun). In addition, the chapter mentions the importance of other printmakers in the Czech and Slovak space, such as Vincent Hložník, Vladimír Gažovič, Kamila Štanclová, Zdeněk Sklenář, Karel Svolinský, Jiří Anderle, Oldřich Kulhánek, Jan Krejčí, Pavel Hlavatý, Jan Kavan, Jan Švankmajer.

Besides this master, I consider that the art of the Ukrainian Oleg Denysenko is also a model of reference for my research, as it encapsulates the main aspects that are defining for fantastic intaglio printmaking in Slavic countries: technical mastery, humour, self-irony, narrativity, a certain mechanization of the characters, a subtle knowledge of European culture, the link with popular culture, the dialogue with the old masters, the creation of a personal bestiary, the presence of the miraculous and of a fairy-tale world. These issues are discussed in the chapter dedicated to the artist, entitled, of course, “Oleg Denysenko.”

Most of the printmakers included in my research dedicate a portion of their activity to *ex libris*. I consider that the definition given by Josef Koutecký in relation to the creation of bookplates by the Czech artist Oldřich Kulhánek is also relevant for the artists I discuss, being able to clarify how bookplates are seen in contemporaneity: “Any attempt to define *ex libris* for the lovers and collectors of the works of graphic arts would be like bringing owls to Athens. A definition is given by any encyclopedia and any explanatory dictionary of visual arts. But still, I feel tempted to offer my own definition. In my point of view, the *ex libris* bookplate is a small piece of paper used by a great graphic artist to interpret a great theme with even greater brilliancy in a small format. My definition substantiates the fact that the size is not important, that small may be great – in terms of both form and content” (in English in the original).

In the chapter “A Foray into the Fantastic of My Own Prints and Drawings” I discuss the project I undertook during the period of my doctoral studies. During this time, my main concern has been the art of *ex libris* and small-size graphics.

My drawings and prints reflect, to a large extent, my deep interest in the Romanian and the Slavic folklore, in mythology, in the peasants’ customs and beliefs. Various influences from medieval art and ancient manuscripts (reaching me both along Western channels, through the so-called illuminated manuscripts, and through the Orthodox manuscripts in the Romanian Countries) can definitely also be noticed. The interaction between these two cultural worlds has shaped a personal, subjective bestiary. In this way, I try to observe the ways in which popular beliefs and customs still resonate with contemporary art.

Some characters from the peasant bestiary move to town, which is always medieval (an alphorn player blows his tune over Cluj, a goat stands guard by the gates of medieval



Toruń). I want to say that I hesitate to reproduce or to limit myself to simply giving a shape to mythological characters by entirely replicating their features from the original source. On the contrary, I take a certain amount of freedom. Sometimes this freedom refers to the setting in which they live or in which they are represented: many a time they are depicted in an urban environment (Central or East European), and not in their native one, because these characters are travellers, like me. With a bag on their back, they set off to discover especially Central Europe, with which the legends say they are related, but every once in a while, they also roam around our country. And those who cannot leave blow their alphorn over Cluj. It is very important to me that my prints and drawings should not be an illustration of myths and legends; I want to create my own story, a story that conjures up and integrates folk beliefs and bestiaries. As we have already seen, folk culture often meets an urban culture, mostly of Gothic provenance. Although these two cultures are at opposite poles, both folklore or folk legends and Gothic architecture share a fantastic dimension.

Starting from a recognizable bestiary, I try to create a personal one, in which, however, just like in universal narratives, characters have a dual structure: a bestiary-like appearance and a humanized behavior.

I am also interested in a certain narrativity that can be developed with the help of details and, notably, of the ancillary characters, who conceal other stories than the main thread of the drawing. My preference for etching, as working technique in printmaking, helps me in my endeavour to take the story as far as possible, precisely because it is a technique which allows the creation of an abundance of details in a world of lines (the line is the protagonist and the main element of the artistic language in my creation).

The “Addenda” of the work includes the interviews that three of the printmakers generously gave me: Christopher Nowicki, Oleg Denysenko and Günter Hujber. At the same time, in this part of the thesis, I have included a chapter that contains “Biographical Information about the Researched Artists”.

Concluding, I would say, in short, that this research is largely intended as a plea in favour of and as a way of raising awareness about the potential of this type of art which is deeply anchored in its space of origin, being still attached to certain traditional values and very much aware of its peculiarities.

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