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Genius and Art: Kant's Theory of Genius and the Concept of Genius in Ukrainian Fictionalized Biographies of Artists

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to analyzing the nature of genius in the context of the development of fiction about artists. From the biographies of the famous Renaissance artists by G. Vasari, who made one of the first attempts at chronicling the lives of geniuses of his time, to modern fictionalized biographies of genius artists – we can trace the desire of writers to comprehend the nature of the artists and sculptors' genius. The foundation of the concept of genius can be found in Immanuel Kant's works, which synthesized theories developed previously and influenced the understanding of genius by future generations. The paper analyses the consonance of Kant's aesthetics with the concept of genius in fictionalized biographies of F. Goya, M. Bashkirtseva, V. van Gogh, P. Gauguin, O. Novakivskyi, K. Bilokur, P. Picasso, V. Tsybal, S. Karaffa-Korbut and other artists, while focusing on the Ukrainian texts of the 20th–early 21st centuries. The research attempts to single out and analyze elements of conceptualizing the notion of genius in novels, including the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime in art, recognition of genius in society, the gender aspect of genius, the issues of heredity, and others. The representation of the image of genius in visual arts, iconography, and the cult of genius are discussed within an intermedial framework.

The research relies on literary and art criticism methodology and comparative and intermedial studies.

Key Words: I. Kant, genius, aesthetics, biographical novels, intermediality, visual arts.



Introduction

“Western philosophy follows in the footsteps left behind by Kant's shoes, which turned out so spacious that they fit a vast majority of contemporary ideas with ease,” notes researcher Viktor Kozlovskyi in the preface to *Kant's Anthropology*.¹ Indeed, when we analyze the key ideas of aesthetics, such as taste, the perception of beauty, and, most importantly, the concept of genius, in a corpus of texts about artists, we encounter ideas that are in accord with those expressed in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790),² where the philosopher explores the category of genius in art and provides

1 Victor Kozlovskyi, *Kantova antropolohiia: Dzherela. Konsteliatsii. Modeli* [*Kant's Anthropology: Sources. Constellations. Models*] (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2023), XXI.

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Hackett Publishing Co., 1987).

justification for the idea that fine arts (namely, literature and visual arts)³ is the art of genius.

Vitaliy Terletskyi, a Ukrainian translator and researcher of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, notes that Kant's definition and theoretical framework of a genius of his/her time became a landmark.

Kant's reflection upon the phenomenon of genius <...>, the researcher claims, falls onto a period when the "Epoch of genius" (Genie-Zeit), better known in literature as "Storm and Stress" (Sturm und Drang), has already descended from the forefront of German spiritual life of the second half of the 18th century, giving way to classics (c. 1785). Undoubtedly, Kant could not but respond to the "cult of genius" practised by representatives of this epoch..."⁴

Vitaliy Terletskyi's 2022 publication of the Ukrainian translation of *Critique of Judgment*⁵ and Viktor Kozlovskyi's monograph's republication in 2023 rekindled the use of Kantian ideas not only in philosophical discourse but also in other humanities. The present paper is dedicated to analyzing Kant's aesthetic ideas and their representation in the history of fictionalized biographies of artists and their development.

The research is based on a corpus of fictionalized biographies of Ukrainian painters, graphic artists, sculptors, and other artists along with biographic novels about foreign artists for comparative purposes. The literary process of the past several decades is notable for the active development of the genre of fictionalized biographies of artists, varying from children's books about Ukrainian female artists to fictionalized novels with elements of art criticism. Compared with biographical texts about writers, this segment of literature remains virtually unresearched. Kant's theory of genius and the concept of genius in fictionalized biographies of artists have not been singled out as a separate object of study in literary or art studies papers. On the other hand, many aspects of Kant's philosophy and aesthetics echo ideas of the authors of biographical texts about artists, including reflections on art, thoughts about the beautiful, and the theory about the nature of genius as the creator of the beautiful, and can be used as a key to the interpretation of belles-lettres dedicated to genius artists and sculptors.

The premise of the study is that the theory of genius, in its classic understanding and influence on the worldview of many artists, is found in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In contrast, in the aesthetics of later periods, these ideas are either less mainstream

3 Vitalii Terletskyi, "Kantova teoriia henii: deiaki pytannia dzherelnoi rekonstruktsii" ["Kant's Theory of Genius: Some Questions of Sources Reconstruction"], *Sententiae* 39, no.1 (2020): 31.

4 *Ibid.*, 29.

5 See Immanuel Kant, *Krytyka syly sudzhennia [Critique of Judgment]*, transl. by Vitalii Terletskyi (Kyiv: Tempora, 2022).

than in the 19th century or develop within multiple narrower trends of specific philosophical doctrines, the analysis of which appears more feasible not at the cross-section of genres within a broader context of biographical texts but using the materials dedicated to specific types of genius and subject-matter studies or separate texts about genius artists.

According to Kant, the nature of genius allows for the creation of the sublime and the beautiful; genius is an exceptional trait that not all creators possess. Recognition of the genius of an artist is among the research objectives of the present paper. Upon analysis of a corpus of Ukrainian fictionalized and documentary texts about painters, sculptors, and graphic artists, as well as numerous landmark biographical texts of world literature, only those have been selected for the study of genius that expressly highlight the issue or reveal one of the vital aspects of the aesthetics of the beautiful and the theory of its maker – genius.

Given Kant's idea that “*judging* beautiful objects to be such requires *taste*, but fine art itself, i.e., *production* of such objects, requires *genius*”),⁶ fictionalized biographies of artists have been analyzed with a focus on two philosophical categories, singled out in Kant's philosophy and conceptualized in belles-lettres about artists, which stipulated the structure of the present paper.

The theory of genius discussed in the article is based on previous research into Kantian philosophy conducted by Vitaliy Terletskyi⁷ and the study of Kant's anthropology undertaken by Viktor Kozlovskyi.⁸ The present investigation relies on interdisciplinary methodology, which employs literary criticism, art criticism, and aesthetics tools. It also involves comparative literary studies, visual arts, and intermediality theory.

The study of the category of genius and the concept of genius in fiction about artists is the first attempt at offering an overview of Ukrainian fiction about artists in the context of the genre and within the framework of Kant's aesthetics.

A genius artist: the nature of genius in the context of the development of fiction about artists

When analyzing the nature of genius and its interpretation in fiction about artists Kant's definition can be used as the starting point. Even though the notion of genius has been recognized since ancient times, according to Aristotle and his explanation, Kant's understanding of genius within Modernity philosophy is more suited for fiction about artists as a new literature genre.

This claim may be confirmed via a look into the genre's history. For many fiction writers, the fundamental text for creating literary biographies and works of fiction with elements of an artist's biography is *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors,*

6 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 179.

7 Terletskyi, “Kantova teoriia heniiia,” 31.

8 Kozlovskyi, *Kantova antropohiia*, XXI.

and Architects by the Italian artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari.⁹ The book is primarily an art history study, an attempt at a systemic overview of biographical information about Italian painters, sculptors, and architects of the Renaissance and Mannerism periods. Yet, the author often resorts to artistic narration fictionalizing the artists' biographies and offers an aesthetic assessment of their works.

Vasari believes that only some artists can be called geniuses – out of several dozen names in the three parts of his book, the characteristics “work of a genius” or “genius” are granted to a select few, such as the sculptor and architect Filippo Brunelleschi, the painter and sculptor Leonardo da Vinci, the architect Donato Bramante, the painter and architect Raphael, the painter, sculptor, and architect Michelangelo Buonarroti.

He sees genius as something of divine nature; he often speaks of “divine genius,” sometimes using the work of a genius as a synonym for a talented, perfect work, and considers the works that have reached “divine perfection” or “divine mastery” to be genius. The genius of artists is evidenced by their buildings, sculptures, or paintings.

By reason, then, of the excellence of the works of this most divine craftsman, his fame had so increased that all persons who took delight in art, nay, the whole city of Florence, desired that he should leave them some memorial, and it was being proposed everywhere that he should be commissioned to execute some great and notable work, whereby the commonwealth might be honored and adorned by the great genius, grace and judgment that were seen in the works of Leonardo.¹⁰

Long before Kant, Vasari used the examples of genius Italian artists to explain the nature of their geniuses and the way geniuses approach the works of predecessors. When writing about Donato Bramante, Vasari mentions that Bramante imitated what he saw but did it like a genius, adding great beauty and elaboration to art, the embellishment that excites us in the present day.¹¹

In this context, it is worth mentioning another comment made about a genius and his creations:

A painter had executed a scene, and had copied many things from various other works, both drawings and pictures, nor was there anything in that work that was not copied. It was shown

9 See Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, translated by Gaston du C. De Vere, 10 vols (London: Macmillan & Company and the Medici Society, 1912–15).

10 Ibid., vol. 4, 101.

11 Ibid., 138.

to Michelangelo, who, having seen it, was asked by a very dear friend what he thought of it, and he replied: "He has done well, but I know not what this scene will do on the day of Judgment, when all bodies shall recover their members, for there will be nothing left of it" a warning to those who practice art, that they should make a habit of working by themselves.¹²

Vasari utilizes an intermedial perspective to explain his understanding of a genius work via ekphrastic descriptions of canvases and a profound analysis of the intricacies of shape, color, light, and shade. He describes the genius nature of a work of art, the unique methods and techniques used, the novel approach and the effect the piece has on an observer.

Leonardo drew with the brush in chiaroscuro, with the lights in lead-white, a meadow of infinite kinds of herbage, with some animals, of which, in truth, it may be said that for diligence and truth to nature, divine wit could not make it so perfect. In it is the fig tree, together with the foreshortening of the leaves and the varying aspects of the branches, wrought with such lovingness that the brain reels at the mere thought of how a man could have such patience. There is also a palm tree with the radiating crown of the palm, executed with such great and marvellous art that nothing save the patience and intellect of Leonardo could avail to do it.¹³

Vasari wrote about those who were practically his contemporaries, whose names had yet to enter the history of museum collections or art historians' monographs, many of whom he introduced to the history of painting and discovered for contemporaries and posterity through stories about their lives and work. While Vasari's text is used as biographical and stylistic material by many researchers of art and aesthetics, it has been translated into many languages and still enjoys some popularity despite numerous inaccuracies, subjectivity, and fictionalized elements, yet to discuss the development of fiction about artists, which dates back to the first decades of the twentieth century, Kant's philosophical understanding of the theory of genius and the interpretation of art aesthetics is a worthwhile starting point. Kantian theory of genius belongs to Modernity and thus lends itself to a new understanding of genius, which is different from the Ancient and even Renaissance perspective, which we find in Vasari's work. His genius, which grew up on the foundations of Sturm und Drang and gave impetus to the Romantic era artists, planted the seed for understanding the genius of many authors of fictionalized biographies of artists.

12 Ibid., vol. 9, 113.

13 Ibid., vol. 4, 92.

Notably, Kant does not mention the names of artists when speaking of genius. Homer or Wieland are referenced in this context not to acknowledge the genius of these particular poets but rather to explain how genius works in poetry, i.e., in art, and why the concept of genius cannot be applied to scientists. When reading Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, one will not encounter the names of renowned artists-geniuses, such as Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo. However, the philosopher puts forward the most specific characteristics of a genius: a genius does not copy or imitate other artists – followers imitate him; a genius does not describe or judge his works – it is the job of his successors.

The word “genius” has long been part of our vocabulary and multiple reference books highlight its various aspects. For instance, Encyclopedia Britannica approaches “genius” from a psychological standpoint as “a person of extraordinary intellectual power” and defines it “in terms of intelligence quotient (IQ).” The author of the entry, Barbara Kerr, writes:

The word genius is used in two closely related but somewhat different senses. In the first sense, as popularised by Terman, it refers to great intellectual ability as measured by performance on a standardised intelligence test. In the second and more popular sense, as derived from the work of the 19th-century English scientist Sir Francis Galton, it designates the creative ability of an exceptionally high order as demonstrated by the actual achievement —always provided that such achievement is not merely of transitory value or the result of an accident of birth <...>. Genius is distinguished from talent, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Talent refers to a native aptitude for some special kind of work and implies a relatively quick and easy acquisition of a particular skill within a domain (sphere of activity or knowledge). Genius, on the other hand, involves originality, creativity, and the ability to think and work in areas not previously explored — thus giving the world something of value that would not otherwise exist <...> New ways of describing genius nearly always incorporate ability, creativity, mastery of a domain, and other personality traits such as autonomy and capacity for endurance.¹⁴

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant's initial statement is that fine art „is possible only as the product of genius” since it „cannot itself devise the rule by which it is to bring about its product.”¹⁵

14 Barbara Kerr, “Genius,” in *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/science/genius-psychology>.

15 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 175.

Genius is the talent (natural endowment) that gives the rule to art. Since talent is an innate productive ability of the artist and, as such, belongs to nature, we could also put it this way: *Genius* is the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art.

Whatever the status of this definition may be, and whether or not it is merely arbitrary or rather adequate to the concept that we usually connect with the word *genius* (these questions will be discussed in the following section), we can still prove even now that, in terms of the meaning of the word *genius* adopted here, fine arts must necessarily be considered arts of *genius*.¹⁶

Dominant in Kant's theory is the idea that a genius must rely entirely on a guiding spirit and have the talent to produce unique works that are exemplary, yet a genius cannot explain the nature of such creations because only genius makes their production possible: "that is presumably why the word *genius* is derived from [Latin] *genius* [which means] the guardian and guiding spirit that each person is given as his own at birth, and to whose inspiration [*Eingebung*] those original ideas are due."¹⁷ This is the justification that Kant uses for his statement that genius is only possible in the artistic space and not in science: "In scientific matters, therefore, the greatest discoverer differs from the most arduous imitator and apprentice only in degree, whereas he differs in kind from someone whom nature has endowed for fine art."¹⁸

What is a genius? A view of a genius through the lens of fictionalized biographies

Out of the analyzed corpus of texts about Ukrainian artists, the most consistent with Kantian theory is the novel about Maria Bashkirtseva, a "candidate for a genius" who doubted her talent, aspired to fame and recognition, and suffered "all the labours of men of genius."¹⁹ Slaboshpytsky's novel *Maria Bashkirtseva* (1987)²⁰ is based on the artist's journals, which contain a long list of aesthetic questions that she seeks answers to: the question of the artist's taste and the tastes of the public, the nature of genius, the artist's innovation and imitation of others, the influence of the environment on the artist, and others. Bashkirtseva's journals also directly refer to her familiarity with Kant's works; for example, in December 1881, Maria recalls her friend, an artist and

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 177.

19 [Marie Bashkirtseff], *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff*, transl. with an introduction by Mathilde Blind (London, Paris & Melbourne: Cassell & Company, 1890).

20 See Mykhailo Slaboshpytskyi, *Mariia Bashkirtseva* (Kyiv: Makhaon-Ukraina, 1999).

philosopher Sara Purser, with whom she discusses Kant's ideas.²¹ Bashkirtseva's journals are a type of self-reflection, a search for answers to the Kantian question "What is man?" (or its varieties – "What is artist?", "What is genius?"). In her journal, the artist expresses an idea that the word "genius" possesses the same quality as the word "love."²² "How one would like to have genius!" Bashkirtseva wrote in October 1881.²³ "But I have no genius, so it is better to die," she wrote in August 1883.²⁴ "If I believed I had genius, I should never complain of anything... But genius is such a formidable word that I laugh in writing it of myself, even if only to say that I lack it... If I thought I had genius, I should go mad with joy. Well, well! I don't think I have genius, but I hope the world will" an entry of December 1883 reads.²⁵ Finally, in July 1884, a few months before her death, the artist wrote, "Listen, if I have no talent, heaven must be turning me into ridicule, for it makes me suffer all the tortures of artist of genius ... Alas!"²⁶

Mykhailo Slaboshpytskyi characterizes the theory of genius and the nature of genius from different angles, using Maria Bashkirtseva's perception of genius as the exceptional nature of artists, romanticized in the 19th century, and as her perception of her genius, the search for signs of genius in herself, working on herself to create her art that could reach a genius level. Bashkirtseva herself often endowed her idols – artists and writers – with the attributes of "genius" and "divine spark," generously sprinkling them all over her letters to Guy de Maupassant and Émile Zola and often reflected on the nature of genius in her journals. Thus, in his novel about the artist, M. Slaboshpytskyi also utilizes this concept, intertextually introduces quotes from the artist, and tries to offer his own vision of her talent and genius. In the novel's epilogue, we read, "The well-known publicist and critic Jean Finot, praising Bashkirtseva's paintings and admiring her diary, wrote that she was one of the most mysterious creatures of the nineteenth century. Cesare Lombroso, a well-known author of the doctrines of genius as an anomaly, of the influence of pathology on human intelligence and artistic abilities, believed that the complex psychological phenomenon of Bashkirtseva could be explained only by a special concentration of atavism in her personality."²⁷

Vincent van Gogh is another artist whose genius is often discussed in art history discourse and public space, as well as in biographical novels and biopics. He is the subject of the novel, which is considered the first fictionalized biography of an artist, *Lust for Life* (1934) by Irving Stone.

In the fictionalized biography, Ukrainian novelist V. Domontovych speaks about the uniqueness of van Gogh's personality – he displayed no skills or talents neither during his school years nor as a missionary preacher, he was not gifted with words, and was not popular with women. However, the writer believes the world would not have

21 [Bashkirtseff], *The Journal*, 515.

22 Ibid., 643.

23 Ibid., 491.

24 Ibid., 627.

25 Ibid., 643.

26 Ibid., 684.

27 Slaboshpytskyi, *Mariia Bashkyrtseva*, 247.

had a genius artist if he had not experienced such outright rejection. Domontovych writes,

Vincent van Gogh is a type of genius devoid of talent. He has little skill; his genius is specific, concentrated, and narrowed. It covers only a certain area, compressed within certain limits. It took him many years to find himself and discover his inherent genius, but until then, he did not show the slightest ability in anything else.²⁸

The author emphasizes the fall, despair, and the extremes that Van Gogh reached in his search, “where human life collides with non-life and short temporal existence with the oblivion of timeless eternity” – only then did he discover the true nature of his destiny. “Through great sacrifice, he gained his genius for himself! He suffered through his genius for himself,” the story tells, and the author asserts that “the great creative genius of Vincent van Gogh emerged “out of suffering, from self-negation, from poverty”:

It was at a time when he seemed to have reached absolute despair, wandering around lost, when he, a pauper and a vagabond, could no longer see the light, just the emptiness of darkness, that he discovered the mighty triumphant majesty of his unique self, the purple, and gold of the magnificent completeness of his genius. He recognised his vocation as an artist.²⁹

Among the many aspects of the theory of genius identified in biographical fiction, we will highlight several cross-cutting and important ones in the context of this topic.

Genius and society: triumph and lack of recognition

The social dimension of genius and its recognition has its characteristics. Fiction writers characterize the phenomenon of genius from the point of view of society, the factors of recognition of genius, and its impact on the artist and his or her work.

In his novel *Self-Portrait from the Imagination* (1984), Volodymyr Yavorivskyi contemplates the genius of one of the most famous artists of the twentieth century, the Spanish painter Pablo Picasso. Shown in a parallel storyline to the Ukrainian self-taught artist Kateryna Bilokur, he is dependent on public opinion, when “in the morning the newspapers called him one of the greatest artists of the first half of the

28 V. Domontovych, “Samotnii mandrivnyk prostuiie po samotnii dorozii” [“A Lonely Traveler Walks a Lonely Road”], in *Spraha muzyky: vybrani roboty* [The Thirst for Music: Selected Works], ed. by Vira Aheieva (Kyiv: Komora, 2017), 334.

29 Ibid., 341.

twentieth century (unfortunately, he had to share the top with Charlie Chaplin), and in the evening – a talentless Spanish bullfighter who annoyed the public more than the bull, or a mediocre bird keeper whose pigeons, allegedly, covered the entire blessed Paris with droppings.”³⁰

The artist had to balance between public recognition of his genius and his own understanding of his purpose because “if he believed any of the two statements, he would cease to be Pablo Picasso”: “Eugène has often thought that the genius Pablo-Mephistopheles became perhaps the greatest artist of the 20th century (understandably so, after *Guernica*) due to one little thing: he cultivated a sense of complete independence and developed his sense of self-worth to the maximum.”³¹

Within the corpus of texts of Ukrainian literature, the issue of national genius is important: biographers and fiction writers reflect on the fact that genius represents not only a particular art but also a specific community, culture, and nation. We may trace a similar trend in Vasari’s text, which focuses on the artists of Florence.

Bohdan Horyn’s novel *The Anguish of Viktor Tsymbal* is about longing for “Great People,” the titans of the Renaissance, universal artists. “The lack of such People is the main cause of our misfortunes,” the artist believes.

He tried to understand why Renaissance-era artists could create masterpieces that modern artists could not. Analyzing the life and work of geniuses, he concluded that the main feature of their character was maximalism. Work beyond might, creativity beyond might, endurance beyond might, tasks, ideas beyond might, acquiring knowledge and skills – everything beyond might. Never stop, constantly test yourself in different areas and strive for perfection in everything. Nothing can be done in haste, not completely.³²

The author writes that after visiting the centers of Italian Renaissance culture, Venice and Rome, Viktor Tsymbal started thinking a lot about great artists, comparing the art of the past with the present, and concluded that “the twentieth century has diminished the requirements for a creative personality, teachers and customers push artists to be narrow specialists, while a creative person can express themselves in many areas, not just in one”:

Raphael was not only an easel and monumental painter but also an architect, and Michelangelo was a painter, sculptor,

30 Volodymyr Yavorivskyi, *Avtoportret z uiavy: roman pro trahichnu ta dyvovyzhnu doliu Kateryny Bilokur* [*Self-Portrait from the Imagination: A Novel about the Tragic and Marvellous Fate of Kateryna Bilokur*] (Kyiv: Bright Books, 2018), 38.

31 Ibid., 277.

32 Bohdan Horyn, *Tuha Viktora Tsymbala* [*The Anguish of Viktor Tsymbal*] (Kyiv: Pulsary, 2005), 102.

architect, and poet. Rubens worked in various genres of painting. He painted landscapes, portraits, still lives and works on mythological and religious themes. Goya's work is striking in its versatility. Which of the twentieth-century artists can compete with them? Minor artists have occupied the artistic stage. It is difficult to name artists who could be described in the same way as titans of the Renaissance: those are great People. To separate the outstanding People of different times from the small-time folk, we need to capitalize the letter "P."³³

Horyn concludes that there is a certain regularity in the emergence of genius in a people:

"There is a mysterious biological law of nature called the Law of Catching Up [La Ley de la Recupcracion]. It means that nature catches up to compensate for what it has lost. For example, after major wars, for some reason, more boys are born than girls. After every calamity, plague, or epidemic, humanity becomes stronger, healthier, more resilient... The soil becomes more fertile... More babies are born...

And then many talented people appear: writers, artists, scientists, politicians...

And then a people gives rise to geniuses."³⁴

In the duology *Love and Creativity of Sofiya Karaffa-Korbut* (2013–2015),³⁵ the author describes the genius of the graphic artist indirectly, via quotes from letters, notes, and other ego documents, notes of exhibition visitors or friends; calls the artist a genius who was destined to protect Ukrainian identity and depict other geniuses such as Taras Shevchenko, Lesya Ukrainka, and Ivan Franko.

Genius and a woman: the gender aspect

"There are women who are mad and there are women of talent: none of them has this madness in talent called genius," concludes the famous feminist activist Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*.³⁶ When discussing genius artists and genius in the history

33 Ibid., 99.

34 Ibid., 280.

35 See Bohdan Horyn, *Liubov i tvorchist Sofii Karaffy-Korbut* [*Love and Creativity of Sofiya Karaffa-Korbut*] (Lviv: Apriori, 2013–2015).

36 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 840.

of art, it is worth focusing on gender aspects. As far back as antiquity, people believed that Genius was the spirit accompanying a man, while Juno accompanied women.

Agata Tuszyńska utilizes this fact in her novel *The Fiancée of Bruno Schulz*, dedicated to the famous artist and writer Bruno Schulz, the “little genius of Drohobych,” and his fiancée Józefina Szelińska:

Józefina? It's the name of monarchs – rulers and schemers. He preferred to call her Juna, from Juno, a real divine goddess. She immediately noticed Genius, the partner of the mythical Juno, so everything was going well. She and He. Juno and Genius. Only occasionally did he relegate Juna to an ordinary Józia. And she would later dismiss him as Brun, a domestic bum and whiner, incapable of making any decisions.³⁷

Agata Tuszyńska seems to be turning the mirror inside out. Now, Juno is no longer the female counterpart of Genius but, conversely, “the mythical Genius” is “the male shadow of Juno.”³⁸

Gender discourse was actualized much later than Kantian philosophy emerged, reflecting social changes, especially the attitude towards women in art. “The very notion of genius is gendered, and thus defining it becomes a tautology: The Artistic Genius is male because men are most fit to be Artistic Geniuses,” Cody Delistraty writes in America's preeminent literary quarterly *The Paris Review*.³⁹ Many authors who wrote about female artists focused on the social contribution that such artists made by breaking social rules and prohibitions, emphasizing who she was as an author of paintings rather than the innovative things she introduced into painting. Fictionalized biographies are called to tell the story of a person, his or her path to art and the suffering of genius.

Mykhailo Slaboshpytskyi, who wrote Bashkirtseva's fictionalized biography, metaphorizes her genius through the image of wings, “obsession and spirituality became her wings,” wings that were not given to her by the mythical winged Genius or his counterpart Juno – she gained them, and they “raised Maria above the vanity of the world in which she was born and lived, and which tried its best to keep the girl within the orbit of its values. She got rid of its gravity and started rising to her zenith but never reached it.”⁴⁰ When writing about women's “inferiority,” S. de Beauvoir emphasizes that she means the position of women, not their mysterious nature, “Moreover, individuals who appear exceptional to us, the ones we honor with the name of genius, are those who tried to work out the fate of all humanity in their particular lives.”⁴¹

37 Agata Tuszyńska, *Naręczona Schulza* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2015), 18.

38 Ibid.

39 Cody Delistraty, “The Myth of the Artistic Genius,” in *The Paris Review*, Jan. 8, 2020. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/01/08/the-myth-of-the-artistic-genius/>.

40 Slaboshpytskyi, *Mariia Bashkirtseva*, 242.

41 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 845.

Contemporary fiction about artists has brought to the forefront the topic of biographies of extraordinary females, who are also often called geniuses. In Ukrainian art, in particular, these are Kateryna Bilokur and Maria Prymachenko, whose artistic talent made it possible to break the stereotypes of female artists in the patriarchal world. Furthermore, this is also where genius manifests itself – in daring to change the order of things.

The frenzied genius: genius, demon, obsession

From the ancient understanding of genius as a spirit (demon) that accompanies an artist and up until the most recent research on the link between genius and mental disorders, we observe an overarching desire to explain the creative nature of those who produce something unique, inexplicable, impossible to replicate by a regular mercenary. Kant's idea of the difference between art and craft is presented in the comment below:

Art is likewise distinguished from craft. The first is also called free art; the second could also be called mercenary art. We regard free art [as an art] that could only turn out purposive (i.e., succeed) if it is a play, in other words, an occupation that is agreeable on its own account; mercenary art we regard as labour, i.e., as an occupation that on its own account is disagreeable (burdensome) and that attracts us only through its effect (e. g., pay), so that people can be coerced into it.⁴²

Kant defines art as something free, unlike craft, which is commissioned work; art is not nature as it is the product of one's originality; it is not the result of scientific work as it cannot be replicated if one follows a set of specific rules.

The iconography of genius, just like mythological and philosophical interpretations of artistic texts, confirms the shared nature of the spiritual origin of genius and demon.

Namely, Angela Voss speaks of divine frenzy in Antique philosophy:

It was Plato who established the spiritual potential of the “frenzied” condition, in suggesting that in such an altered state of consciousness, it was possible to become a channel for the influx of divine knowledge. Through the observation of four contexts in which such madness manifested – religious ritual, poetic inspiration, erotic love, and prophetic utterance – he transformed a pathology into a “gift of heaven” as it enabled the individual to transcend the human condition and lift his

42 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 171.

or her mind to the level of the gods – in effect, to “realise” their innate divine nature. The Platonists insisted on the distinction between this ‘divine-sent’ madness, which led to inspiration or ecstasy, and the derangement of mental faculties, which was of purely human physiological or psychological origins and led to insanity. The near-identity of the words *make* (madness) and *manlike* (prophetic divination) proved, for Plato, their common etymological origins and, therefore, the essential Moreover, a prerequisite condition for both foresight and artistic genius, which could never be derived from merely human talents: But he who, having no touch of the Muses’ madness in his soul, comes to the door and thinks that he will get into the temple by the help of art – he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted; the sane man disappears and is nowhere when he enters into a rivalry with the madman.⁴³

The characterization of artists as other, unique, different from ordinary people, endowed with specific supernatural abilities or characteristics is described differently in different cultures and eras.

In the novel about Bashkirtseva, emphasizing the artist’s uniqueness, M. Slaboshpytskyi notes:

By publishing more and more excerpts from Maria’s journal, her mother skilfully stirred up interest in her daughter’s name. It was no longer difficult to do so because supporters of the theories of Guyot, Mantegazza, Lombroso, Nordau, Galton, and Ribot began to write about Bashkirtseva. Such quasi-scientific doctrines imported from other countries were abundant in Russia then. Genius as an anomaly. The psychophysiology of genius. Genius as a sign of insanity. Norm and abnormality of women. The driving force of egotism in creativity. Creativity as a manifestation of human complexes. Eugenics, graphology, astrology, phrenology, parapsychology – there were so many.⁴⁴

M. Slaboshpytskyi compares Bashkirtseva’s sensational journal, published in the second half of 19th century to the diary of the “frenzied genius” Salvador Dali, published in the second half of 20th century, “This book will prove that the everyday life of a

43 Angela Voss, “‘The Power of a Melancholy Humour’: Divination and Divine Tears,” in *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays in Astrology and Divination*, ed. by Patrick Curry and Angela Voss (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 151.

44 Slaboshpytskyi, *Mariia Bashkyrtseva*, 255.

genius, his sleep, his digestion, his ecstasies, his nails, his colds, his blood, his life and his death are essentially different from those of the rest of mankind. This unique book is thus the first diary written by a genius...”⁴⁵

In fictionalized biographies, genius is often characterized through the categories of demonic, metaphysical, and supernatural: Yavorivskyi calls the genius Picasso “Pablo-Mephistopheles,” hinting at the demonic nature of talent; Bilokur is dubbed as obsessed Kateryna, out of this world; in Bashkirtseva’s *Journal* geniuses are those endowed with the divine spark, the spirit of genius. The most frequent characteristic of artists’ genius in fictionalized biographies is obsession (Ohanesyan and Chip about Vrubel, Domontovych about van Gogh, Le Clézio about Diego Rivera, etc.)

A demonic trace appears in Domontovych’s story about van Gogh, and a puzzling inscription on the wall reads, “Je suis Saint-Esprit Je suis sain d’Esprit.” Staggered at the absurd inscription, Paul Gauguin asks himself, “Why did Vincent need to write this on the wall of his room?”, “What misfortunes should this inscription protect him from?” and “What good demons could be summoned by this magic spell to help him”? V. Domontovych writes,

“I am the Holy Spirit. My mind is healthy.” What a strange inscription! Perhaps a joke, perhaps a spell! What demons will this magical formula, both timid and manic, protect against? Is it “mania grandiosa” manifested in the desire to assert one’s identity with the Holy Spirit, or is it fearful and wants to protect itself from the onset of a disease that threatens him? What does this inscription mean?

Only this bizarre inscription and the citrine color of the house indicate that the house is inhabited not just by a poor man, an ordinary beggar, but by a heroic fantasist, a man of delusional dreams, of an isolated calling and his own destiny, to which he sacrificed not only himself but the entire world around him.⁴⁶

In the context of the present study, it is essential to pay attention to attempts at describing genius and the altered state of consciousness of genius in the biographies of artists. Fiction writers showcase the nature of genius in the act of creation; the genre of a novel or other work of fiction makes it possible to describe an artist at work, to show the very process of inception and birth of an idea, to depict an artist while painting or engaged in another act of creation.

“Madness/insanity,” according to the *European Dictionary of Philosophies: Lexicon of Untranslatables*, along with a negative meaning have a positive one, which treats madness “as a distinct entity subject to the highest valuations: thus, the Greek *mania* or, in another register, Latin *furor*, which indicate exceptional states. There

45 Ibid., 256.

46 Domontovych, “Samotniy mandrivnyk,” 377.

persists in literary modernity in the ideas of inspiration, enthusiasm, and genius, as well as *Schwärmerei*, the extravagance in terms of which Immanuel Kant characterises both the madness of Emanuel Swedenborg and that of dogmatic idealism.⁴⁷

Genius and heredity in fictionalized biographies

Where do geniuses come from, is genius an inherent trait – these are some of the questions often asked by scientists, philosophers, and writers about genius artists. The idea of a link between genius and heredity is a point discussed in many scholarly and philosophical studies, as well as fictionalized biographies.

These are some of the thoughts expressed in this regard by art critic Bohdan Horyn, author of the fictionalized biographical work about Viktor Tsymbal:

What do parents pass on to their children through the genetic code? Facial features? Character? Abilities? When we ask these questions, we subconsciously think about the things that Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko, and other brilliant personalities inherited from parents who did not stand out among thousands and millions of other ordinary, unremarkable people. On the other hand, let us take Lesya Ukrainka. Her mother's, the poetess Olena Pchilka's, influence on her creative development was so significant that genius Lesya recalled it throughout her entire life.

Having analyzed hundreds of examples, we conclude that in each particular case a unique combination of factors influences the development of a creative personality. <...> This includes the natural abilities of his parents, their occupation, the moral climate in the family, joyful experiences, and dramatic situations that left a mark on his soul.

Based on the achievements of experimental psychology, scientists have concluded that everything that a person has ever seen, heard, and felt through the tactile senses, everything they have read does not disappear from memory but lives in a person forever, becomes a part of their soul, an essential factor in the formation of the spiritual world. That is why when unravelling the creative personality, there is no secondary information; everything is important ...⁴⁸

47 *Yevropeiskyi slovnyk filosofii: leksykon neperekladnostei [European Dictionary of Philosophies: Lexicon of Untranslatables]*, vol. 1 (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2009), 534.

48 Horyn, *Tuha Viktora Tsymbala*, 17.

Jacek Dehnel, Polish writer and artist, author of the personal life of the Great Spanish painter Francisco Goya, his son Javier and his grandson Mariano, also expresses some ideas on the genius inherited by the descendants of artists:

Children are said to be more like their grandparents than parents; hasn't the thing that women have always liked in me been passed down from Francisco de Goya himself? The elegance, the inner strength, the radiance of ancient gentility intensified by the sparkle of genius! And this is what my son would inherit from the grand grandfather.⁴⁹

The aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime

“Fine art would seem to require *imagination, understanding, spirit, and taste*,” Kant writes.⁵⁰ Kant's aesthetics in *Critique of Judgment* is focused on the categories of the beautiful and the sublime. The philosopher uses arguments to explain the essence of art, the nature of beauty and its perception, and, hence, the concept of taste.

While musing over the notion of the beautiful, which has fascinated philosophers since antiquity, Kant uses the following premise, “This is also why, concerning the beautiful in nature, we can raise all sorts of questions about what causes this purposiveness in nature's forms, e.g., how are we to explain why nature has so extravagantly spread beauty everywhere, even at the bottom of the ocean, where the human eye (for which, after all, this beauty is alone purposive) rarely penetrates? – and so on.”⁵¹

Ukrainian-American artist and writer Jacques Hnizdovsky endowed art with extraordinary power, “Art wakes up things that are dormant, infusing them with life, and they start to exist for us. This is the greatest mystery of art,” he wrote in the essay “Awakened Princess.”⁵²

“A natural beauty is a *beautiful thing*; artistic beauty is a *beautiful presentation of a thing*,” Kant writes in *Critique of Judgment*,⁵³ “if someone is directly interested in the beauty of nature, we have cause to suppose that he has at least a predisposition to a good moral attitude.”⁵⁴

Kant explains the nature of influence on judgments about the beautiful that other people and their public opinion have. “To make other people's judgments the

49 Jacek Dehnel, *Saturn: czarne obrazy z życia mężczyzn z rodziny Goya* (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2011), 149.

50 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 189.

51 Ibid., 167.

52 Jacques Hnizdovsky, “Probudzhena tsarivna” [“Awakened Princess”], in J. Hnizdovsky, *Maliunky. Hrafika. Keramika. Statti* [Painting. Graphics. Ceramics. Articles] (New York: Proloh, 1967), 75–6.

53 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 179.

54 Ibid., 167.

basis determining one's own would be heteronomy," Kant says, and "taste lays claim merely to autonomy."⁵⁵ The philosopher argues that an artist can abandon their previous judgment "when his power of judgment has been sharpened by practice" or "will he voluntarily depart from his earlier judgment, just as he does with those of his judgments which rest wholly on reason."⁵⁶

Kant says that judgment about taste is always a single judgment about an object. In contrast, "the understanding can, by comparing the object with other people's judgment about their liking of it, make a universal judgment."⁵⁷

Taste, like the power of judgment in general, consists in disciplining (or training) genius. It severely clips its wings and makes it civilised or polished, but at the same time, it guides it on how far and over what it may spread while still remaining purposive. It introduces clarity and order into a wealth of thought, and hence makes the ideas durable, fit for approval that is both lasting and universal, and [hence I fit for being followed by others and fit for an ever-advancing culture. Therefore, if there is a conflict between these two properties in a product. and something has to be sacrificed, then it should rather be on the side of genius; and judgment, which in matters [*Sac hen*] of fine art bases its pronouncements on principles of its own, will sooner permit the imagination's freedom and wealth to be impaired than that the understanding be impaired.⁵⁸

On December 23, 1883, Mariia Bashkirtseva wrote in her diary that true artists could never be happy because they were conscious that the majority would not understand them. They knew they were working for some hundred people as all the others followed their bad taste and ignorance regarding art. According to the young artist, it was a frightful phenomenon among all classes of society.⁵⁹

An artist and genius: the interartistic interaction of image representation

While analyzing the nature of genius in fiction about artists from an intermediate perspective, it is worth briefly mentioning the visualization of genius in art. How does an artist portray a genius, and what is the visualization of the spirit of genius in artistic

55 Ibid., 145–6.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 148.

58 Ibid., 188–9.

59 [Bashkirtseff], *The Journal*, 644.

works? Iconography and the cult of genius originated in the ancient world, starting from the depiction of vases and ancient drawings of the winged genius of Roman mythology, which was transformed into other winged creatures in later images. Iconographic material is one of the sources of biographical works, an object of description, comprehension, and reflection; it directly or indirectly influences the reception of the image of a genius or the concept of genius. For example, one of the most enigmatic graphic works by Albrecht Dürer, dated 1514, is the allegory *Melencolia I*, which, according to many researchers⁶⁰ depicts genius as a winged woman and undermines many earlier ideas about the visual image of genius or its characteristics, and encourages immersion in the context of Dürer's era, the imagery of that time and the philosophy of mysticism, a thorough analysis of Cornelius Agrippa's treatise and the influence of Saturn on artists, or a turn to ancient Greek treatises which interpreted melancholy as a sign of genius.

Allegorical images often demonstrate the artist's idea of perfection in art, as in the works of the Florentine Baroque artist Livio Mehus, whose *The Genius of Painting* (c. 1650) depicts a little genius in a wreath while painting on an easel with a palette and a brush in his hands, and next to him is a self-portrait of the artist. Another painting, *The Genius of Sculpture* (c. 1650), shows a self-portrait with a genius and a sculpture. Francois Boucher depicted numerous tiny, winged, chubby geniuses of various arts in his *Geniuses of Arts* (1761) and *Allegory of Painting* (1765). *The Genius of Painting* (1886) by the English sculptor Alfred Drury is a self-portrait of Rubens, symbolizing his influence on the development of the arts.

While Kant refers to genius as a creative and artistic characteristic, even refusing to attribute it to scientists, artists themselves may see genius in a broader sense. For instance, the eighteenth-century etching *To the Genius of Franklin* by Fragonard and Gérard depicts an allegorical portrait of Franklin that symbolizes his political role in the history of American independence. The study of iconography attests to the transformation of the image from the visualization of the image of genius and the winged genius accompanying the artist to the visual comprehension of the very concept of genius artist or genius, as seen in Paul Klee's *Ghost of a Genius* (1922) or René Magritte's *The Face of Genius* (1926).

We often come across genius in memorial compositions, namely monuments, e.g., Antoni Popiel's monument to Adam Mickiewicz in Lviv, where the column holds a figure of a winged Genius handing a lyre to the poet. The memorial image of genius is included in Slaboshpytskyi's novel about Bashkirtseva in an intermedial way: by appealing to the romanticized biography of Baskhirtseva by M. Gerro (1905), Slaboshpytskyi mentions the *Immortality* monument by Léon-Eugène Longepied from Musee du Luxembourg in Paris:

60 Angela Voss, "The Power of a Melancholy Humour," 158; see also: Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, & Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (McGill-Queen's Press, 2019).

It depicts a young genius dying at the feet of the angel of death, who holds a tablet with a list of names of great people who have prematurely left this world but have already achieved immortality on earth. The genius's eyes are fixed on the list. Moreover, among the eight French names, there is one Russian female name: Maria Bashkirtseva.⁶¹

Introducing a visual image of genius to the discourse of genius and its intertextual referencing in the text allows for a more comprehensive understanding of genius in art and worldview.

Conclusion

The study of fictionalized biographies of artists confirms significant overlaps with the ideas of Kantian aesthetics, particularly those expressed in *Critique of Judgment*. Kant's *Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments* highlights essential questions asked by authors of fictionalized biographies and the artists themselves, as seen from ego documents. The key topics that align pertain to the notions of taste, the influence of public tastes on the perception of the beautiful, and the questions of the aesthetics of the beautiful. According to Kant, art requires the free spirit of genius. Thus, literary works about artists naturally use different methods to raise the question of the genius of characters-artists and analyze the nature of genius, its uniqueness, manifestations, and heredity.

In general, the theory of genius developed by the representative of German idealism, which emerged on the grounds of a new understanding of the nature of a human being and was perceived as the Copernican Revolution of its time, was widely known in art and literary critic circles of later periods and found its reflection in biographies and fictionalized biographies of artists.

Fiction about artists is quite a new literary genre, with its history belonging to modern literature of the previous century. Consequently, it relies on a developed and understood concept of genius, a synthesis of many cultures' genius theories. Researchers expressly point to the fact that Kant synthesized different European concepts of genius. The reception of Kant's concept of genius finds its reflection in fiction about artists. Research shows that for writers and authors of fiction, as well as artists who reimagined the nature of their creativity, Kant's theory is a starting point in working out the key concepts of aesthetics: ideas about art, the beautiful, and the nature of genius, while for researchers of fictionalized biographies as well as biographical fiction about artists Kant's concept offers a key to interpretation, guides the research methodology, and draws focus to the theory of the beautiful as a product of genius.

61 Slaboshpytskyi, *Mariia Bashkirtseva*, 249.

While Kant's philosophy is focused on works of art, fictionalized biographies showcase an artist's personality. The present research shows that in order to perceive the nature of genius, an author of a biographical text must put in the intellectual effort, as it is a complicated and multifaceted task which requires profound philosophical examination, anthropological analysis and the talent to comprehend the spirit of genius of an artist and to reveal all of the above in a convincing way within the literary text.

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