

Neo-impressionist aesthetics as a sign of the *monstrative*

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Abstract: *To understand neo-impressionist aesthetics supposedly highlights the important role that it was Neo-Impressionism in the birth of modern art. The technique of the neo-impressionists and the mechanisms that led to its use, as well as the themes and topics addressed by these artists are illustrative in this regard. Both in terms of the technique used and the topics covered, neo-impressionist artists refer to the same principle, extracted from the anarchic social philosophy, whereby art is understood as a face of the order of the world and the order or harmony of nature. Through his works of art the neo-impressionist artist does not intend to show a meaning that he has already seen, but he proposes to the viewer to look for a meaning together, which can be revealed having a phenomenological approach.*

Key-words: *Neo-Impressionism; anarchism; phenomenological approach; divisionism; optical mixture; anti-utopian allegory; monstrative.*

1. Introduction

The paper proposes a view on how to understand neo-impressionist aesthetics and represents a synthesizing approach to the problematization that targeted this artistic movement, the aim being to bring to the fore the important role that neo-impressionism played in the birth of modern art. The research of this issue draws attention to the fact that there are several points of view regarding a possible relation to different aspects involved by the subject, two of them being fundamental: the technique of the neo-impressionists and the mechanisms that led to its use and the themes and topics addressed by these artists. The study of these two aspects revealed to me the fact that there is a principle that crosses as a red thread the preoccupations of the neo-impressionists and which probably derives from their reflection on the great problems of the contemporary scientific and artistic life. This principle has a *monstrative* character², in the sense that the neo-impressionist artist, through his works of art, does not intend to show a meaning that he has already seen, but proposes to the viewer to look for a meaning together, which can be revealed having as a reference an phenomenological approach.

The argumentative approach of this work is based on three benchmarks that we should consider important for the neo-impressionist aesthetic. First, it is about the work - manifest of neo-impressionism, *From Delacroix to neo-impressionism*, written by Paul Signac, late, about

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² This term comes from the Latin monstrare, rendered in English by to indicate, to show, to present, to reveal, to unveil. In Italian there is mostrare, which means to do so in such a way that someone can see something that is indicated or shown to him. The Romanian philosopher Mihai Șora uses the concept monstrare (Romanian verb: a monstra), in the work *To be, to do, to have*, published in Romanian, by Humanitas Publishing House, in Bucharest, in 2006, meaning to indicate, to show, to refer to something specific that is shown to the viewing looking by itself. Monstrare is thought in opposition to demonstrate, because if demonstration has a character of constraint and necessity, the human being becoming the "producer of truth" through a logical and methodological approach, monstrare involves to reveal the truth by focusing on the object; thus the human being is the "witness of the truth" and not his "producer." M. Șora uses the notion monstrare with an implicitly phenomenological significance, but, as Victor E. Gelan argues, in the paper *Finding the other again*, this concept can acquire an explicit phenomenological meaning. According to this interpretation, the term refers to the fact that in the process of knowledge there is a pre-constitutive level (pre-predicative), which does not claim an elaborate theoretical justification and is not required to be demonstrated, but only shown as such that is made to come to the light. See also Victor E. Gelan. 2019. "Despre regăsirea celui alt" [Finding the other again]. In *Verso Magazine* 14 (121): 16 - 19, p. 16.

10 years after the movement started, but at a time when the artist feels that this artistic movement has whose initiator had died, it risks being forgotten. Secondly, it is a series of studies that have been published in the English and American space on different aspects involved in neo-Impressionist aesthetics, of which we should note: the scientific concerns of the time in the field of physics and chemistry, the connection of neo-impressionists with the anarchist social philosophy, the references to a series of critical reactions of contemporaries of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac - the two great representatives of the neo-impressionist current, the ethical implications of the neo-impressionist aesthetics, the problem of style and the differentiation between general and individual style. And, last but not least, is the work of art by Georges Seurat, *A Sunday afternoon on the Grande Jatte Island*, which was exhibited for the first time at the eighth (and last) impressionist exhibition, in May 1886, in Paris and which represented the manifestation of a new trend in art. The motivation for choosing Seurat's art work, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* is that this is the manifestation of neo-Impressionism and gives us the opportunity to understand the problem of the technical and stylistic processes that both involve, and, implicitly, the way in which the register to understand the meaning of a work of art changes with this artistic movement.

This study is a synthesis work that collects fragmentary research on the issues presented in the previous paragraph, the purpose being to deepen and justify an aspect that seems not to have been highlighted by the researchers who leaned on Neo-Impressionism. This is the fact that we are talking about a single principle that explains both the approach of the technique, the styling, as well as the themes and topics encountered by neo-impressionist artists. This principle is based on the understanding of art as a face of world order and of the order or harmony of nature. In this regard, in addition to the work of P. Signac, *From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*³ and that of Félix Fénéon, *The Impressionists in 1886*⁴, studies such as those by Paul Smith⁵, Robyn Roslak⁶, Linda Nochlin⁷ or Stephen Elsenman⁸ are representative.

The argumentation of this study, based on the articulation of some concepts proposed by the researchers mentioned above, is based on the following main ideas: the technical and stylistic concerns of neo-Impressionism regarding the highlighting of the scientific and technological climate of the time; the infusion of aesthetics with social significance, derived from anarchist social philosophy; aesthetic harmony as a vehicle for promoting moral harmony; the subjective-objective dimension of the reality that the neo-impressionists realize by coming out of the contemporary temporal flow and capturing the reality.

2. Art as an aspect of the order of the world and the order or harmony of nature

At the last exhibition of the Impressionist group, in 1886, in Paris, the critics' attention was drawn to one of the works of art exhibited by Georges Seurat, it is *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. A few months later, in September 1886, Félix Fénéon published in

³ Paul Signac. 1971. *De la Delacroix la neoimpresionism*, București: Editura Meridiane.

⁴ Félix Fénéon. 1886. *Les Impressionnistes en 1886*. Paris: Publications de la Vogue.

⁵ Paul Smith. 2009. "“Souls of Glass”: Seurat and the Ethics of “Timeless” Experience”. In *Seurat Re-viewed*, ed by Paul Smith. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 199 - 221; Paul Smith. 2014. “The Neo-Impressionist Painter. Color, Facture, and Fiction”. In *Neo-Impressionism and the Dream of Realities. Painting, Poetry, Music*, ed. by Cornelia Homburg. New Haven: Yale University Press and Washington: D.C. London in Association with The Phillips Collection, pp. 47 - 71.

⁶ Robyn Roslak. 1991. “The Politics of Aesthetic Harmony: Neo-Impressionism, Science, and Anarchism”. In *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Sep., 1991), pp. 381 - 390.

⁷ Linda Nochlin. 1989. “Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*: An Anti-Utopian Allegory”. In *The Politics of Vision. Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, 171 - 193. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, pp. 171 - 193.

⁸ Stephen E. Elsenman. 1994. “Mass culture and utopia: Seurat and Neoimpressionism”. In *Nineteenth Century Art. A Critical History*, ed. by Stephen E. Elsenman. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., pp. 274 - 287.

the magazine *L'Art Moderne*, which appeared in Brussels, the article “L'Impressionnisme aux Tuileries”, which he will resume next month in the pamphlet *Les Impressionnistes in 1886*, in which he uses the term “neo-impressionism”, which it links to a new and essential version of impressionism⁹. Fénéon pointed out that the neo-impressionist artist applies the different colors according to a principle of divisionism, in small dots, replacing the pigmented mixture with the optical mixture, which retains the brightness and contributes to the complementary intensification and that we witness a systematic distinction between the local color of the objects, the color lighting and the reactions of both¹⁰. After all, what Fénéon was describing was more than a tendency of Impressionism, because both Georges Seurat and the other artists who exhibit alongside him, such as Paul Signac, Camille Pissarro and his son, Lucien Pissarro, are supporters of the same method, which P. Signac will call, a few years later, a “scientific and precise method”¹¹, based on a “knowledge of the scientific theory of color”¹². In fact, it is a study of neo-impressionists on the simultaneous color contrast of chemist Michel Chevreul, as well as a study of the latest works of physicists Herman von Helmholtz, James Clerk Maxwell and Ogden Nicholas Rood¹³.

The division of color applied scientifically is one of the basic aspects for which neo-impressionism is known. A number of twentieth-century researchers, such as Meyer Schapiro, in 1935, William Innes Homer, in 1967, Alan Lee and John Gage, in 1987, have studied this and, regardless of the ideas they have expressed. Regarding the influences of the sciences of physics and chemistry on the neo-impressionist painting, they came to the same conclusion, namely that, by dividing and juxtaposing the contrasting and complementary colors, the neo-impressionist artists were aiming to create an aesthetic harmony¹⁴.

Therefore, the technique of neo-impressionists was derived from the main scientific discussions of the time, which referred to important theories of physics and chemistry, which applied to the physical world and which contributed to a better understanding of it. In the same sense, Robyn Roslak discusses a series of controversies that arose in the second half of the nineteenth century, between positivists and chemists, as to the actual existence of the atom. In our argument we note the position of Adolphe Wurtz, who, in dispute with Marcellin Berthelot, “paid particular attention not only to the construction of the atom as a physical entity, but also to the ways in which atoms combine under the influence of stable natural laws, a condition known as of chemical affinity and forming systems characterized by their harmony and balance”¹⁵. This theory was recovered by neo-impressionists, who “always insisted that their paintings are integrated entities created by pigment units that work harmoniously together”¹⁶ and they created through their paintings stable and harmonious surfaces, based on the principle that if the laws of nature are left to function, social and moral change will come by itself. Thus, they shared the faith in a creative and regenerative scientific model¹⁷. The belief of the neo-impressionists was that their pictorial surfaces, though constructed using an objective method, could express a subjective idea or evoke an emotional or psychological state¹⁸.

In his manifest work, Paul Signac promotes the idea of aesthetic harmony as a vehicle for promoting moral harmony: “A neo-impressionist work of art ... due to its constant contrast

⁹ *Apud*. Paul Smith. 2009. ““Souls of Glass”: Seurat and the Ethics of “Timeless” Experience”. In *Seurat Re-viewed*, ed. by Paul Smith, 199 - 221. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 47.

¹⁰ Félix Fénéon, *op. cit.*, pp. 19 - 23.

¹¹ Paul Signac, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 54.

¹³ Robyn Roslak, *op. cit.*, pp. 384 - 388; Stephen E. Elsenman, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

¹⁴ Robyn Roslak, *op. cit.*, pp. 381 - 382.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 386.

¹⁶ Robyn Roslak, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

¹⁷ Robyn Roslak, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 388.

observation, its rational composition and the aesthetic language of colors, it includes a general harmony and a moral harmony”¹⁹ and “Concerned with the moral effect of the lines and colors, he [the neo-impressionist] does nothing more than follow the teachings of Delacroix once more”²⁰. The concern for the moral harmony of the neo-impressionists is associated by R. Roslak with the infusion of an aesthetic with social significance, derived from the French anarchist social philosophy of the last quarter of the 19th century, with which the neo-impressionist artists would have shared a common vocabulary²¹. Studying this problem, Eugenia Herbert, in the work *The artist and Social Reform*, explores the relationships between the anarchist sympathies of the neo-impressionists and their choice of topics²². Thus, we can problematize on the topics chosen by neo-impressionists having as a point of reference a subjective-objective dimension of reality. For, the neo-impressionists do not express in their works an imaginary objective reality, but their painting is centered on a social and individual problem, which reflects the spiritual states of the illustrated characters. And, while Neoclassicism focuses on the idealization of the past, Romanticism on the expression of the artist's feelings and moods, and Realism on the careful observation of reality and its truthful, objective reflection in creation, the neo-impressionists propose a painting in which the states of the soul and the experiences of the illustrated characters are expressed and the complexity of the different aspects of their existence.

Therefore, both in terms of the technique used and the topics covered, neo-impressionist artists refer to the same principle, extracted from anarchic social philosophy, whereby art is understood as an aspect of the order of the world and the order or harmony of nature. We could say that this is a kind of explicit understanding of what the artist proposes through his work of art, which has a “purely monstrative” character, in the sense that the phenomenological philosopher Mihai Şora understands this²³. For, the Impressionist artist comes out of the flow of his time and from there the world tells us objectively, as if outside, looking at it from there, and this assures its originality: “It is not always desirable, of course, and as little as possible, to live our lives as if we were outside the world and the flow of time. But a life completely devoid of this perspective, in which “our glass souls” never play a role, is certainly impoverished and degraded. Therefore, although Beaubourg's view that our ability to transcend time may be our cancellation is essential, Seurat did not hesitate to show us that this can sometimes be our glory”²⁴.

The “purely monstrative” character of the neo-impressionist artist's approach refers both to its technique and to the way of presenting its subject. In the terms of M. Şora “it is not ... to show you something that I have already seen ...; on the contrary, it is about looking for something together that we can see together, when and if it will be revealed to us. After all, by all ways and means of persuasion ...”²⁵. That *search together* represents a transposition into a reality of the present, either of developments in the field of science or of the mechanisms of contemporary social life, which the neo-impressionist artist proposes to convey and to which the receiver must be able to have openness. And, the work of art - manifest of neo-Impressionism, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, of Seurat, is edifying in this sense, being the starting point of neo-impressionist art and the landmark of the new school that was born at the end of the 19th century.

¹⁹ *Apud.* Robyn Roslak, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

²⁰ Paul Signac, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²¹ Robyn Roslak, *op. cit.*, pp. 382 - 383.

²² *Apud.* Robyn Roslak, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

²³ Mihai Şora. 2006. *A fi, a face, a avea*. Bucureşti: Editura Humanitas, p. 59.

²⁴ Paul Smith. 2009. ““Souls of Glass”: Seurat and the Ethics of “Timeless” Experience”. In *Seurat Re-viewed*, ed. by Paul Smith, 199 - 221. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 216.

²⁵ Mihai Şora, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

3. *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* - manifest of an art school

A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte is a scientific study of how we see colors. The work of art is presented as a mosaic consisting of small regular brushes of pure colors. The work is presented as a mosaic consisting of small regular brushes of pure colors, which blend in the mind of the viewer without losing their intensity and brightness. The freshness of the spontaneous sensation, typical of the impressionists, is replaced by a rigorous scientific approach regarding the relations between directions, colors and sensations.

The approximately equal and uniform application of color on the canvas to form equal unified surfaces is likened by R. Roslak to the contemporary French anarchic society of the neo-impressionists, with whom they sympathize. Speaking to P. Signac, R. Roslak refers to the plastic language of neo-impressionists, noting: "This language subtly establishes the analogy between individual colors and human individuals, a relationship that Signac confirmed with greater force and clarity in 1902 when he wrote: «Justice in sociology, harmony in art: the same thing». Signac's language from 1895 also recalls the descriptions of the anarchist society of the future as populated by numerous individuals who naturally coexist in harmony"²⁶.

Seurat's composition also has a decorative aspect, this being one by which neo-impressionist artists self-identify: "Even small canvases of neo-impressionists can be presented as decorative. They are neither studies nor easel paintings, but «perfect specimens of an art of wide decorative breath, which sacrifices the anecdote of arabesque, the nomenclature of synthesis, the ephemeral of eternal (...) giving nature, yet exhausted by its uncertain reality, an authentic existence», wrote Mr. Felix Fenéon. Do these canvases, which bring back the light of the walls of our modern apartments, which include pure colors in rhythmic lines, which are related to the charm of oriental carpets, mosaics and tapestries, are not decorations themselves?"²⁷. All these aspects that we find in Seurat's work, exposed in 1886, will represent starting points and principles for the artists who will be called neo-impressionists, their role being to open a new way of painting, making it benefit from the certainties of science. The way this aspect is revealed to the viewer is rather *monstrated*, as the subtle implications can be discovered by looking.

On the other hand, if we refer to the subject of the work of art *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, we identify a large landscape, based on sketches by nature, which presents a public park along the banks of the Seine. The work of art depicts a large crowd, made up of townspeople, who enjoy a full day of summer Sunday. The figures are made geometrically and give the impression of immobility, the shadows themselves appearing unable to move. Seurat's characters have regularity and gestures of archaic statues. The painting expresses a realism that retains the attention, but the stylistic qualities, the fineness of the colors, the purity of the forms and the harmony of the relations between them prevail. Two aspects are relevant to our argumentation from the perspective of the subject represented by Seurat: one concerns the way in which the artist intends to reveal to us a moment from the life of the bourgeoisie from the end of the 19th century, and the other is related to the stylistic apparatus that the artist uses proposes to use it to provide a way of original artistic expression.

Regarding the first aspect, Linda Nochlin discusses the idea of looking at G. Seurat's painting as an "anti-utopian allegory"²⁸. Quoting Ernst Bloch, she speaks of an anti-utopian significance that she does not see as a matter of iconography or of social history transcribed on the canvas, but as a way of producing cultural meanings "by inventing certain visual codes

²⁶ Robyn Roslak, *op. cit.*, p. 384.

²⁷ Paul Signac, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

²⁸ Linda Nochlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 170 - 171.

for the modern experience of the city”²⁹. It is a kind of “paradoxical establishment of pure visibility and the flat surface of the canvas as synonymous with the modern”³⁰, which “establishes the timeless, nonsocial, subjective and phenomenological realm”³¹, from which any trace of classical utopia - whether it is desirable of the epicurean happiness, of the flesh or of the true golden age that lies not in the past, but in the future, disappears³².

Thus, the Western tradition is undermined, “if not canceled by a dominant language, which is decidedly anti-expressive, rejecting the notion of a hidden inner meaning that must be externalized by the artist”³³, because Seurat “allegorizes the general state of evil at the level of the society in his time”³⁴ and proposes a negative vision of modernity, especially of urban modernity, through a project of social criticism and by building a new type of specific language for the entire period of his creation³⁵. In this respect, the illustration of a moment in the life of the bourgeoisie from the end of the 19th century is rather a *monstrated* one, shown as such, made to come to the light.

Regarding the styling that the neo-impressionist artist uses, P. Signac himself spoke about the multiple possibilities of interpretation of the recipients of the time: “When Georges Seurat exhibited in 1896 the painting - manifesto *A Sunday on the Grande Jatte Island*, the two literary schools that dominated at that time, naturalist and symbolist, they judged each one according to their own tendencies. J. K. Huysmans, Paul Alexis, Robert Caze saw a Sunday roast with boys in the shop, with apprentices, and women looking for adventures, while Paul Adam admired the rigidity of the characters in a pharaonic court, and Moréas saw Pan-Roman processions. This, while Seurat had sought only a clear and cheerful composition, in a harmony of vertical and horizontal lines, a dominant one of warm tints and bright tones with the brightest white in the center. ... He had chosen a naturalistic subject only to annoy the impressionists, because he had proposed to remake all their paintings in his own way”³⁶. This peculiar manner that Signac spoke of was a kind of search for the originality and authenticity of Seurat, which will be articulated through his use of plastic elements similar to those of the ancient Egyptian East: “We could say that there is something almost “Egyptian” in accentuating the vertical and horizontal lines at Seurat; the artist is deviating more and more from the faithful rendering of the appearance, looking for unique and expressive schemes”³⁷.

In Seurat's painting there is almost no interaction between the characters, there is no articulated sense of their presence in the same space and there is also no deep core feeling for them³⁸. Bodies are present only through their outlines, under which nothing is seen, neither soul nor thought³⁹, which is an expression of the lack of authenticity, a symbol of the rigidity of the time, in which everything can be metaphorically illustrated as being motionless and ossified⁴⁰. In this rigid frame, in the center of the picture stands a little girl dressed in white, who looks directly at the viewer of the painting (which is not in a shadow), the only one otherwise offered to the viewer as a sign of human presence and which generates an interaction. Active, “in the midst of a sea of passivity”, she is the symbol of hope⁴¹, of the

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 171.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 172.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem, pp. 172 - 175

³³ Ibidem, p. 173.

³⁴ Ibidem, 180.

³⁵ Ibidem, 186.

³⁶ Paul Signac, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

³⁷ Ernst H. Gombrich. 2012. *Istoria artei*. București: Editura Art, p. 544.

³⁸ Linda Nochlin, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

³⁹ Paul Smith. 2009. *op. cit.*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Linda Nochlin, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

problematization regarding the evolution of society, because the painting of the shadowy perspectives, wrapped in the shadow, are associated, symbolically, with the suspicion of sin.

The lack of corporality portrayed by Seurat through the strongly geometrical contours gives rise to simplified and hieratic silhouettes, reminiscent of the Egyptian statuary⁴². This representation can be closely linked to the idea of illustrating a human typology, the Parisian bourgeoisie. For, as in the conception of the ancient Egyptians, the images of a person or of an object reproduced sustainably and completely duplicated the reality of the person or object, the portrait being as true and alive as the model, in the neo-Impressionist painting the images of the people are their prototypes, expressions of the reality of the time.

The very principle of aesthetic harmony as a vehicle for moral harmony, as it is theorized by P. Signac himself, with reference to Seurat's paintings, or the infusion of aesthetics with social significance, a problem that researchers like Charles Henry, Meyer Schapiro or Eugenia and Robert Herbert bring it up⁴³, it seems to fit into a stylistic field inspired by the art of the ancient Egyptian East, for which the good and the perfection, the beautiful and the useful, were under the same concept - *nofir*, because the Egyptians did not have a word for beauty, though "they had developed an aesthetic attitude towards the world that is no longer found in other peoples of the ancient East"⁴⁴.

4. Conclusions

Understanding neo-impressionist aesthetics presupposes bringing to the fore the important role that neo-impressionism played in the birth of modern art. The technique of the neo-impressionists and the mechanisms that led to its use and the dimension of the themes and topics addressed by these artists represented the two fundamental aspects of this research. The study of these two aspects revealed that between them there is a unity that governs as a supreme principle of the neo-impressionist school, which probably derives from their reflection on the great problems of contemporary scientific and artistic life, which has its basis in the original way of these artists to refer to the creative artistic act, which has a monstrative character monstrative character in the sense that the neo-impressionist artist, through his works of art, does not intend to show a meaning that he has already seen, but proposes to the viewer to look for a meaning, which it can be revealed with reference to a phenomenological approach.

Three points that I considered important for the neo-impressionist aesthetics were the subject of the argumentative approach of the present work. It is about: the manifest work of neo-impressionism, to *From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*, written by Paul Signac; a series of studies published in the English and American space on the different aspects involved in the neo-Impressionist aesthetics and the relation to the painting of Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, which was considered emergence of a new trend in art.

As a result of synthesizing a series of ideas promoted by researchers in the art history of the English and American space, which refer to aspects such as: the scientific concerns of the late nineteenth century in the field of physics and chemistry, French anarchism and the connection of neo-impressionists with philosophy social anarchist, the ethical implications of neo-impressionist aesthetics, the problem of style and the differentiation between general style vs. individual style, this argumentative approach offered the opportunity to understand the problem of technical and stylistic processes that involve both neo-impressionist aesthetics,

⁴² Paul Smith. 2014. *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁴³ Robyn Roslak, *op. cit.*, pp. 382 - 383.

⁴⁴ Mihail V. Alpatov. 1962. *Istoria artei. Arta lumii vechi și a Evului Mediu*, vol 1. București: Editura Meridiane. pp. 104 - 105.

and, implicitly, the way in which the register which makes it possible to understand the meaning of a work of art changes with this artistic movement.

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