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ANTIQUITY AND THE IDEA OF «TOTALITARIAN ART»

At the end of the 20th century the concept of «totalitarian art» is widely represented. The fall of the Soviet Union permits scholars to dispose, at very least, of the European history of «totalitarian art», since the politicized critics who formulated this mythologeme link the totalitarian esthetic with the political system of the states in which this art was extant: Italy, Germany, Austria, the Soviet Union.

Unable to overcome the taboo on comparisons between fascism and communism, Russian art historians in the pre-perestroika era would but rarely dare touch upon the similarities between the art of the Third Reich and Stalin's Soviet Union. On the other hand, Western scholars were already doing a great deal of work in this direction during the Cold War years. Now that It (totalitarianism) has left us behind, we can examine it more closely.

Even a cursory glance at European and American art of the 30s, 40s and 50s reveals a similarity of style. It was not only in the countries on «the totalitarian list» that the «stark raving mad» avant-garde of that time «hushed up». As early as the late 20s neoclassicism began to appear in the work of Picasso and De Chirico; even the Russian «hotheads» - Malevich, Tatlin, Mayakovsky, Rodchenko - were not immune to creeping doubts.

On the other hand, the art of fascist Italy was at first futuristic and only later began to take on neoclassical qualities; Jugendstil occupied a significant place in the life of national-socialist Germany; in painting, Soviet «socialist realism» did not much depart from the Peredvizhnik tradition and, in my opinion, was not inimical to the impressionists and realists (cf. The work of Sergei Gerasimov, the Leningrad landscape school of the 30s, etc.). If Hitler personally insisted on models from antiquity for the Nazi esthetic, then other «chiefs» did not always share his artistic predilections. Thus Goebbels was fond of German expressionism as exemplified by Die Brücke (the Bridge) and held it up as «the most expressive of the Nordic spirit». During the 30s the average (even the somewhat better than average) museumgoer (in Europe and America, in Berlin, Chicago, Rome, Warsaw) had no suspicions about the «totalitarianity» of the art he saw: he considered this esthetic simply «modern».

Opposing themselves to the Productivist's avant-gardism, the groups «Circle» and «OST» appeared. In the West, Art Deco was «all the rage», sports fashion was forming, the Olympic movement was expanding; in nearly every city a neoclassical fountain adorned with the figures of handsome youths and svelte maidens was raised. The decor of American skyscrapers of this period was as like the design of the Moscow metro as two peas, even in the smallest details: marble, «gilded» bronze, grillework, stain-glass windows. The Serb Meshtrovich and the Swede Milles - representatives of international neoclassicism with an ethnic twist of one sort or another - became two of the most prominent American sculptors.

At the Paris World Expo in 1937, the very same exhibition in which Picasso presented his now-famous «Guernica», it was not this «masterpiece» that was awarded the grand prize, but a pictorial panel by Russia's Alexander Samokhvalov, who was well received by the French. He was also awarded a prize for book illustration and a gold medal for painting - «Girl in a Football Jersey». Not Picasso!

The Soviet totalitarian regime radically altered the esthetic of state art several times: at first the Bolshevik avant-garde dominated, then the socialist realism of Gorky and Zhdanov, later the stylistically severe socialist realism of the Thaw. From the 60s to the 80s socialist realism made the transition into «socialist art» and «20th century realism» - one might joke that socialist realism «burst its banks» as a consequence of «the Thaw's» high water. And in the architecture of the 30s a «heterostylistics» was extant: neoclassical rest homes occupy the same space in time as constructivist buildings. One example of the latter is the KGB's «Big House» on Liteiny prospect in Leningrad/Petersburg. The Productivists Rodchenko, Stepanova and Popova worked successfully in Soviet design and light industry; Nikolai Suetin served as the director of a ceramics factory. In Germany, the romanticist architect Wilhelm Kreis was held in high esteem by the minister of armaments, the architect and eminent engineer Albert Speer. So, from this point of view it is not so easy to divide geographically Euro-American art of the mid-20th century. Cold war ideology needed not only an ideological foe, but an esthetic one as well: the time for a modernist «revanche» had arrived. It was precisely then that the European and American systems of artistic education began to change. Before the war, modernist schools were few in number (VKHUTEMAS, Bauhaus): modernism was propagated mainly through private galleries and ateliers, and propagandized in small-circulation journals - it was not financed by the state. In the postwar period, the modernist artists, who for the most part had sat out the war in the United States, returned to Europe along with the conquering army. With modernist facility they interpreted the political victory over Germany as a victory over the classicist predilections of Hitler, who had constantly taken issue with modernism and had used all means available to fight it (the exhibition «Degenerate Art» in 1937).

Toward the end of the 50s Europe was restored and once more could allow itself the luxury of art. But what sort of art? The art of victorious democracy. This art was supposed to become a «different» art. Right then and there the moth-eaten, shagreen-and-felt pelt of modernism was pulled out of the trunks, that very same modernism which from the moment of its birth had directed its «unknown masterpiece» against the principal enemy - the classical idea of the Beautiful. Wasn't this skin, this fur, the very same that Apollo had torn from Marsius in punishment for the latter's feeble attempts to affirm the forest's disfigured art? As we know from the myth, the skin continued to emit queer noises long after it had dried.

Now able to settle scores with the classical idea on the level of the state, modernist thinkers formulated a slanderous mythologeme, which in greatly simplified form can be summed up as follows:

The Greeks worshipped an exclusive beauty, they did not recognize «barbarian» art; in Sparta deformed infants were killed; there were many tyrannies and dictatorships in Greece; it was

precisely antiquity that give birth to the monster; that hetaera, antiquity, is to blame for all that totalitarianism and fascism. All of Europe succumbed to the awful influence of the Renaissance; in the darkness of «Europe's terrifying dream» only Delacroix had the strength to say. «It is not only the Greeks who can point us towards what should be considered beautiful». He awakened the Impressionists; it turn, they aroused Van Gogh, and with him, all the Europe. Europe opened up to «the new»; modernism blossomed - but those lovers of antiquity, the fascists, arrived on the scene and crushed modernism's lovely flowers. «Totalitarian art» appeared; the pagan monster of antiquity was reborn. But from across the ocean a firefly came winging in, bearing aloft the flashlight of modernism, and it illuminated the gloom of postwar Europe, who for years had awaited this, its beautiful savior. The West was rescued, but Eastern Europe remained under the totalitarian yoke of the classical idea; and this state of affairs continued until «perestroika», but the fall of the Berlin Wall changed the world. The specter of antiquity dissolved into thin air forever.

At this point I will take the liberty of citing a few quotations. Achille Bonito Oliva, the director of the Venice Biennale, a left-democrat commentator and a friend of modernism, wrote in one of his articles that our time the traditional conflict between East and West (communism vs. Capitalism) is giving way to a new conflict - between North and South. He writes:

«I think that until quite recently European culture stood in a certain kind of opposition to America. Nowadays, however, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, not only has the military confrontation between America and Russia been liquidated, but the cultural confrontation between America and Europe as well. Theoretically speaking, Europe always constituted an outpost of the art of antiquity, whereas America was a stronghold of contemporary art. Today, as it seems to me, this polarization no longer exists; and the possibility of overcoming national boundaries with new trends and directions and taking in new impressions unfolds before Europe. To wit, the European idea is a cosmopolitan one: the idea of compatibility, multiculturalism, multilingualism, multiethnicity. And therefore, it is precisely Europe - by virtue of its nature, history and traditions - that is continent which can most fully open up to the influence of other cultures. In the positive sense of that word».

Claudio Mutti, a philologist, professor at Turin University, radical-conservative columnist and foe modernism, gives the following answer to the question of the nature of contemporary Western society's fundamental conflict and how it influences contemporary art and culture:

«Most of all one must elaborate that Western culture is not European culture, but its monstrous offshoot. Moreover, the quintessence of Western civilization, which received its initial impulses from America, is its break with European civilization. Generally speaking, this great tragedy consists in the fact that the fundamental conflict - i.e. the conflict with the west - simply does not exist in Europe. This fact - the absence of a conflict which would be Europe's salvation - has an enormous influence on Europe's culture and its art movements in that, having accepted the West's cultural models, Europe rejects its own artistic forms. Theoretically, the only European society capable of developing cultural models and movements in art corresponding to its own distinctive character is Eastern Europe, which, thanks to the heavenly conditions in which

socialist realism existed, until very recently had maintained a careful distance from the West's all-consuming machine. Today, however, the West is trying to make up for lost time».

Within the framework of so modest an exposition as this one, it is of course impossible to examine in depth the ideological and esthetic base of the «totalitarian art» of those states which finances and propagated it - in the first instance, fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and socialist Russia. I will cite only a few examples - examples that disturb popular notions of an essential orientation towards classical antiquity. At the foundations of German Nazism lay, in particular, the ideas of Hermann Wirt, the first director of the SS's Ahnenerbe Institute (for the study of ancestral heritage), ideas which were more anti-classical than not: the Nordic race, runes, Nibelungs, Atlanteans, Varangians - but not Greeks and Romans; the art of idols, stones, animal pelts, woodcarving and magical signs - but not that of beautiful images of men. (Editor's note. After the First World War, Hermann Wirt, Germanist and archaeologist, developed a theory of Atlantis, which he «found» - not in the Mediterranean Sea, but in the Atlantic Ocean, between Europe and America, approximately at that point where Canada and Scandinavia had drifted apart. He discovered traces of this ancient civilization in Norway and Sweden, in Ireland - and in Lower Saxony, particularly in the peatbogs of the lower Weser River and around Bremen. The thesis of *ex oriente lux* was replaced by *ex occidente lux* and worship of the North. In 1928 Wirt made the acquaintance of Ludwig Roselius, a rich coffee merchant, collector and patron of the arts, who, along with the expressionist sculptor and architect B.Hettger, had created the famous «Bettcherstrasse». Together they planned to build a «Haus Atlantis» on this street for housing the archaeological collections of a museum of «Father-lore» - «Vaterkunde» (now located in the village of Worpsfede, near Bremen). The building was constructed in the ultra-contemporary forms of steel framework architecture, but the facade was decorated with a gigantic totem - a carved wooden depiction of the tree of life and the solar disc, with a crucified Odin mounted on this; everything was covered with the runic signs. The idea and image of the building consciously incorporated an orientation to the West, to America, which Roselius and Wirt considered the country of the Atlantean ideal's realization - but the ancient German Bremen remained the center for their world. Hitler condemned the entire Bettcherstrasse complex and Haus Atlantis (completed in 1931) in particular. For him it represented a dilettantism, mystical perversion of national-socialism's pragmatic spirit and a deviation from the ideal of the «healthy man» of the master race, which could not arise in the swamps of Lower Saxony. His ideal of nature was linked with Alpine meadows and the Peloponnesian plateau. Although Wirt continued as director of the Ahnenerbe Institute, his position in the Reich remained marginal).

Colliding with nationalism, the Italian futurists recalled the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, and the imperial ideal of Mussolini's time might be compared rather with outlooks of the «Moscow-Third Rome» variety; it was backed by «pseudo-Roman futurism», which was close to the pseudo-neo-hyper-Russian style of the Russian Empire, from the stillborn Byzantism of the architect Ton to the necrophile Pavel Filonov. This was far from a hunger for a new renaissance of antiquity, for the gracious and radiant classical idea. At the same time, in contemporary traditionalist discourse, which is close in spirit to neofascism, antiquity is encountered only

episodically and in the background, as a rule yielding to local pagan cults. The enmity of totalitarian governments towards modernism is most likely a manifestation of democracy, i.e. the tastes of the majority of people, since even today, after the «final victory» of modernism, the democratic majority of taxpayers doubt whether it has any value whatsoever; and a half-century ago, in the Thirties, this majority was absolute and, besides, had no doubts at all. Therefore it is exactly the mass viewer who has preserved the tradition of worshipping the beautiful human image that has come to us from Greece; preserved it in the forms available to him - advertisement, cinema and popular entertainment; preserved it by the simple act of worship, by hanging artless photos of beautiful models on the walls of his adobe.

At the beginning of our century the cult of Apollo suffered a crushing defeat in the war with the voodoo cult. Today the temple of Apollo lies in run, its altar desecrated. Picasso, Braque and Breton all came out with appeals for destruction; they called the dignity of European civilization into question. They said that all of it was rubbish, that something different, new and better was needed. Apollo - strictly speaking, they replaced him with an idol. How did they do this? What was the murder weapon? What esthetic took its place? Before this there were Apollo, beauty and the Greek statue. And what took its place? The African mask and figurine - i.e. magical objects. Sculptors, artists, philosophers and poets fill their studios with magical objects of African origin. Not all artists, however, were so weak-minded that they calmly accepted the destruction of European culture, burying themselves in African mysticism. As a result of the research I have carried out in the field of art, I have discovered that at the beginning of the 20th century the cult of Apollo moved from the traditional, elitist arts dedicated to him - painting and sculpture - to the art of photography. During the course of the past century, only this art preserved within itself signs of worshipping the beautiful image; for example, in this form of photographers of beautiful young men and women in «Vogue». It is difficult to imagine ugly people appearing in this journal. It is a fact that recent times the public's interest in photography has increased and it is precisely photographers who climb ever higher in ratings of popular personalities. By means of photography the cult of Apollo is being revived and becoming more and more active.

It is indicative that it is precisely against photographs of the beautiful body, against the depiction of beautiful people in cinema and advertisements, that conservative thought takes the field, using such fascist-futurist authorities as Julius Ewola for support. The above-cited Claudio Mutti offers the following answer to the problem of the image of contemporary man created by «Playboy», Hollywood's dream factory and their ilk:

«If «secret pornographic literature» was already several decades ago seen by Ewola as something «beyond any sort of authenticity», then what might we say about this obscene fiction reflecting the sexual imperfection of contemporary consumerist iconography? The pseudo-eroticism of the masses, soft and hard porn, gives «respectable people' the illusion of partaking of forbidden fruits. That is how the inferiority complex - which characterizes the personal relationship and is becoming total - reflects itself on the level of sex. Hollywood and «Playboy» are merely two steps in a complex evolution, whose conclusion (thanks to cybernetics!) is foregone. Progress in electronics will send such primitive dream factories as «Playboy» and Hollywood packing into

museums of ancient history and will inculcate the totalitarianism of illusions with its anti-Christian connotation: «empowered» by his communion with the «dream machine», the Promethean man of cybernetics believes in the fact that he is a god - that is, in an absolute illusion».

One cannot but agree with Mutti that «consumerist iconography» is a crude substitute for the satisfaction of a genuine need for the beautiful, in terms both of the flesh and the spirit. But, as they say, for want of roses, geraniums will do. I repeat: it was the mass viewer who preserved the tradition of worshipping the beautiful human image.

The conclusion we should draw from above-said is simple. A totalitarian, steely, severe and superhuman antiquity was dreamed up by the avante-gardists and foisted on the public by the fascists; and this false image continues to be preserved by proponents of an art inimical to the Muses, an art that has replaced the beautiful man with a misshapen and abstract monster. Antiquity is beautiful - and Apollo awaits his pupils.

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As an appendix and for the sake of entertainment I cite here an interesting text written by the contemporary Russian metaphysics and traditionalist Alexander Dugin.

«For contemporary man the classical visual image is, first, absolutely alien; second, absolutely incomprehensible; and third, completely odd. So if an artist of the contemporary world appeals to the form, to the structure, to the proportions, to the method, to the reproduction of traditional, classical styles, then without a doubt we are dealing with deliberate kitsch. As a French theoretician of this movement, Victor Abalque, wrote, the principle of «the new wave» is the irony of the exact copy. For example, when young people dress in the clothes their parents wore in their own youth, then, on the one hand, this is a precise copying of another generation's style; on the other hand, this shows to what degree these young people are alien to that cultural atmosphere in which their parents lived, to what degree these young people do not understand it. One might say the same about contemporary art as well. If it appeals to old, traditional or classical methods, then it is merely in order to show to what degree it does not understand anything whatsoever, to what degree it is estranged and remote from these methods. Strictly speaking, this is the principle of the exact copy's irony. This is the form of a particular conceptual approach. In it is manifested one of the last possibilities remaining to European nihilism in art - and in culture in general: to take that which preceded this nihilism and, 'with a native expression on one's face», to simply copy it. This is nihilism's last card.

As far as contemporary art is concerned, then in the overwhelming majority of instances it is, of course, vaginal; and it is not that its hero's strategy is hard to trace, but that, practically speaking, such strategy is altogether absent. In my opinion, it is not those works which somehow hint at the hero's strategy that possess some value for contemporary art, but rather those that to the greatest

degree embody and demonstrate the monstrousness of the reign of the vagina in the contemporary world, the monstrousness of femininity's victory over masculinity, and give us to understand what this means. He who more deeply shows to what degree humanity is immersed in the Great Mother's dark kingdoms, he who in greater detail illuminates this mother's womb from within, - he, so to speak, is the more valuable.»

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For further reading at home we recommend:

Steinernes Gesicht. Ausstellungskatalog. Projektberatung, Vladimir Guzman. Hrsg. Alexander Sokolov. Dusseldorf, 1994.

Novikov T.:" Antiquit and idea of "Totalitarian Art" // New Russian Classicism. The edition of the State Russian museum. SPb. P. 223-238, 1998