

The “mental figurative” of Alexandre Beridze and the metaphor of consciousness

By Maria Falikman

Doctor of Psychology, Head of the Department of Psychology, Higher School
of Economics,
National Research University, Moscow



Regarding the works of Alexandre Beridze, it hardly makes sense to ask the question: "What did the author want to say with his work?" Each of his works continues to speak. These works, although completed, but not static, are a stream that begins and continues outside the bounds of a sheet of paper or canvas, like the human mind, an internal experience that, although given to us simultaneously, has a past history that changes every moment and is directed to the future. In this regard, it is interesting to look at the painting of Alexandre Beridze through the prism of metaphors, with which psychology for over 150 years tried to answer the question of what consciousness is.

When psychology was just beginning as a science, it was precisely consciousness that naturally became its first subject of research - everything that is revealed to us when we turn to our inner world: images, thoughts, experiences. But psychology, in its desire to become a true rigorous science, decided to move along the path of chemistry. And the first step that psychologists have taken is an attempt to analyze consciousness as a combination of the simplest elements: sensations and "feelings" (elementary emotional experiences), in order to then collect consciousness back from these separate elements, clear and distinct in focus, vague on the periphery.

The first metaphor of consciousness was comparing it with the field of view, proposed by the founding father of psychology as a science, Wilhelm Wundt. It was the presence of a clearly defined structure, the distinction of focus and periphery, that Wundt considered as the essential characteristic of human consciousness, revealed in self-observation. And his student Edward Titchener, developing the ideas of his teacher, suggested considering consciousness as a section or a slice through the stream of spiritual life, where certain sensations that are in focus and most clearly experienced are on the crest of a "wave of attention" - isn't this a cut that Alexandre Beridze shows us?

Perhaps not: a section or slice, by definition, is static, devoid of development, and the works of Alexandre Beridze are fundamentally dynamic, deployed not only in space but also in time. Therefore, closer to his work, a comparison of consciousness not with a slice, but with the stream itself, permeating fiction and philosophy of the twentieth century.

William James, a classic of American psychology and the author of this then completely new metaphor for the "stream of consciousness", although now completely familiar to us, emphasizes the continuity and originality of our inner experience. Moreover, as James observes, in this stream there are more stable states of consciousness, and there are more dynamic, flowing ones: "Consciousness is like the life of a bird, which either sits in place or flies. [...] Stopping points in consciousness are usually occupied with sensory impressions, the peculiarity of which is that they can, without changing, be contemplated by the mind indefinitely; "the transitional gaps are occupied with thoughts about the relations of static and dynamic, which we for the most part establish between objects perceived in a state of relative rest." Separately, James emphasizes the elusiveness of the transitional states of our consciousness: "A snow crystal, captured by a warm hand, instantly turns into a water drop; similarly, wishing to catch the transitional state of consciousness, we instead find something quite stable in it ... In such cases, the attempt to self-observe is futile - it's the same as grabbing a spinning top with your hands to catch its movement, or quickly wrapping a gas horn, to see how things look in the dark. " I suppose the reader recognized the Titchener's "cross-section through the soul stream" - according to James, it cannot tell psychologists anything about the essence of consciousness. However, Alexandre Beridze in his painting does the impossible - captures the dynamics of consciousness, its transitions, polyphony (or, in the words of James, "psychic overtones") of each of its states.

And besides, James continues, just as a stream cannot flow in all directions at once, so consciousness is fundamentally selective, always has a certain orientation, always "more interested in one side of the object of thought than in the other." It is this property of human consciousness, which is especially clearly expressed in thinking, that is emphasized by another school of psychology of the late XIX - early XX centuries, which took shape in the German city of Würzburg. Human thought is distinguished by its focus on solving a problem, even if it is not the most difficult, somewhat even the usual task for us - for example, to understand a metaphor or explain a proverb. Thinking is not just a stream of associations, but a stream directed by a task, or a "determining tendency" that organizes individual elements of experience - much like the lines dissecting a canvas in the works of Alexandre Beridze determine the direction of the state embodied on this canvas.

The French philosopher-intuitionist Henri Bergson, in whose writings one can find many echoes with the views of his contemporary William James, designates this orientation differently - as a "life impulse". Bergson surprisingly accurately captures the continuity and aspiration of human consciousness in the treatise "Creative Evolution." Let's read: "Is my personality single or plural at the moment?" If I call her one, the inner voices of sensations, feelings, ideas, between which my personality is divided, will protest. But if I make a separate multiplicity of it, my consciousness rebels against it with the same force; it states that my sensations, feelings, thoughts are only abstractions that I produce on myself, and that each of my conditions includes all the others." In other words, consciousness as a whole encompasses all human experience, the whole set of individual feelings and sensations, each of which can be marked on the canvas with a separate brushstroke or stroke. What makes this unification possible?

Take the Reflection Series paintings. I note separately that already in the title of the series, the artist fully utilizes the ambiguity of the word itself: here, there are reflections, reflections, and reflection itself, as defined by the 17th century British philosopher John Locke, "observation to which the mind exposes its activities." It is interesting that modern neurobiology returns again and again to the duality of consciousness indicated by Locke, to the distinction between immediate sensations and thoughts about these sensations. In the language of today's science, they are designated as "phenomenal consciousness" (that is directly accessible to a person, here-and-now) and "consciousness as access" (that a person can report to himself or communicate to another person if necessary, using the language), then as "first-order consciousness" and "second-order consciousness".

"Phenomenal consciousness" is a product of ascending processes in the human nervous system, movement from the sensory organs to higher-level brain structures. Conversely, "consciousness as access", the ability to report on the perceived, including oneself, is the product of downward processes, feedback loops directed from overlying, newer and more complex brain structures to the underlying ones, which process and retain information received from ascending path. How can voluminous color flashes and strict, barely noticeable lines that define the general outline of a work be combined in one canvas? Or maybe this is the embodiment of the duality of our consciousness, the seething of sensations continuously coming from outside and their reflection structuring them?

French researchers have identified the style of Alexandre Beridze as a "mental figurative" - a visual depiction of the human thinking process. It seems to me especially interesting the question whose thinking it is: the artist or his viewer, especially if you recall the words of Henri Bergson that art only becomes art when it is perceived by someone, in other words, it becomes the property of the perceiving consciousness.

One of the most pressing problems of modern cognitive science is the problem of distributed cognition - cognitive functions shared between several people (and in recent years -

between a person and a computer, a person and the Internet, the widespread use of which gives rise to completely new psychological phenomena that only become the subject of close attention of psychologists) . Consciousness (co-knowledge), although it is inherent in an individual person and in this regard privately, is formed and opened only in the interaction between people. And I think that the canvases of Alexandre Beridze can be considered as a direct interface between the consciousness of the artist and the consciousness of the viewer. In the absence of symbols that need to be interpreted and images involuntarily compared with their sources in the outside world, the artist and the spectator find themselves on the same wavelength, allowing them to directly experience the paradoxes of human consciousness, its multiplicity and unity, the presence of structure and constant dynamics, selectivity and polyphony. And since none of the states of consciousness can be repeated exactly, you can return to these canvases again and again without risking getting bored.