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**THE FANTASTIC AS THE UNCONCEALMENT
OF TRUTH IN DEBORA VOGEL'S WORK**

Abstract

This essay examines the notion of the fantastic in Debora Vogel's work. I argue that the fantastic for Vogel is simultaneously a novel artistic form and a form of life, as well as a singular use of language; it is both a "trait" of modernity and thinking of modernity. The fantastic is analyzed as a key term in the author's understanding of modern design of space and objects through discussions of "Dwelling in its Psychic and Social Function" (1932), the critic's essay on lived space. I demonstrate that Vogel's reflections and theorizing of the fantastic are not necessarily aimed at the development of pure theory and concepts but rather at the performance of the fantastic in the author's own theory-praxis through the lens of Vogel's essay on poetics, "White Words in Poetry" (1930). The essay discusses various types of the fantastic which finds itself between matter-of-factness and phantasm: the fantastic of ingenuity, the fantastic of asymmetry, the fantastic of color, and the fantastic of simplicity. All of these different types set forth the unconcealment of truth.

Keywords

the fantastic, ingenuity, matter-of-factness, phantasm, simplicity, modernity, design, poetry

*The colors are layered with long, outstretched strokes;
this technique of painting reminds of Van Gogh's tragic line,
and yet it is also strangely fantastical.¹*

Gradually, boredom can be a style. This means that the form combinations of a certain kind are exhausted. The forms may become exhausted like things and events. Then they are transformed into the gray surfaces which have lost their contours and their colorfulness and fantasticality.²

¹ Debora Vogel, "Maks Feyering," *Tsushstayr*, no. 2, 1930: 57–58.

² Debora Vogel, preface to *Day Figures*, quoted after *Blooming Spaces: The Collected Poetry, Prose, Critical Writing, and Letters of Debora Vogel*, translated and edited by Anastasiya Lyubas (Boston, Massachusetts: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 123.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this essay is the notion of the fantastic in Debora Vogel's work. For Vogel, the fantastic is encapsulated in the line – in art, philosophical thought, and, above all, in writing. Two epigraphs, one from an essay dedicated to a Polish-Jewish artist Maximilian Feuerring (1896–1985) and another from Debora Vogel's first poetry collection *Day Figures*, both published in the same year (1930) demonstrate the author's thinking about the relationship between the fantastic and the line. The fantasticality of Feuerring's painting – known for its tendency of dwelling on the limit between the known and the unknown and shaped and unshaped – arises out of the layering of colors and strokes. New forms in Vogel's own writing originate in the boredom of old form combinations which had been once imbued with color and fantasticality and subsequently became exhausted. Their grayness and exhaustion shapes the outlines of Vogel's writing style, of novel colorful fantasticality out of the dated, unexciting one.

Beyond the above example of an essay about Feuerring, Vogel discusses line and color in the work by other artists: Marek Włodarski (Henryk Streng),³ Leopold Pilichowski,⁴ and Marc Chagall.⁵ Streng's lyrical Constructivist style emerges from the artist's use of color framed by "hard contours."⁶ Likewise, the "movement of the line and color intensity" in Leopold Pilichowski's work is intertwined with the painter's Polish-Jewish cultural identity.⁷ Finally, Marc Chagall's "uneven, broken, and indecisive-schematic contour" reveals the fantasticality of the new type of ornament by abolishing the "conventional balance of vertical and horizontal strokes."⁸ In all cases, use of line in artworks reveals not only the truth about the painters' artistic methods and their modernity but also uncovers the truth about existence. By fantasticality, Debora Vogel means poetic – not in the sense of poetry but in the sense of poesis – unconcealment of the truth.

³ Debora Vogel, "Henryk Streng – malarz konstruktywizmu," *Nasza Opinia*, no. 96, 1937: 6.

⁴ Debora Vogel, „Leopold Pilichowski,” *Opinia*, no. 29, 1933.

⁵ See part one: Debora Vogel, "Teme un forem in der kunst fun shagal. Pruv fun estetisher kritik," *Tsushtayer*, no. 1, 1929: 21–26; part two: "Teme un forem in der kunst fun shagal. Pruv fun estetisher kritik," *Tsushtayer*, no. 2, 1930: 19–24.

⁶ See Debora Vogel, "Henryk Streng, a Constructivist Painter," in *Blooming Spaces*, 72.

⁷ See Karolina Szymaniak's discussion of Vogel's essay on Leopold Pilichowski in *Montaże. Debora Vogel i nowa legenda miasta*, ed. Andrij Bojarov, Paweł Polit, Karolina Szymaniak (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2017).

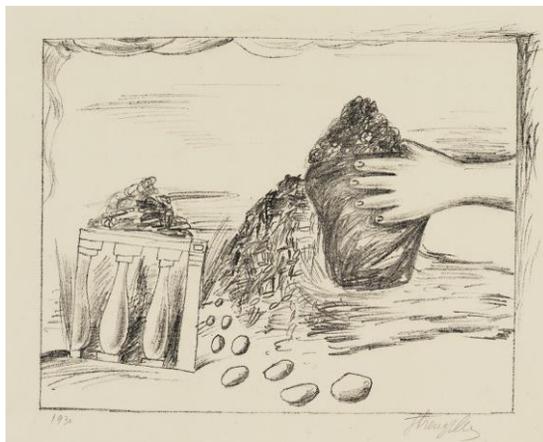
⁸ See Debora Vogel, "Theme and Form in Chagall's Art: An Aesthetic Critique," in *Blooming Spaces*, 47.



Il. 1. Henryk Streg (Marek Włodarski), *Ryby i portret*, 1930, olej, płótno, 65 x 82 cm, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi.



Il. 2. Henryk Streg (Marek Włodarski), *Rysunek z kapeluszami*, 1930, ołówek, kredka, gwasz, papier, 26,5 x 19,5 cm, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi.



Il. 3. Henryk Streg (Marek Włodarski), *Sen*, 1930, farba graficzna, papier, 24 x 30 cm, I TeKa Graficzna Zrzeszenia Artystów Plastyków Artes, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi.

In her essay “The Legend of Modernity in Children’s Literature,”⁹ Vogel suggests that the fantastic, or the new legend of the modern city does not require embellishments; rather, it is streamlined. The new fantastic does not require anything from the realm of “fantasy.”¹⁰ In Vogel’s view, this is what the Polish author Ewa Szelburg had captured in children’s literature. When discussing the Austrian writer Rudolf Brunngraber and his work, Debora Vogel invokes the fantastic of “matter-of-fact dates and facts” which seems to stand at a contrast with the fantastic of “dreams and the colorfulness of human fate.”¹¹ Brunngraber’s sober fantastic of “banal gestures and numbers” forms a type of literary ornament akin to fantastical ornament which Vogel discussed in the work of visual artists such as Marc Chagall.

As is evident from the examples above, the fantastic for Vogel is simultaneously a novel artistic form and form of life, as well as a singular use of language; it is both a “trait” of modernity and thinking of modernity. In the passages that follow I will analyze the fantastic as a key term in Vogel’s understanding of modern forms of life, including modern design of space and objects, by discussing “Dwelling in its Psychic and Social Function” (1932) the critic’s essay on lived space.¹² I also aim to show how Debora Vogel’s reflections and theorizing of the fantastic are not necessarily aimed at the development of pure theory and concepts but rather at performance of the fantastic in writing – in the works by other writers and in author’s own theory-praxis. This will be discussed through the lens of Vogel’s essay on poetics, “White Words in Poetry” (1930).

THE FANTASTIC BETWEEN MATTER-OF-FACTNESS AND PHANTASM: DEBORA VOGEL’S ESSAY ON DWELLING

Debora Vogel traces the fantastic in design of the modern dwelling and its linear simplicity in her 1932 essay “The Dwelling in its Psychic and Social Functions.” In order to examine psychology, sociology, and the aesthetic of dwelling in modernity, the author discusses the prehistoric origins of shelter: as a defense against frost, heat, precipitation, in short, as “the struggle against the element.”¹³ In her view, dwelling stands guard against the menacing infinity of space which

⁹ Debora Vogel, *Legenda Współczesności w Literaturze Dziecięcej. Fragmenty*, in *Montaże*, 405–410.

¹⁰ See Debora Vogel, “The Legend of Contemporaneity in Children’s Literature,” in *Blooming Spaces*, 86.

¹¹ See Debora Vogel, “The Romance of Dialectics,” in *Blooming Spaces*, 27.

¹² Debora Vogel, “Mieszkanie w swej funkcji psychicznej i społecznej,” *Przegląd Społeczny*, no. 8–9, 1932: 208–217. Reprinted in *Montaże*, 291–300.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 293.

otherwise leads to human exhaustion. Therefore, dwelling's primal psychic function is its quality of being a limit, of shaping the chaotic emptiness and infinity of space.

The modern modification of the psychic function of dwelling entails defense against outward mechanization of urban life that leads to alienation – a modern form of exhaustion. Similar to the way dwelling once withstood the storm, it now defies modern tempo and mechanization. Dwelling in modernity allows its inhabitant to follow her “individual rhythm,” the biological rhythm of movements and actions of inhabiting the space. Ideally, individual dwelling harmonizes with the rhythm of social being rather than disconnecting from it. The dwelling's social function emerges from its psychological one. It condenses space and provides structure to psychic events by allowing its inhabitant to find equilibrium amidst the jarring rhythm of “cells” found in large cities – streets, factories, workshops.

Dwelling shapes the dweller through style, “the general line of direction of a given era” – from the Gothic and Rococo to modern geometricism. Each of these styles made use of the line, its straight and curved varieties, in order to form distinctive shapes of artifacts. Observing modern tendencies in visual and applied arts, Debora Vogel remarked that “simplification of form becomes a cool geometrical line.”¹⁴ Symptomatic of the novel form-searching, aesthetic of the geometrical line has implications for colors of walls and surfaces (preference for monochrome colors and “pathos of the white wall”)¹⁵ and choice of materials for objects and interiors (steel and glass which are, for example, favored over wood).

Vogel reconciles the tendency towards the geometrical line's “coolness” and monotony with an equally important principle, the “longing for the fantastic,”¹⁶ or the need for “colorfulness,”¹⁷ multiplicity, and negation of monotony. For Vogel, the geometrical line is not at odds with the fantastic. Rather, it becomes the “new” fantastic, the fantastic of simplicity. The new fantastic is of two kinds: “the fantastic of ingenuity”¹⁸ and “the fantastic of asymmetry.”¹⁹ The former means construction of the object's “soul” and the latter signifies a rhythmic totality of geometrical shapes in asymmetrical combinations (not to be confused with the stuffy fantastic of the arrhythmia).²⁰ The old-fashioned dwelling may be full of symmetrical groupings of objects, every free inch of space filled with objects without a plan. This stands at a stark contrast with the character of the

¹⁴ See Debora Vogel, “The Dwelling in Its Psychic and Social Functions,” in *Blooming Spaces*, 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

modern dwelling, “the spacious matter-of-fact grouping of things, the horizontal line, and the fantastic of asymmetry.”²¹ The asymmetry emerges out of the arrangement of objects rather than individual objects themselves. As Vogel explains:

the character of the dwelling is like a human facial expression which cannot be reduced to the structure and actions of its separate elements – the nose, lips, eyes, the forehead, since these may be shared by a few different individuals – rather, this character is in a conceptually elusive relation, arrangement, composition.²²

Aside from drawing an analogy to physiognomics, Vogel mentions asymmetry in painting – “various rhythmic tensions,” or “contents of the rhythm.”²³

Similar to the asymmetrical groupings which produce vibrations of the fantastic in modern style of the interior, the matter-of-factness of things creates another type of the fantastic, that of ingenuity. The critic discusses this fantastic in her analysis of a tea table and chair. The matter-of-factness of the table, or in Vogel’s words, its “soul,” needs to channel “the fantastical lightness and aroma-like quality of an exotic drink, as well as restfulness and an element of dreaminess”²⁴ in order to present the truth of the table. Likewise, the chair’s shape needs to capture its character (its chairness) and be intertwined with its function: whether that function is rest and “passive absorption of sensations”²⁵ or state of activity, work, tension. In this lies the chair’s matter-of-factness. Vogel’s discussion of the chair and the tea table may remind us of Martin Heidegger’s examination of the thingness of the thing, or the opening up of beings in their being, and specifically the equipmentality of equipment which consists in utility or usefulness that the thinker pursued in his “The Origin of the Work of Art.”

To the two kinds of fantastic, of ingenuity and of asymmetry, Vogel adds a third one, the fantastic of colorfulness which highlights simplicity of the modern dwelling. Vogel theorizes color as a means of shaping the space of the dwelling and provides summaries of analyses of color by Wassily Kandinsky,²⁶ Wilhelm Steinfels,²⁷ and Johann Wolfgang Goethe.²⁸ The importance of the

²¹ See Debora Vogel, “The Dwelling in Its Psychic and Social Functions,” 81.

²² *Ibid.*, 80.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶ See Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das geistige in der Kunst, insbesondere in der Malerei* [On the Spiritual in Art, in Particular in Painting] (Munich: R. Piper & Co, 1912).

²⁷ See Wilhelm Steinfels, *Farbe und Dasein. Grundzüge zu einem symbolischen Weltbild* [Color and Being. Characteristics of the Symbolic World Picture] (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1926).

²⁸ See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre* [Theory of Colors] (Tubingen: Cotta, 1810).

color's fantasticality is traceable in Vogel's other essays, such as, for example, the "City Without Cares." In this travelogue depictions of Stockholm link the visual and poetic,

Grayness needs a reagent: and so the fantastic arises. The fantastic is uncompromising like life itself. Colorfulness of the interiors and colored house-boxes, silver azure of poetry, thick and dense paint of images – all these gestures are not accidental: they are expressions saturated with color.²⁹

In summary, Vogel's trifold discussions of the fantastic: the fantastic of ingenuity which finds itself at the border shared between the matter-of-fact and the phantasm; the examination of fantasticality of color (rather than colorfulness) which highlights modern simplicity; as well as discussion of the fantastical physiognomies of things and their asymmetrical rhythms and tensions, lead to the essay's overarching conclusion – that fantasticality does not merely help us shape and process new forms of life (in the interior design, for example) but also helps us shape our thoughts.

Today the dwelling plays the role of a landscape in the life of a modern person. Like nature previously, the city and its cells-factories, workshops, and interiors-now supply a person with the elements for processing thoughts and forms.³⁰

Hence, perhaps is Vogel's investment in the fantastical (thinking the fantastical) and the notion's radical potential – fantastical thinking, the boundary shared between imagination and thinking.

“WHITE WORDS IN POETRY”: THE FANTASTIC OF SIMPLICITY AND POIESIS

Vogel explores the limit shared between imagination and thinking, the real and the phantasm, and the fantasticality of writing and poiesis. Drawing analogies to the aesthetics of ornament in the visual arts and specifically, geometrical ornament, the author mentions that the fantastic in poetry is not to be understood in terms of embellishment but rather as construction in words. Like the fantasticality of color in modern interiors, fantasticality of the line in the modern painting, or the wonder of number, date, or fact in statistical science – all forms of poetic shaping – the fantastic in poetry is another side of the real, facticity of things. The author writes,

²⁹ Debora Vogel, "Miasto Bez Trosk," in *Montaże*, 357.

³⁰ Debora Vogel, "The Dwelling in its Psychic and Social Functions," in *Blooming Spaces*, 82.

There is seemingly no place for the inexpressive element and the distance of perspectives in the construction of simple and white words, as in a cool geometrical ornament. Here all things are mass, numbers, calculation; everything is balance and stasis, finitude, fixed boundaries, without intimations about that which has not been expressed.

Thus, speaking about the fantastic in this case may sound like a paradox. One might think that the fantastic and numbers are mutually exclusive.

And yet, in cool, measured, and simple constructions there is an element of the fantastical: the gray color and the geometrical line; banal words are the condensations and ultimate stages of the dynamic colorfulness which further manifest in them. And, thus, we should note the elements of novelty in such constructions!³¹

In the passage above, the fantastic that Vogel describes is fantastic of ingenuity, imagination; it is not the fantastic of dynamism, colorfulness, expression, novelty, absence of limit and repetition. Rather, Vogel addresses the “thing” that the seeming oxymoron of the fantastic of stasis, inexpressiveness, banality, measure, and repetition helps us think, namely tracing of the existence which is not reduced to existents. Debora Vogel’s essay on poetics, then, shares a limit with the philosophical discourse which approaches the visibility/ invisibility of existence, or existing without existents. What is at stake for Vogel is the happening of the truth that surfaces in poetry. The fantastic is nor any particular “fantastical” element per se, and neither it is made up of any elements which are not “fantastical.” Rather, it is the poesis, the manifestation of truth, the unconcealment of truth of existence in the work.

Vogel’s examination of the fantastic and the unveiling of truth in poetry brings to mind the discourse on art by Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” and the discussion of this important mediation on aesthetics by Jacques Derrida in *Truth in Painting*. Derrida posits that what is at stake in Heidegger’s text, as suggested by its title is the implication that,

art the word, the concept, the thing – has a unity and, what is more, an originary meaning, an *etymon*, a truth that is *one* and *naked*, and that it would be sufficient to unveil *through* history. It implies, first of all that “art” can be reached following the three ways of word, concept, and thing, or again of signifier, signified, and referent, or even by some opposition between presence and representation.³²

Heidegger’s argument throughout his text is that there is indeed “a disclosure of the being as what and how it is, there is a happening of truth at work.”³³

³¹ Debora Vogel, “Vayse verter in der dikhtung [White Words in Poetry],” *Tsushdayer*, no. 3, 1931: 42–48. English text: Debora Vogel, “White Words in Poetry” in *Blooming Spaces*, 3–11.

³² Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 20.

³³ Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art* in *Off the Beaten Track*, edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.

In short, “art is the setting-itself-to-work of truth.”³⁴ In multiple other formulations, the thinker underlines that art allows truth to arise. For Heidegger, truth is “unconcealment of beings as beings.”³⁵ Heidegger explicates that “the createdness of the work means: the fixing in place of truth in the figure.”³⁶ Along similar lines, the philosopher maintains, that “art is the creative preservation of the truth in the work. Art is, then, a becoming and happening of truth.”³⁷ Derrida goes on to highlight that in Heidegger’s aesthetics, there is “subordination of all the arts to speech, and, if not to poetry, at least to the poem, the said, language, speech, nomination.”³⁸

In *The Heidegger Change. On the Fantastic in Philosophy*, Catherine Malabou suggests that Heidegger’s philosophy and philosophy in general is fantastic thinking, or thinking of the fantastic. Heidegger’s thinking of the fantastic has to do with the fact that there are both metaphysical and non-metaphysical aspects of everything, with the real connected to phantasm.³⁹ In short, “the fantastic is another dimension of the real image of thingness,”⁴⁰ or “the new face of the entire world.”⁴¹ Philosophy is the fantastical thinking because it is tied to the imaginary, “insofar as, because it is itself included in the crossing that it must think, it can only imagine what it thinks.”⁴² In an earlier article “Pierre Loves Horryanges. Levinas-Sartre-Nancy: an approach to the fantastic in philosophy,” Malabou calls certain philosophical works by Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-Paul Sartre “the fantastical works of philosophy” insofar as they manifest the question of visibility/invisibility of existence. Malabou states that, “the fantastic for Levinas is the mode of being of what does not exist... and thus of existing itself.” Levinas asks: “How can we approach this existing without existents?” And his response is [...]: “by an act of imagination.”⁴³

To tie this back to Debora Vogel’s intervention, what Vogel calls “the fantastic” is as much poetic as it is the theoretical freedom of philosophizing on the facticity of things. Vogel’s interest in the modern design of the interiors and in the “fantastic of simplicity” in poetry seem to suggest that the thinker attempts to trace existence itself as form-giving of things.

³⁴ Ibid., 19.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 38

³⁷ Ibid., 44.

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 23.

³⁹ Catherine Malabou, *The Heidegger Change. On the Fantastic in Philosophy*, translated and edited by Peter Skafish, (Albany: The SUNY Press, 2011), 182.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 286.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Catherine Malabou, “Pierre Loves Horryanges. Levinas – Sartre – Nancy: an approach to the fantastic in philosophy,” *Umbr(a)*, no. 1, 2006: 103–117.

CONCLUSION

This essay attempted to demonstrate that Debora Vogel treats the fantastic as a key term to understand modern form of life, as well as the setting-forth or unconcealment of truth. Debora Vogel's discusses various types of the fantastic: the fantastic of ingenuity, the fantastic of asymmetry, the fantastic of color, and finally the fantastic of simplicity in her essays "Dwelling in Its Psychic and Social Functions" and "White Words in Poetry." As is evident from the discussion above, the fantastic for Vogel is simultaneously a novel artistic form and form of life, as well as a singular use of language; it is both a "trait" of modernity and thinking of modernity.

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**FANTASTYCZNOŚĆ JAKO NIESKRYTOŚĆ PRAWDY
W TWÓRCZOŚCI DEBORY VOGEL**

Artykuł poświęcony jest pojęciu tego co fantastyczne w twórczości Debory Vogel. Staram się uzasadnić, że fantastyka według Vogel jest jednocześnie nową postacią sztuki, nową formą życia i szczególnym użyciem języka; jest ona zarówno „znakiem” nowoczesności, jak myślenia o niej. Fantastyka stanowi kluczowy termin w eseju Vogel „Mieszkanie w swej funkcji społecznej i psychicznej” (1932), poświęconym nowoczesnemu projektowaniu wnętrz i przedmiotów. Refleksja Debory Vogel dotycząca fantastyki nie jest nakierowana na wykształcenie pełnej teorii i aparatu pojęciowego, lecz raczej na rozgrywanie tego co fantastyczne we własnej autorskiej teorio-praktyce, zgodnie z założeniami eseju „Białe słowa w poezji” (1930). W eseju tym Vogel omawia różne typy fantastyki, sytuujące się pomiędzy fantazją a rzeczowością: fantastykę pomysłowości, fantastykę asymetrii, fantastykę koloru, fantastykę prostoty. We wszystkich tych typach dokonuje się odsłonięcie prawdy.

Słowa kluczowe

fantastyka, pomysłowość, rzeczowość, fantazja, prostota, nowoczesność, projektowanie, poezja