

Ants Juske

**Is Stalinist and Nazi Art
Postmodernism?**

[Translated by Peeter Tammisto]

[1.745 words]

Estonia



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



Institute for
Contemporary
Art Zagreb

This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Ants Juske

Is Stalinist and Nazi Art Postmodernism?

Modernism and postmodernism are readily contrasted and outright graphically laid out in columns: innovative-conservative, metropolistic-regionalist, history-posthistory, utopia-anitutopia, and so on. Thus, attempts are made to explain the entire history of culture and art using the same scheme. The sharpest argument I have read with my own eyes claims that modernism already began during the era of early Christianity!

Naturally the contrast between modernism and postmodernism still displays metropolistic traits: the scheme which functions in cultures, where the emergence of contrast has a real basis, does not begin to function the same way elsewhere.

That was also how it was with modernism, on which we have tried to project our mottled art history. The favourite example cited by Linnar Priimägi is how the photographs of Toomas Volkmann were suitable for both the Dionysia exhibition of man at the end of the century as well as the Estfem exhibition. Yet this is also the case with Konrad Mägi, for example, whose paintings have been displayed at exhibitions of jugend, folk romanticism, impressionism and expressionism. The mixing of so-called pure styles inevitably occurs in peripheral cultures.

What can we say about ourselves when total confusion reigns in Russia regarding working the concept of postmodernism in, of which the seminar that recently took place in Helsinki entitled "Modernism and Postmodernism in Russian Literature and Culture" provided a good overview? There it turned out (from the presentation of M. Epstein) that there are characteristics which allow the beginning of Russian postmodernism to be fixed in the time of Peter the Great! To say nothing of Stalinism, since simulativeness (the symbols for things become more real than the things themselves) is one of the primary characteristics of

postmodernism, and is an inseparable companion of every type of ideologically saturated art.

This leads to the question of where to place the art of totalitarian regimes. The same question arose at the Berlin-Moscow exhibition presently on display, the most intriguing block of which is the comparison of Stalinist and national socialist art.

There is at first glance no mistaking this art for modernism because both dictatorships outright physically destroyed modernism. The logic of categorization would automatically conclude that consequently it is postmodernism. Alas, the matter is more complicated.

Simulative Stalin in the Communal Flat

Both Stalinist socialist realism and Nazi art truly have one of postmodernism's basic characteristics in the form of hyper-realism as Jean Baudrillard has described it. All of over-ideologized society together is actually one general hyper-reality, and there is probably no more "postmodernist" society as North Korea.

A story about Stalin comes to mind. He decided during another of his frequent bouts of night-time carousing that he wanted to visit one of his old comrades-in-arms from his days in Georgia. The latter lived somewhere in a suburb of Moscow in a communal flat. When Stalin knocked on the door with his camarilla, some woman opened the door and suffered a total shock. The next morning, she told her neighbour ladies an incredible story: "There was a knock at the door, I opened it and...there stood the portrait of comrade Stalin!"

Artificial reality is more realistic than reality itself in this model of society. In other words, hyper-realism dominates over reality. This gives rise to the utter theatricization of the entire society of the regime, which resembles the theatre of the classicist era. This same hyper-realism also displays itself in Stalinist and Nazi paintings.

I have always been fascinated by Aleksandr Laktionov's famous painting "A Letter from the Front", for which he was awarded the Stalin prize in 1948. It was on display at the Berlin exhibition, and since I also visited Dresden, a good comparison emerged with one of the most famous paintings of the Dresden Gallery, Vermeer's "Girl Reading a Letter". In my imagination, I added Salvador Dali's academistic surrealism and the photo-realism of the

1970's, and together it formed a nice sequence from the world of hyper-realism. It is worthwhile to study the treatment of light and shadow and the wondrous textures in Laktionov's painting: how the bright sunlight shines through the blouses of the girl and the old lady, how the smoke from the soldier's Russian cigarette winds about. The same academism that Dali used is even more impressive in the case of Laktionov. Laktionov, by the way, was a student of Brodsky. Dali acquired the same skills at the Barcelona Academy of Art.

I remember an art experience in Moscow in the 1980's where I visited a Laktionov exhibition. Naturally, "A Letter from the Front" was on display there, but in addition to that there was an unfinished copy of that same painting. "A Letter from the Front" immediately became an even bigger hit in soviet art, and Laktionov made many so called in response to demand. One of them is even in the Klaipeda Art Museum in Lithuania.

The unfinished copy was enlightening from the technical aspect of painting: the canvas was divided into squares and the surface of the painting was filled with only a patch of paint started from the upper left-hand corner. Laktionov had consequently copied the original version of his painting precisely the way hyper-realists transfer photographs to their paintings. One can ask Miljard Kilk how this is done. An artist painting something directly from the natural world can never succeed in achieving such hyper-realistic effects.

Aleksandr Ivanovitsh's Life as An Artificial Fairy-tale

The life story of Aleksandr Laktionov is also total postmodernism, reminiscent of an artificial fairy-tale. Some excerpts of a short monograph written by D. M. Ossipov in 1968 are cited here:

Aleksandr Ivanovitsh Laktionov was born in 1910 in Rostov on the banks of the Don River in a house on Moscow Street. Sasha does not remember his real mother, who died when Sasha was one and a half years old. His father married again after half a year and again with a washerwoman, this time of Polish descent. The second mother of the future artist died of typhus six years later during the civil war years.

Ivan Vassiljevitsh Laktionov went to work in the railway forge and he often brought little Sasha along to work. The sweaty workers forging hot iron left an impression on him. His father married once again, now for the third time, this time with a hospital orderly considerably younger than he. The

marriage turned out to be unhappy and after six years he divorced again. Thus, the father of the artist got married for already the fourth time with some woman from the collective farm called Marfa Aleksejevna, who died already during the years of the next great war.

Laktionov's father had seven children altogether from four marriages and all except for the future artist died young!

Laktionov's life is somehow dislocated in the direction of hyper-realism like all of his art. It is a predecessor to the present-day virtual reality in a certain sense. Postmodern man lives in the virtual image of the computer more than in the real world which he sees with his natural perception. The art of hyper-realist painting similarly recorded the world of the artist as seen through a slide. Laktionov's sketches allow us to presume that he used photographs as the basis for his paintings. It is not excessive to recall here that camera obscura occupied a central place in the technical aids used by Vermeer as well.

The simulative aspect is obvious in the case of Laktionov and for this reason we can speak of postmodernism in his case. All Stalinism seems like it was completely staged in Hollywood, looking back on it. People nevertheless felt physical pain, which was just as incomprehensible for many repressed communists as being shot down in the Gulf War was for American pilots, who had practiced virtual battles for months. Stalinism, on the other hand, is again a modernistic Gesamtkunstwerk, a utopia brought into being using repressive methods. Boris Groys has written convincingly about all of this.

The Russian avant-garde dreamed of a great utopia, the art of a new society, for which the year 1917 provided the opportunity. Malevitsh, Tatlin, Lissitzky and other futurists, constructivists and other radicals went along with the new regime, hoping to realize their utopias. Art was to move from the palaces of the rich bourgeois to the streets, from the gilded frames of museums to city squares. Majakovski exclaimed: "The streets are our paint brushes and the city squares are our palettes!"

Even so, the avant-garde Gesamtkunstwerk did not come into being, rather the Stalinist variety did. That which the surrealists led by Breton failed to achieve in democratic France was successfully achieved by Stalin. Good old academism, which was also Dali's secret love, after all, still suited the people as a total model for art. The people do not want art to come amongst it - it is some sort of modernist elitism as far as the people are concerned.

Perhaps the last 20 years have nevertheless reconciled the people with the avant-garde, at least in Western art. Reproductions of Kandinsky's abstract paintings hang on the walls even in the Latin-American soap operas broadcasted domestically here!

The postmodern era has brought about tolerance for all types of art. The avant-garde has become classic, and the old classics are themselves again back in favour. Essentially, two art forms declared contradictory at the end of the last century already have been equalized. The avant-garde itself has become a simulation, sign or icon which is revered in large museums. It is not idle talk which speaks of the institution of museums as a substitute for religion. We could paraphrase a famous quotation of Marx: "Art is the opium of the masses!" Just as Laktionov's painting captivates, so does Joseph Beuys's conceptualism.

We have come full circle, and hopefully I will not be accused of hyping Laktionov here either by hardened modernists or by hardened postmodernists. Altogether, everything is one and the same, or as the most famous phrase of postmodernism says: "Anything goes!"

Thus, we can in summary once more arrive at the conclusion that both Stalinist and national socialist art do not fit into categorization on the modernism-postmodernism scale. The culture of the end of the millennium seeks a way out of this categorization, and comrade Aleksandr Laktionov's paintings are worthy of attention as a brilliant example of simulation.