

Timur Novikov

SECRET CULT

A Dialogue

Avdotya Andreevna, a lady in her prime, is sitting in an armchair in an old-style St.Petersburg apartment; the heavy, tasselled velvet drapes half-conceal the view of the river Neva and the spire of Vasilievsky Island. On the walls, above the silk wallpaper, darkened with age, there are photographs and pictures in whimsical frames; on the table, a leather folder with an embossed floral design contains photographs between sheets of tracing-paper.

Timofei Petrovich, a middle-aged gentlemen, is looking out of the window.

A.A. Ah! What marvellous photographs; when I look at them I am sized by a strange sensation, as though the life beyond these windows does not exist, everything fades away, but I am not transported to another time, no, it is rather a sensation of a different space, which exists simultaneously with us ordinary people sitting here.

T.P. Would you like to be there? I would.

A.A. I am not really sure, of course I'd like to be there, but I don't know what to prefer. There seem to be various fantasy worlds in these photographs, it's hard to choose, and I wouldn't be able to visit them all, I'm very busy girl. A it is, I am transported every time I see something beautiful.

T.P. Beautiful. That's it precisely. And what if you see a work by an artist which does not belong to that category?

A.A. Oh, Timofei Petrovich, you always have to spoil things so! I do not wish to talk about anything unpleasant, I do not even wish to notice its existence. I would be glad to converse with you for hours at a time, bur I do not wish, you understand, I do not wish to take the ugly as a theme of discussion, such things give me a migraine in any case; I have given up watching the television, do not deprive me of the joy of your company by making me turn you out.

T.P. Ah, Avdotya Andreevna, I had not the slightest desire to anger you, please forgive me and do not turn me out, I promise to talk only of the elegant.

A.A. Very well. You would do better to explain to me something quite inexplicable, for instance, why it is that I like these photographs.

T.P. Nothing could be more simple, Avdotya Andreevna. You have a sublime nature, you have been surrounded by museums since you were a child, and you seek the beautiful. You seek it in art, even though finding the beautiful in art is anything but a simple task nowadays.

Avdotya picks up a flower lying on the table, glances angrily at Timofei Petrovich and throws it at him, aiming for his face.

A.A. No more of that! Again you are trying to reduce everything to ugliness.

T.P. Far from it. Pray hear me out before you pass judgement on me.

A.A. Then set everything out in due order. You theoreticians are constantly carried away by your theories - no conclusion, no beginning, no way to understand a single thing, you reason away the whole day long, and then, apropos of absolutely nothing, you make a pronouncement such as "beauty will save the world", and you are very pleased with yourselves, and we poor things are left to ponder for an hour or more - from whom will it save the world, how, what world?

T.P. Very well, then listen and I will exert all my powers in the attempt to provide both beginning and a conclusion. But I warn you that this is not the whole truth, but only a theory, so to say. I imagine the following model: an artist creates in his picture a certain reality visible to the viewer. He models this reality out of something. He has his own stock of images. If he chooses to ignore the images of surrounding reality, then he draws them from his memory. You seek beauty, which means that you are from that beautiful land where beauty actually exists; for you a picture or a photograph comes as news from your native land, and you perceive the artist as a fellow-countryman encountered in foreign parts.

A.A. But Baron von Gloeden was a German who lived in Sicily a hundred years ago, and what is more - he was a homosexual.

T.P. The values of art are eternal because in the land of beauty there is no time, while in our world we contemplate beauty from various aspects, circling, as it were, around the beautiful, contemplating it first from one side, then from the other. It is always the same, always a unity, because the category of time is alien to it. In earlier times, a century ago, the ideal nature of the beautiful was acknowledged as being perceptible, because the beautiful turned its back on us.

A.A. Why did it do so?

T.P. That is an old story. You remember? of course, A.A.Ivanov's prophetic picture "Apollo, Cypress and Hyacinth"? It shows Apollo not with the muses, but with his favorites, who will shortly be transformed and leave him inconsolable in the company of the muses. Cypress will become the tree of sadness, eternally mourning the loss of the deer. Hyacinth will be accidentally slain by Apollo's discus, and from his blood will spring a flower. But this is not yet. In the picture painted in 1831, everything still seems to be in order. There is only a presentiment of something malign that gives the admirer of the muses cause to shudder, that rouses him from the beautiful music. I would call this masterpiece "A Presentiment of War in Art".

A.A. (as though suddenly roused from sleep) What war is that?

T.P. The great war of the beautiful with the ugly. At first the assault was prepared, and the preparations were long and thorough. The 19th century was a period of brilliant and varied talents. But this variety shattered the classical image, and then Volga boatmen began tramping across pictures and the impressionists began finding beauty in industrial waste (the steam of locomotives), in obsequious homage to Turner. Poisoned from the smoke of his club, Delacroix took his "drunken broom" and sang the praises of "corpses and cholera"; they began to threaten artists with photography the way little children are threatened with the bogey-man - saying that any photograph would produce an image which was a better "likeness", so please be so good as not to interfere with it (it was not even clear immediately whether they meant the photograph of reality). But the categories of aesthetics formed a solid base, the Europeans had inherited them from Greeks, they were valued as more than an antique curiosity, and served to restrain the bulk of the "priests of Apollo" and "favorites of the muses" from insanity. However, the enemies of beauty were cunning. Before proceeding to the main stage of the war - open confrontation - they attempted to undermine the foundations, by depriving Apollo of the support of Hyacinth and Cypress. They decided to exploit the taboo nature of their relations as viewed by European public opinion in order to divide up the categories of antiquity and settle their scores with them one at a time. They began with the most defenceless - with the boys.

A.A. Do you have in mind the trial of 1895?

T.P. Both that and the case of 1893. The first blow was struck against music and the ballet. Tchaikovsky is the finest representative of the beautiful in music. His murder would resound and echo throughout the world. The next blow, two years later, was the trial of Oscar Wilde. At the other end of Europe, not music but literature, but the same scenario - the intention was to deprive society of the very thought of such aesthetic views, and Wilde was first and foremost an ideologist, a propagandist, a symbol of beauty. This undermining "from both sides" served as the signal for the assault. A quarter of a century later we had the almost total victory of the ugly. But a flower sprang up from the blood. Hyacinth was reborn and appeared where he was awaited - a marvellous world was created for him by Wilhelm von Gloeden, and after him by Wilhelm von Pluschhoff, Francesco Galdi, Elizar von Kuypfer. This is all no more than a projection of the ideal world, but it is perceived as a mystical communication - read, commit to memory and conceal from profanation. These partisans preserve beauty in secret, on islands, on mountains, in forests. The cities have been seized by modernists of every stripe. In the academies statues are broken into fragments which are subjected to desecration, the square reigns supreme. The black square as a symbol of Apollo's nightmare.

A.A. There now, you are frightening me again.

T.P. What is to be done, Avdotya Andreevna? War is war.

A.A. But then why the photograph?

T.P. Not only the photograph - take the cinema, for example, you do not like all the photographs in general, only some of them. It is a matter of the magic essence of photography. It allows us to visualise an ideal world at the factual level, but not every photograph is a priest of Apollo. And in any case, you know quite as well as I do that confrontation in art has reached unprecedented heights and in places a genuine massacre has begun. Artists are an ambitious crew, some of them have moved over into politics in order to use the army in the conflict (Hitler, Lunacharsky, Marinetti, for instance). But the soul of art is a tender, living thing, it could exist in such conditions, which brought about the "migration to another world", interpreted by many as the death of art. I will not attempt to review the entire history of art over the last century - it is nothing but the history of "conflict and war, it knows no time of peace". But that is not the point. Association with the beautiful has become a secret cult. The slide projector which shows us Ivanov's "Apollo, Cypress and Hyacinth" on the wall of dark room can be switched off upon the entry of these photographs (he points to Gloeden), we can hide it away quickly and talk to Malevich, for conspiratorial purposes. In our age the beautiful must be concealed in order for it not be exposed to profanation. Look around you, where is the place of Venus in modern society? It is the venereological clinic, the pornographer's kiosk.

A.A. You exaggerate, there are still the museums.

T.P. Take my word for that exaggeration is a method of investigation. Recall the telescope, the microscope, even spectacles, indeed. The museums have been transformed into cabinets of curiosities.. An antique statue in the Hermitage is set on the same level as a chamber pot from a Sumerian excavation site - the scope of their cemeteries exceeded all others - human and animal corpses share exhibition halls with the creations of Leonardo and Raphael, they have inventory numbers in the same numerical system. The crowds of people passing through the halls are not worshipped of the beautiful - they are barbarians, conquerors reviewing their booty (art belongs to the people).

A.A. (sobbing) I asked you not to. We were just sitting here quietly, looking at the photographs ...

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