

R E V I E W

From

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NEW BULGARIAN UNIVERSITY

Department Cinema, Advertising and show business

for the defence of the doctoral dissertation of

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PhD student in the self-preparation doctoral program, expelled with the right to defend at NBU, Department of Fine Arts, doctoral programme “Visual and Plastic Arts”, professional field 8.2. Fine Arts, scientific specialty "Visual and Plastic Arts" for the acquisition of educational and scientific degree “PhD”.

Thesis topic:

**“THE SYMBOLS IN TAROT CARDS AND THEIR TRANSFORMATION IN
CONTEMPORARY ART”**

Scientific supervisor:

assoc. prof. Kalina Hristova, PhD

The submitted dissertation contains 229 pages of main text, 11 pages of bibliography, an appendix with illustrations of 132 pages, as well as a list of publications on the topic, a list of figures and an abstract. The text is composed in an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, appendices, and scientific contributions.

Relevance and importance of the research problem

As the PhD student notes in his introduction, Tarot cards are rather classified as popular culture and are considered unsuitable as an object of scientific study. The consequence of this perception is the limited number of studies related to them, making the presented dissertation timely and filling a significant gap in research on the topic.

The object and subject of the study

The study traces the history and transformations of Tarot cards from their appearance in antiquity to the present day. It is an ambitious and extensive study that has the potential to be further developed and enriched in the future. The transformations that the cards have undergone reflect the influences of various social, historical and cultural factors that have shaped their form, function and uses. The different aspects of the topic, its scale and scope justify the choice of an interdisciplinary approach to the development.

Originality of the study

An additional difficulty and challenge is the paucity of theoretical information on the topic, especially in the context of the Bulgarian scientific field. Saraliiski's study is the first to examine the topic through the prism of psychological, social, historical and art historical aspects of Tarot.

Task and objectives of the study

The aims and objectives of the present study are clearly stated : “to contribute to the formation of a comprehensive cultural history of the Tarot, to explore the visual changes that the deck has undergone over the centuries and to trace the symbols in its images”.

The stated task of comparing key decks from the development of the Tarot is ambitious and its execution is impressive for the volume of material that has been collected and analysed. The author of the thesis has also managed to implement his own version of a deck of cards using artificial intelligence, which has linked the ancient tradition with the modern technological realities of creativity.

Degree of knowledge of the state of the problem and consistency of the literature used

The PhD student has made a commendable effort to familiarize himself with the theoretical studies of foreign authors, but the Bulgarian context of his topic is not covered. My recommendation is that future editing and enrichment of the study should take into account the Tarot decks painted by Bulgarian artists such as Atanas Atanasov, Yassen Gyuzelev, My Grace and others. Also, the work would only benefit from a future chapter on the influence on Tarot cards of the styles of famous artists - there are already realized decks in the style of

Leonardo da Vinci, Hieronymous Bosch, Dürer, Frida Kahlo and others, including those created by Bulgarian artists.

Availability of a substantiated and developed theoretical model of the study

In spite of the clearly articulated main theme of the study, at times the presentation is scattered and loses focus due to insufficient articulation of the conceptual framework and rationale for why these examples were chosen and what the criteria are against which they are compared.

Relevance of the chosen methodology to the aim and objectives of the thesis

The historical analysis of the visual and symbolic transformations of the Tarot cards is set out clearly and with ample evidence. The dissertation would sound much more convincing if the author's personal view and position on the issues at hand were expressed even more explicitly.

Availability of own input in the collection and analysis of empirical data

The personal contribution of Ivaylo Saraliyski in terms of researching and composing the intended material on the subject is undeniable.

Correctness in citing a representative number of authors

The condition of a representative number of authors is fulfilled with one qualifying remark - in some places in the text the references are given as an announcement or retelling of the authors, rather than with exact quotations and page references from the respective works. It is noticeable that the same author is referred to repeatedly, albeit to different works of his - Dummett appears in the bibliography with 4 of his works. Beyond this circumstance, the sources cited satisfy academic requirements.

Characteristics of the scientific work

The first chapter is historiographical and presents the history of Tarot cards and their evolution. The chapter is divided into seven parts, each devoted to a different period. The first part deals with the different versions of the origin of the cards before their appearance in Europe: ancient Egypt, China, the Middle East. The author examines Decker and Dummett's thesis that ordinary playing cards had their origins in the Tarot, but that their symbolism was

simplified. He also presents the opposing thesis that the ordinary deck appeared before the Tarot cards.

The second part deals with the documentary evidence for the presence of Tarot cards in Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The next third part is devoted to the history of cards during the Italian Renaissance and the connection with the Visconti-Sforza family. The influence of the cultural context of the period on the symbolism of the maps is convincingly pointed out. This relationship is defined by the importance of religion and the church, ideas of death and eternal life, etc. At the same time, there is a correlation between the symbolism and the life stages, history and rule of the Visconti-Sforza family.

The fourth part of the history of cards moved from Italy during the Renaissance to France in the nineteenth century. The socio-cultural conditions in this stage were determined by the changing positions of Christianity and the focus on esotericism and other religions. The symbolism of the cards is associated with the ideas of the Jewish Kabbalah. This period also saw another fundamental change in the history of the cards - the shift from handmade to mass production using the printing press. This transition deserves further consideration in a possible future revision of the present study. The dissertation succeeds in conveying the changing ideological climate of the era - the dominance of rationalism and the reaction against it, which was expressed in the attraction to the occult.

The fifth part is devoted to the activities and influence of Spiritualism, the Theosophical Society and Martinism. The occult Tarot created by Antoine de Gebelin sets the stage for the relationship between the cards and the occult beliefs of all that followed ages, and the final transformation of the cards into a ritual and magical element. Associated with this are the names of the Comte de Méliès, Jean-Baptiste Alliéth-Eteila and Eliphas Levi.

The subject of the sixth part is the influence of the Tarot cards in England, associated with the activities of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, William Wescot, George Jones and Aleister Crowley. It was Crowley who created one of the most famous decks of Tarot cards to

this day. Another prominent member of the order was Arthur White, associated with the Golden Dawn deck of cards, which is perhaps the most widely distributed worldwide to this day. The text also devotes space to the development of occult practices in American culture in the 18th century - the decks of Charles Jones, Israel Regardi and Paul Case are mentioned.

The seventh part has to do with the blending of Eastern and Western, old and new beliefs in the New Age movement. This is a twentieth century movement that is making the transition to today's technological age. Tarot cards are a field for visual experimentation incorporating images and symbols from both classic art and popular culture.

Chapter two is analytical and makes interesting comparisons between image and text, and their interactions in the use of Tarot cards. The connection of the symbolism of the Tarot cards with Jung's teachings on archetypes and the collective unconscious is an original and contributory point. The psychoanalytic view of the translation of abstract symbols into concrete meanings through language enriches the understanding of the cards and their changed function today as a means of self-knowledge. The first part of chapter two presents a comparative analysis of the symbols of the Major Arcana cards, and their interpretations in different decks.

The second part of the second chapter is devoted to the iconography of the Minor Arcana - the symbolism of the colours and their relationship to each other, as well as their meanings that link them to the astrological symbolism of the planets and the building elements of nature water, earth, air, fire, respectively depicted as cups, coins, swords and staffs (referred to by the dissertation as "sticks").

The third chapter of the dissertation transfers us to the present day, when man no longer holds the monopoly on creativity and creation, but shares it with artificial intelligence. Specifically, it is about the use of the image generation program MidJourney, by mixing specific or random images taken from the Internet. The second part of chapter three discusses digitising of Tarot cards using the artificial intelligence programs MidJourney and Dall-E, which use language models at work and convert language assignments and key phrases into images. In Ivaylo Saraliiski's practical project, the images used are pre-selected

and subordinated to a specific concept. The result of this experiment is the LET THERE BE cycle, which creates three collages united around basic elements of representational practices - light in LET THERE BE LIGHT, colour in LET THERE BE COLOR and form in LET THERE BE FORM.

The thesis abstract was prepared in accordance with the requirements of the regulations of the HEI. The information in it is presented correctly and understandably, and gives a good overview of the dissertation. The abstract presents all the chapters and points of the study, as well as the conclusions drawn and contributions made.

The scientific publications that are presented as approbation of the scientific work are four in number and prove the in-depth work of the doctoral student on the presented topic.

Scientific contributions of the dissertation

1. This work is the first study in Bulgaria on the evolution of Tarot cards and their transformation into contemporary art.
2. The thesis on the evolution of Tarot as a series of transformations and adaptations following the development of the socio-cultural environment is justified. The comparison of different decks from different epochs made for the first time in Bulgarian literature proves the connection of Tarot and art through the centuries.
3. The contribution of the dissertation is the use of a multidisciplinary approach that includes information and views from history, sociology, cultural studies, psychoanalysis and other sciences.
4. A practical contribution to the above theoretical results is the creation with the help of artificial intelligence of three Tarot decks united in a common author cycle. This is also a first of its kind attempt in Bulgaria.

Conclusion

I would recommend more attention to formatting and layout - such attention is a must for a

professional dealing with aesthetics and art. Content recommendations are listed in the individual sections above. The work presented here demonstrates in a definitive way the effort applied by the PhD student in the development of his research, which proves competence and analytical skills in the selection and conceptualisation of the rich evidence. On the basis of the aforementioned merits and points of contribution, I give a positive evaluation to the dissertation and propose that Ivaylo Emil Saraliiski be awarded the degree of Doctor of Education and Science in the 8.2 Fine Arts, Visual and Plastic Arts.

Sofia, 01.11.2023

Assoc. Prof. Chavdar Guyzelev, PhD