

CROATIAN ART AND ART CRITIQUE IN THE AGE OF IDEOLOGISATION OF THE FIFTH DECADE

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The characteristics of the period between 1940 and 1950 ; the war and postwar period, and the culturological tendencies in general have made political discourse the dominant one ; it has clearly manifested itself in all the forms of mass communication and consequently in art.

The art, therefore, reveals to us in a specific way the politically turbulent fifth decade, the intensive experiencing and fateful participation of people, profoundly dramatised and traumatized situations, the quick succession of events and life-determining decisions. From that we learn how three different concepts of statehood : the Independent-Croatian, the Partisan and finally the State-Socialist are defined and implemented in a relatively short period of time, how during the war three confronted domestic armies exist, how "the centuries-old national aspirations of the Croatian people has been realised".

Strain between the syntagms "Ready for Fatherland" and "Death to Fascism - Liberty to the People" or "All to the Reconstruction Front" which at that time represented main tensions between completely opposed variants of governmental and political ambitions, and their anticipatory and impending, legal and illegal connotations, now of course have changed their meaning, and certain contextualisations seem anachronous. At the same time, the forms of ideological practice of the dominant specialised political propaganda centres of the "Agitprop" period (Agitation and Propaganda Department active in National Liberation War), "Promicba" (State Office for Information and Propaganda in the Independent State of Croatia 1941-1945 and "Olikprop" (Art Propaganda Department of the Yugoslavia, active in the second half of the fifth decade) expressed through art shows great similarities.

It is an unambiguous and historically proven fact that the artistic creation is indivisible from the space & time context from which it arises, and that every art is a consequence of the entwined interactively connected reasons.

It is also not ambiguous that in this the tendentiousness plays its part, but in spite of numerous theories, the question of how big a part it plays in the art still remains open. In the myriad of different examples with which, more than entire previous art history, the 20th century abounds, the most illustrative are the experiences of the two totalitarian regimes. Although ideologically opposed, national-socialism and real socialism have considerably more similarities than differences. Both deny art any independence outside serving the regime propaganda which needs to be given a suitable frame for the image of idealized reality as well as for the crooked ideal of "beauty". Of course that in these circumstances there is no room for any, and so for no art critique.

Hitler, as well as Stalin (the same applies for their followers in the puppet dictatorship regimes from Austria and Italy to China), not only lead wars for power but also no less important battle against all aspects of authentic culture that did not put itself at their disposal as a mirage of real or imagined power. The Nazis proclaim it depraved and the real-socialists a subjectivistic formalistic freak. Depending on whether it is in the service of racial or class politics, the art celebrates the people, peasantry and aggressive heroism and respectively the party, working class and the heroes that have liberated them. The art is required to be exclusively and universally understandable and clear while the critique is a mediator between the artist and the public. The revival of the concept of binding all arts in Gesamtkunstwerk from the beginning of the century is typical for both dictatorships, since it is easier to subject them to the patterns of propaganda in this form.

The State builds culture policy megamachinery with a very precise programme that shows similarities in the products originated from regions that considerably differ historically, nationally as well according to their culture tradition ; from China and USSR to Cuba and Iraq.

The situation in which the state socialist regime wins a war, brings down and replaces the until then ruling fascist system, gives in Croatia a profusion of material for parallel critical analysis of the up till now relatively unexplored area of artistic production. The reason for this is at least twofold : the lack of historical distance without which there is no objectivity and the doubt about the question whether the totalitarian art is altogether a phenomenon that has its place in art history, what its relation towards historically parallel tendencies in modern art is really like, what its models of interpretation and value criteria are, or if it is really an anti-art system, i.e. kitch.

The circumstances of political continuity where themes remained a taboo give an added weight to the above mentioned. It is interesting that, differently than the authors, most of the Croatian artists, architects and art critics that have asserted themselves in the former period, still remain active during the whole fifth decade. Contrary to the 40's, when there is a vehement conflict on the cultural scene here because of devided attitudes about the tendency in art known as "The Conflict on the Left", this period is characterised by the lack of polemics. The ideas about art as an expression of the national spirit are in different ways present in the Croatian modern art and art critique since the beginning of the century. From the Mestrovic's heroic cycles made under the influence of the Vienna Secession, through the attempts by Ljubo Babic of giving meaning to the theory of national expression, these ideas have paradoxically flourished like a caricature of their own meaning, during the rule of the fascist regime and thus imposed themselves as the main theme. During the state socialism period however, some of the intellectuals remained faithful to the notion that the historical-materialistic method was a fraud where the duality of form and content was analogous to that of any other idealistic philosophy, like the duality of spirit and flesh or space and time. While doing that, they risked being politically labeled right-wingers, because the so-called dialectic method declared itself as the only one with a right to a scientific foundation. In this way paradoxically, the real intellectual and artistic elite, which previously fought for the affirmation of the "left" tendencies, consciously distanced itself from them at the moment they became an instrument of the ruling policy.

In all its belonging programmes, the dictatorship was turned into a dogma of a fight of the "soul-engineer" squadrons against the so-called decadent art, and thus, literally and symbolically, the Baudelaireque thesis about the materialistic liquidators of the soul experienced its darkest self-ironic realization.

However, Zdanov's and other variants of quasi-aesthetics were and still remain more notionless than any other so-called l'art-pour-l'artistique art, always remaining its vulgarised copy.

It is therefore not too harsh to state that in these circumstances of ruling cultural politics, the art critique is just what its subject-matter deserves.

At least, now we are fully aware that political propaganda means open, direct and clear exaggeration of one's own political ideology and the unmasking of the opponent's (during the course of which all means are justified). Therefore, it is not at all surprising that, for example, Hitler's "instructions" about organising political propaganda which say that "intellectualism should be unfailingly avoided because the majority of the populace is by nature and by approach to life feminised, and thus more influenced by feeling and less by argument", can be matched with rules of a much poorer and smaller Partisan "Agitprop-Centre" from whose instructions we can read something similar : "It is necessary to perform all the preparations corresponding to the level, character and mood of the masses in question - those we wish to influence - for propaganda is not enough down-to-earth, while there is too much "high politics" and generality".

And finally, by analysing the most important characteristics of communication through art and art critique it is possible to establish certain relevant indicators. Thus regarding topic, art is affirmative and mobilisational in character, realistic, often with monumental aspirations.

As a specific form of mass communication, the posters are also very indicative. The iconographic characteristics indicate common repertoire of signs and symbols, together with conceptualized types of super-people and the mythology of heroism.

Now common ideological interests no longer exist. The development of capitalistic societies after the fall of the Wall in countries of former Eastern Block is going on very slowly, because old values are lost and the new are not yet established.

Political forces today can no longer ensue from the supposition that there exists a solid "basis" which with a rifle at foot is steadfastly waiting for commands from the center of the party. The community in the postmodern society thus actually can no longer become totalitarian. Resistance against complete assimilation and the spectrum of personal interests are too large to be determined by only one logic.

This is of course predicts contradictions. The postmodern - or more precisely - the plural society is a conflicting society. Contradictions between different interests in man himself, between different individuals and groups are commonplace. A process in which we will be able to articulate these conflicts and confront them without violence is thus of even greater importance. The solution of the pluralistic society is compromise or, less frequently, consensus. This society needs democratic decision-making procedures in order even to enable the articulation of interests. We need open and non-bureaucratic access to the political processes so that we can introduce them in the form of demands into politics and so people can be allowed joint activity. Cultural symbols and signs are no more than means for the articulation of interests.

It is our responsibility to employ the creative force of all these symbols, signs, forms and meanings to benefit our values or to leave them to the others.