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CONTEMPORARY ART VS TOTALITARIAN ART: SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The article provides a semiotic analysis of the types of totalitarian culture and its manifestation in art, both classical and modern. On the basis of totalitarian culture semiotic analyses, it is shown that mass culture (and its attributes) may be considered a modern type of totalitarian culture. Particularly, the antidogmatic and antitotalitarian essence of the contemporary art phenomenon is highlighted. Based on the semiotic methodology, a key moment of demarcation between contemporary art and the ‘totalitarian’ one has been emphasized. The conclusion about the inconsistency of signs and symbols of contemporary as compared to totalitarian art has been drawn. Contemporary art could be referred to as a tool for tracing, revealing and even combating totalitarianism in culture and life.

Keywords: avant-garde, contemporary art, totalitarian art, mass culture, semiotic approach, postmodernism.

Introduction

Art is called upon to play an important role in society. According to E. G. Yakovlev (2011), “truly artistic work of art should answer not only the questions of artistic and aesthetic life but also the core social, political and moral questions of time. Therefore it should be a universal, polysemantic phenomenon” (p. 106). Contemporary art is a symbol of protest which comprises many qualities, not only the quality of high workmanship but also other criteria like aesthetical ideal, which appeal to the social domain. With the development of civilization, its ideological function in connection with “symbolizing politics” (Smirnov, 2016) comes to the forefront. Such an ambivalent connection between art and society can be used purely for political goals when the

role of art is reduced to the position of a “servant of ideology” as it was in the USSR or the Third Reich in the twentieth century. There are two variants of this conditionality: socio-historical plots in art, or reflection of socially significant events and phenomena in art; an ideological function of art, which reflects the main ideas of the dominant political ideology.

The aim of the article is philosophic and semiotic analysis applied to the sphere of art, revealing the clashes and discrepancies between totalitarian and contemporary art in cultural history and philosophy.

Main Part

Since all the surrounding world is a sign system

which is represented as a piece or work of art, and the language of art is a bundle of artistic means and principles which is intrinsic to the art as a whole, it is said to be possible to use semiotic methods to distinguish contemporary art from the totalitarian one and show anti-dogmatic nature of contemporary art. From this point of view, a piece of art is a complex of symbols or encrypted signs to decode. It is possible due to the dual function of sign: it denotes a thing which it refers to, and it is itself a thing to denote.

However, the language of art differs from the other languages of the communication of culture, which makes it difficult to apply semiotics. Nevertheless, the analysis of works of art allows seeing the structures and symbols of politics, revealing totalitarian tendencies in culture and life. The main method is the semiotic reconstruction of codes, starting with Umberto Eco's (1989) idea that "every code, every language, is based on the existence of more elementary codes and that all forms of communication can be traced from one code back to another toward a single unique code, the first ... constitutes the only real structure of all communication, of all languages, all cultural operations and levels of signification" (p. 245). By finding the primary ("pre-established") code, we might have revealed the initial genuine ideas of this or that text or work of art.

The symbol is a special sign possessing a concealed encrypted meaning (or meanings) but relating in some sense to the event or process designated. It is also a means of storing encrypted information. The interpreting of symbols always requires the possession of the key to decoding the information. The sense begins to arise at the moment of substitution of the meaning of one sign by the meaning of another. An original uniting of meanings in one designating act has occurred. The process of which has its grounds in the principle of similitude in aesthetics. In other words, a sign becomes a symbol when its use refers not to a general but an abstract meaning, conventionally referring to this object. Concerning the totalitarian codes that can be decoded in particular works of art, it could draw the differences between independent art and totalitarian one.

According to Eco, any work of art is a sign system, which can be interpreted in *x*-modes. Amenable to the semiotic theory, culture code varies and depends not on the author but on the

reader. Thus, there is not a sole "rightful" reading of the text (an "open work" provides a set of interpretations). So, the phenomena of "aesthetic information" is nothing else but a set of possible interpretations falling under no theory of communication. Semiology, or any aesthetics, could always say about what a work of art would become, but never – what it has become. "What the work of art became could be best explained by the critics as a narrative about the experience of personal reading" (Eco, 1968, p. 70). However, there could be "closed" forms of art that are used, for example, in totalitarian kinds of culture (including the ones of traditional societies). However, according to Eco (1989), "a work of art is never really 'closed,' because even the most definitive exterior always encloses an infinity of possible 'readings'" (p. 24).

One important task for such semiotic analysis is revealing ideologies. "Signs refer to an ideology and vice versa, and semiotics, as a science about the relationship between codes and messages, is constantly recognizing ideologies that concealing under the rhetoric methods" (Eco, 1968, pp. 94-95). "Totalitarianism" is proved to be a very controversial term since the meaning of it was changing since its very first usage by G. Gentile in 1928's article devoted to the reflection on fascism phenomena. Briefly, totalitarian culture comprises strict state hierarchy; strong central authority; coming back to classical forms and subjects in art; prevailing vertical forms in architecture; subject forms, national traditions, mythology and decorativeness, and loftiness in architecture and fine arts. F. Neumann, Z. Neumann, H. Arendt, F. Hayek, and H. Marcuse are thought to be the founders of the concept. In western historiography, totalitarianism is considered as not only a kind of political regime based on total fear but also economic and technical for "totalitarian" "is not only a terroristic political coordination of society but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests" (Marcuse, 2002, p. 5). A close definition ("totalitarian syndrome") is offered by Z. Brzezinski and K. Friedrich, who think of totalitarianism as a kind of social modelling, the "adaptation of autocracy to twentieth-century industrial society" (Friedrich, 1965, p. 3). According to Y. M. Antonyan, "totalitarianism", as a specific regimen, can be considered a "totality", "general of-

fence against the civilization” (p. 4). According to him, dictators in their violent ruling reveal K. G. Young’s collective unconsciousness (treated as a memory of ancient human experience) having hardly been restrained by social, psychological and cultural frames. These found their highest representation in avant-garde art.

On the wave of rising modernist ideas in the 1920s, a close alliance of art and politics emerged; ideologies and art were often closely related. This happened during the arising of fascism in Italy and the early years of Soviet power in Russia when society was intoxicated with the ideas of building a “new world” (the founder of Italian Futurism, F. T. Marinetti, was the second person in fascist Italy). So, it is a commonly held belief that one of the precursors of classical totalitarian forms they name avant-garde.

In the early soviet culture of avant-garde (cubism, futurism, and so on) was more akin to the Nazi than the Stalinist one. This will be clearer if we take into account that, for example, Mussolini in the early period “belonged to the Bolshevik wing of the Italian Communist Party and in 1924 still expressed his admiration for Lenin while, at the same time, quoted Trotsky, who called Mussolini his best student” (Golomshtok, 1994, p. 54). Historians note the inconsistency and ambiguity of such a “union” (for example, there have been attempts to justify Expressionism as true “Aryan art” by artists E. Barlach and E. Nolde, but Hitler had already said his word and their paintings were branded as “unnatural obscenity” (Griffin, 2007). Even then, in Soviet Russia, the representative of Futurism, V. Mayakovsky, sharply spoke out against such an alliance.

One of the main symbols for futurism was “revolution”: “the art of the XXth century illustrates the text of Marx” (Gutov, 2007, p. 138). Moreover, In the Soviet Union and later in Maoist China, theories of mass artistic appeal were used to promote the Revolution both at home and abroad. In Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, they asserted the putative grandeur of the epoch. The art serving the Revolution or the new millennial society became total realism, and it was always a slave to the state and the cult of personality and, ultimately, one more weapon in the arsenal of oppression. Since the revolution must destroy the old world completely, they would need to build some new one, the “brave new

world” that does not exist in reality and the building of which every citizen of the state has to be concerned. Futurism and fascism were united by the common goal, “the simple-minded, single-minded purposefulness with which they choose those elements from existing ideologies which are best fitted to become the fundamentals of another, entirely fictitious world” (Arendt, 1973, pp. 361-362).

An artist of avant-garde art is by any means turned to the future. “It is its turn to become an engine for the world development, historical transformation, ethical perfection” (Sers, 2004, p. 17). National-socialist and Bolshevik ideologies gave the political grounds to this movement in art. So, the resemblances between fascist and soviet totalitarian cultures could be evoked, particularly by the fact that “both of them adopted their symbolics from the leftist, primarily communist one (for instance, crimson colour of party’s banner, marches of labour movement that were performed along with reading of national-socialist texts, celebration of the 1st of May, and even the word “socialism” itself)” (Siladi, 1994, p. 151).

What is the relationship of the avant-garde to totalitarian art? According to Philippe Sers, the avant-garde phenomenon is a “revolution” in culture. It was provoked by the overturn in artistic representation, which led to abstract art coming. It began with the “emancipation of art” and subsequently involved all kinds of art. The idea of the painting, which was not bound to reality, easily prevails over the principle of figurativity (symbolism). Owing to abstract revolution, the world of avant-garde revealed the unity of poetry and art brilliantly brought to light by the oriental tradition; in architecture, the avant-garde revolution generally is displayed as the functionalist combat against embellishment.

Russian constructivists believed that the transformation should transform humans. The world should be renewed, and the evil related to “the obsolete types of behaviour and oppressive modes of life will vanish” (Sers, 2004, p. 18). The significant core idea of the avant-garde is: “art could bear the evil” (Sers, 2004, p. 18). However, the inevitable evil. Kandinsky, as well as Mayakovsky, saw the Russian Revolution as the dawn of “the great era of Spiritual”. Moreover, many avant-garde artists used totalitarian means in advertisement (e.g., Mayakovsky and

Rodchenko in their posters for Soviet producers and traders). Working for the state's trade and industry, they propagandized the new lifestyle. That is what unites avant-garde to totalitarian culture, as soon as the latter also experimented with individuals and society in the development of a new way of life. On the other hand, there were much more discrepancies than similarities because "avant-garde has its foundation not in power, but in oneness, referring first and foremost to freedom ... if the main characteristic of totalitarianism is the devaluation of individual, the distinguishing feature of the avant-garde is the praise of individual uniqueness" (Sers, 2004, p. 321). It can be instantiated by totalitarian regimes in Chile and Romania: "...Pinochet wanted art to be an apolitical product on the neoliberal art circuit, which led to the politicization of alternative art in Chile, whereas Ceausescu, who, after his 1971 July Theses, under the spell of massive propaganda he saw in China and North Korea, demanded that art serve the revolution, which led to apolitical alternative art" (Preda, 2017). These were the alternatives by which art could pave its way to freedom and independence. It also was what soon led to the spiritual rupture of the avant-garde with the culture of totalitarianism.

Another symbol in totalitarian art is the phenomenon of "folklorization of socialism" during Stalin's time, when there was "the integration of communist ideology and avant-garde art into a network of legends and myths, constituting the historical memory of a certain people or, more precisely, a certain nation" (Groys, 2015, pp. 61-62). The same grievances about the past cultural patterns and fears of the modern ones to destroy them can see in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the 1930s. We have similar ideas of appealing to classical art regarded as indisputable authority, the firm belief that both of them follow this classical tradition in their clearly ideologically engaged art. This was one more distinction with contemporary art, which was mostly inconsistent with classical traditions and means. However, contemporary art goes far beyond the restraints of classical art. Its purpose is to overcome the influence of classical art canons and regulations, which are considered to be dogmatic and, therefore, frustrating the freedom of art.

The ideological veil (the respective codes) saw "publicly recognized" art as the main criteria

for its aesthetic value in the first place. Particularly, the main meaning of the Central Committee VKP(b) resolution "On the party's politics in fiction area" of 18.06.1925 had a call for the artists to "elaborate an artistic form clear to *millions* (italicized by author)" (Kemenov & Sarabyanov, 1957, p. 175). Certainly, it does not relate to any democratic intention, which can be better understood in demagogical Stalin's words about artistic workers as "engineers of the human souls" in the "brave new world".

The same views on socialist art, along with the establishment of Stalinism in politics and socialist realism in art, have arisen. During the First All-Union Congress of Soviet writers in August 1934, people's commissar of culture and chief political propagandist A. Zhdanov defined the main method of artistic literature and literary criticism that is "Socialist Realism". He pointed out the tasks of socialist realism which were before writers and artists who should have known "life so as to depict it truthfully in our works of art" and "not depict it scholastically, lifelessly, or merely as 'objective reality;' we must depict reality in its revolutionary development ... truth and historical concreteness of the artistic depiction must be combined with the task of the ideological transformation and education of the working people in the spirit of Socialism..." (Zhdanov, 1976, p. 293). It is also important to notice that the implementation of socialist realism doctrine into life was relieved by the media revolution that was taking part in that period: "By presenting their works on the radio, the writers put into practice the basic principle of Socialist Realism – creative work for the masses" (Postoutenko, 2010, p. 181).

On the other hand, Hitler, being an artist himself and the leader of the Nazi party, also used contemporary art for his political purposes in Nazi Germany. However, this relationship was of a different nature: approximately since the second half of the 1930s, the era of "cultural terror" began, which was taking place simultaneously with avant-garde declining. In July 1937, several anti-contemporary art exhibitions took place, the most famous of which was in Munich, where bonfires burnt the works of "degenerated art". According to the Nazi ideology in the Third Reich, "everybody, especially artist, must work in a way determined by the Führer, and respond to his wishes" (Sers, 2004, p. 48). Accordingly,

should reject his independent decision; Hitler is becoming that God-creator that had yet been desired in Renaissance” (Sers, 2004, p. 48). The purpose of all these actions both in the Third Reich and in the USSR was to show the “anti-aesthetic” nature of contemporary art. The typical accusations in Germany are of “the distortion of reality and, hence, in decay and degeneration from the point of view of aesthetics”, as well as of violation of racial and national ideas and “culture-Bolshevism” (Golomshtok, 1994, p. 105). In the USSR, these were typical accusations of the hostility of contemporary art people “both in the structure of their thoughts and in their abstruse meaningless form” (in such a way, for example, G. Nedoshivin defined contemporary art in the article *O narodnosti sovetskogo iskusstva (On the nationality of Soviet art)* in the magazine *Art* (1950, No. 6)). These often follow the political repressions on artists.

So, the bold and innovative development of avant-garde art showed its controversies and, inevitably, became an opponent to the totalitarian culture coming. The radical features and spirit of avant-garde art refer mostly to the advent of science-technical overturn, which impacted any social sphere dramatically. The latter, together with its forcible character, made it close to totalitarian art. However, the nature of avant-garde, being free, remained intact, leading to the opposition to the totalitarian culture and art. This can find its parallel in the present-day cultural situation in Russia.

Nowadays, the features of totalitarian art have been coming about in Russia, which may be some clue to the revival of totalitarianism. This is explained, first of all, by the disposition to the totalitarian values being intrinsic to many modern Russian politicians: according to Elena Moroz (2006), “There are still modes of totalitarian dictatorship thought that tend to manage the state of public opinion among a significant number of Russians” (p. 67). Particularly, there was an ambiguous and vague attitude to Stalin in Russian President V. Putin’s speeches. For instance, in Oliver Stone’s interview in 2017, Putin claimed that “over-blaming Stalin is one of the modes or ways of attack on the Soviet Union and Russia” (Dunayevskiy, 2017). This can be explained by S. Yu. Shokarev (2017), who thinks that “the idea of M. N. Pokrovskiy that ‘history is politics turned back’ (1928) is returning and

becoming mainstream” (p. 144). It also affects modern Russian cultural codes. One example of this is that E. Kablukov considers the resemblances between Putin’s and Stalin’s images through the prism of mass media and, ultimately, contemporary culture. “The modern Russian media select the most spectacular breaking news with the participation of Putin and construct the star image, well sold to the Russian consumer” (Kablukov, 2020, p. 73).

The threats of “hero-worship”, “genius” as the ideals of the totalitarian mode of thought, or “the culture of the mob” were pointed out by Hannah Arendt (1973): “all the art theories of the twenties tried desperately to prove that the excellent is the product of skill, craftsmanship, logic, and the realization of the potentialities of the material” (p. 332), not the favour of the God or genius. An example of this is Arendt’s name Bauhaus and functionalism – the style which is making the principle of rationality prevail in art and overcomes the conflict between “expressionist sensations and rational manufacturing principles” (Lavrentyev, 2007, p. 153). However, with the advent of Nazism, the development of these ideas in design was broken off. All the industry powers were put for weapon production. There was neoclassical style, hypertrophied in their sizes of interiors, and imperial style prevailed in architecture. The oeuvre of the Bauhaus was considered alien to the German spirit, and things must reflect “healthy”, intrinsic to the German folk “sense of form” (Lindinger, 1991, p. 92). According to A. Hitler, it must have been a “fight against poisoning the soul”, “purification of culture”:

This purification of our culture must expand into almost every area. Theater, art, literature, cinema, press, advertisements, and store windows must have the pollution which is rotting our world removed, and they must be forced into the service of a moral idea of State and culture. Public life must be free from the overpowering perfume of eroticism and also of all unmanly elements and false prudishness. In all these things, the goal and road to that goal must be carefully considered then set in stone for the preservation of our people’s health in body and soul. The right to personal freedom is secondary to the duty of preserving the race (Hitler, 2009, p. 166).

Such “purification” meant, indeed, the trivializing of culture, the submission of art to the political and ideological ideas of race prevailing and mythical “Arian” nation superiority. In Russia during the same period, we could also see the same processes: the Russian avant-gardist double of the Bauhaus, Vkhutemas (Vkhutein) activity spread over the revolutionary 1920s when the young Russian design nurture was developed. Both schools, Bauhaus and Vkhutemas, flourished in a relatively liberal period and were closed under pressure from the increasingly totalitarian culture of the 1930s (Nazi in Germany and Bolshevik in Russia).

It is true that contemporary art (which Umberto Eco called “open work”) is contrary to traditional one: “the conventional sense and order of traditional art reflect an experience of the world wholly different from ours, and we deceive ourselves if we try to make this sense and order our own” (Eco, 1989, p. XIV). Art represents our experience of the world through the way it organizes its constituents rather than through what the constituents themselves represent. And the traits of avant-garde, some of which were succeeded by contemporary art, are freedom, boldness, openness and “eclecticism”, transgression (the intent to go beyond any borders), major lack of a uniform, organizing principle. However, in the 1930s, together with the establishment of official ideologies like Fascism, Communism or Nazism, there the main rival of independent art appeared: clashes between avant-garde and ideology that resulted in the ban of the former. Today, however, we have another threat to independent art, which is mass culture (and its main product, kitsch).

Kitsch art is free from any meaning attributed, of any values. Kitsch is also a form of trivialization of culture, “...if Kitsch was nothing more than a series of messages emitted by the culture industry to satisfy certain demands without palming them off as art, there would be no dialectic relationship between Kitsch and the avant-garde” (Eco, 1989, p. 188), – this witnesses that mass culture and contemporary art have a different nature.

The culture of Kitsch that has always borrowed from the higher culture and art is “taking its revenge on the avant-garde, by borrowing its procedures and its styles for its ads, where once again the only thing that matters is the pro-

duction of an effect and the display of a higher level of taste” (Eco, 1989, p. 215). One more distinction of Kitsch from art is that Kitsch affects an audience with not merely artistic tools (revoking aesthetic feeling) but rather psychological ones. As a good example here, we can take the effect of advertising: “Repetition of identical sounds and their gradual accumulation intensifies the spiritual atmosphere in its finest essence, to deepen emotions... One could compare it with an individual, who receives a powerful impression from some constant repetitious action, thought, or feeling, even though he is hardly capable of absorbing the different actions as a heavy material would absorb the first rain drops” (Kandinsky, 1946, p. 74).

So, on becoming Kitsch, art promotes the unscrupulousness of aesthetic taste. Artists, salon masters, critics and the public flock to the place where “something is happening”. However, “the matter of fact of this ‘something is happening is the reality of money’”: in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it would be possible and useful to determine the value of the works of art according to the income they give” (Lyotard, 1983, pp. 334-335). So, the totality of money or utilitarian goals is distorting and biasing its main ideas and impacting the social function of art.

We could find many affinities in modern Russian cultural politics. One more example of totalitarian-like art of mass culture is issuing of propagandist comics named *Super-Putin* during the election campaign in 2011. In a Marvel-like manner, it depicts President Putin and Dmitry Medvedev as superheroes that are fighting the world’s evil, impersonated by Nadezhda Novodvorskaya and Alexander Navalny (in such a nicknaming way performing well-known opposition leaders: Valeria Novodvorskaya and Alexey Navalny). So, modern Russian government leaders are exposed to be stars that are similar to the images and methods of political popularization used by Hitler or Stalin coming to rule in the 1930s. They were the characteristic signposts in the new Russian official culture. One more case in point was a depiction of V. Putin and other present statesmen along with Stalin’s portrait and the slogan “Crimea is ours” in the main military temple of mosaic in Kubinka town, Moscow region. At the same time, there are more attempts to constrain the development of contemporary art in Russia. A good case in point is a conflict situa-

tion in St. Petersburg's artist-calligrapher Pokras Lampas' *Supremacist Cross* being depicted and then removed from the square in Yekaterinburg due to violation of the "Law on the defence against the insulting believers' religious feelings" of 2013. While the former images can be treated as Kitsch, the Pokras Lampas' ones are a typical example of contemporary art.

The purpose of art is neither accurately representing reality nor the way of earning money, but rather – living in artistic reality, doing experiments with it, the way of avant-garde art, fully opposed to what Kitsch is created for.

So, we have mass culture comprised of both liberal and dogmatic features, which, accordingly, could be the way to either democratic or totalitarian cultures. This mostly depends not on the author but – on the audience, the public who come to watch the works of art, on their ability to comprehend them. So, mass culture, its methods (advertisement) and its products (Kitsch, collage, parody) should be added to the classical characteristics of totalitarian culture that have previously been mentioned. And the role of contemporary art (including avant-garde) is to oppose mass culture and its totalitarian-like sorts of profane art.

The essence of contemporary art "can be comprehended through by the essence of free thought (or Philosophy)" (Ukhov, 2017, p. 456). Moreover, there was a succession of many ideas of philosophy which were borrowed by contemporary art and vice-versa. Thus, independent art, resurrected after the death of Stalin, also called "unofficial art" or "underground art", was associated with the problems of "individual freedom and responsibility" as "freedom to choose oneself" and to "form oneself by their actions and deeds" (Matveeva, 2010, p. 30). A work of contemporary art is a "pure idea" embodied in new forms of artistic expression. While a philosopher creates a text (a discourse), an artist creates an image. An image in contemporary art is a text with concealed meaning to decode (even if it is formally talking about the deconstruction of meanings).

However, nowadays, the semiotics of fine arts stays of little interest to researchers. Partially, this is because it is very difficult to separate minimal discrete units that can be denoted as a system of signs. On the other hand, even the units separated could have an infinite number of meanings. This

is justified by V. Bychkov, who thinks that inside the image symbol represents a hardly separated on analytical level deep-lying component, which purposely *leads* (italicized by author) the spirit of the recipient onto *spiritual reality* (italicized by author), that has been absent in the work of art itself" (Bychkov, 2018, p. 85). It also agrees with Eco's mention that the sign of image is always contextual.

The symbol in art reveals the artistic image and is its spiritual kernel. The manifestation of the artistic image in the symbol justifies the high artistic and aesthetic value of the work of art: "The symbol (here we talk about *artistic* (italicized by author) meaning) as a deep accomplishment/fulfilment of the image, its intrinsic artistic and aesthetic (non-verbal!) spiritual *content* (italicized by author) witnesses of the high significance (value) of the work, of high gifts or even genius of its author" (Bychkov, 2018, p. 85). Therefore, the symbolism of the artistic image is a criterion of artistic solemnity and highest figurativeness. In the artistic and aesthetic field, symbol relates to the system of signs and the system of images.

Semiotic analysis of fine arts gains its peculiarity from the mode of organization of its elements in a message rather than the number and resemblances between elements-signs. The language of painting is being built with the help of contrasts and comparisons, which is why it is a semi-symbolic system. Eco distinguishes two kinds of encoded information: "semantic information" and "aesthetic information". According to Eco, while semantic plurality "is not enough to determine the aesthetic value of a work" (Eco, 1989, p. 41), the aesthetic function "gives us something that we did not yet know and expect: and it gives it to us because it creates quotas of information at some levels of the message; because it unexpectedly blends the levels together; because they are forced to identify a new idiolect, which is the structural law of the single work; because it questions the code, indeed the background codes, and shows us unsuspected possibilities" (Eco, 1968, p. 83). So, the work of art should present some new ideas referring to different cultural codes, in any case, not the only one, in the case of totalitarian culture. By possessing the culture code, we could decrypt it, revealing additional information needed to understand it appropriately (not just bluntly). By the

semantic analysis, we estimate the work of art as it is (i.e., in its genre, artistic means used, etc.), while by the semiotic analysis, we understand its symbolic meaning, its metaphysical sense. The latter relates to the socio-historical, ideological, and political function of the work of art. In other words, a picture may have two layers of meaning: on the one side of what we see, and on the flip side – its deeper meaning or sense.

Seeing “the crisis of contemporary bourgeois civilization is partly due to the fact that the average man has been unable to elude the systems of assumptions that are imposed on him from the outside, and to the fact that he has not formed himself through a direct exploration of reality”, Eco thinks that the contemporary art’s discourse would “go well beyond questions of taste and aesthetic structures to inscribe itself into a much larger context: it would come to represent modern man’s path to salvation, toward the reconquest of his lost autonomy at the level of both perception and intelligence” (Eco, 1989, p. 83).

For example, M. Lifshitz, who had not recognized contemporary art in the context of the dominant totalitarian aesthetics, sought the source of aesthetic pleasure not in dialectical materialism’s “objective reality” but indeed in the personality of the creator, the artist himself: “art is derived here not from the consciousness and reproduction of the objective world, but from the irrepressible artist’s inner will” (Lifshitz, 1978, p. 306).

This is parallel to those ideas of Andy Warhol: “An artist is somebody who produces things that people don’t need to have but that he – for some reason – thinks it would be a good idea to give them” (Warhol, 1975, p. 141). It is completely proved by J. Kosuth, one of the founders of conceptual art direction, which to the utmost expresses the postmodernism principles. The “empty content” or “uselessness” of contemporary art is precisely the “content” that distinguishes them from children’s creativity. This is the virtue that science and philosophy lack. “Art will be viable, only without taking a philosophical position”, so the end of the twentieth century can be named the “end of philosophy and the beginning of art”. Here is what J. Kosuth (1993) says about the role of art in modern culture:

Here then, I propose rests the viability of art. In an age when traditional philosophy is unreal because of its assumptions, art’s

ability to exist will depend not only on its *not* performing a service but – as entertainment, visual (or other experience), or decoration – which is something easily replaced by kitsch culture and technology, but rather, it will remain viable by *not* assuming a philosophical stance, for in art’s unique character is the capacity to aloof from philosophical judgements. It is in this context that art shares similarities with logic, mathematics and, as well, science. But whereas other endeavors are useful, art is not. Art indeed exists for its own sake (Kosuth, 1993, p. 24).

So, philosophy, being unable to carry out cognitive functions in contemporary culture, should pass its functions over to art. Philosophy suffers the flaw that makes it defective: it is in some sense “useful”. Art, on the other hand, is intrinsically “useless” – it does not require any funds to develop. An example of this is conceptual art, which rejects not only art forms but the very idea of expressibility by means of art.

Finally, one way for the “modern man’s autonomy and identity’s reconquest” is such features of contemporary art as absurd.

As V. Bychkov thinks, the general meaning of active appealing of contemporary artistic creativity to the absurd is in “shattering and demolishing traditional ideas of mind, reason, logic, order being the firm universalia of human existence and culture” or in “the attempt by epatage or *shock* (italicized by author) ... to activate human consciousness and creative capacity for the search for some fundamentally different, alternative paradigms of being, thought, an artistic-aesthetic expression which are adequate to the present stage of the cosmo-ethno-anthropocivilized process” (Bychkov, 2008, p. 100). It is possible in this way to create the “perfect man” (in V. I. Vernadsky’s and P. Teilhard de Chardin’s sense) since the modern society “experiences acute deficiency of the ‘human’, not the ‘super-human’ or ‘ultra-human’, the emanation of which is in abundance in mass culture, but – ‘God-manhood’ or ‘Cosmo manhood’, whose outlines are still visible only as if in a fog” (Melikyan, 2016, p. 56).

So, those philosophers who write about the establishment of new patterns and canons aimed at the degradation of culture (for example, V. A. Kutyrev, A. Dugin, etc.) may not avoid ideologi-

cal engagement and, in such a way, appeal to the totalitarian culture. On the contrary, “Absurdity, alogism, paradoxicality, rubbish, non-objective, non-figurative, nonsense, glossolalia, etc. concepts were used to designate those art structures that expressed the irrational foundations of being, life, creativity ... the expression of the absurdity of human life, social relations, being, as a whole, occupies a central place in the works of Kafka, Joyce, Kharms, Vvedensky, Beckett, Ionesco, Burroughs, Dali, Greenaway, Barney, Cage” (Bychkov, 2008, p. 100).

By deconstructing the foundations of the old art in this way, new ones are created. The latter are also necessary only in order for a new trend in the art to destroy them, revealing itself in the art of the future. On the contrary, the culture of unfreedom, totalitarianism, with all its energies, is striving to conserve these foundations and subjugate them politically for the reason of slowing down the development of art and culture as a whole.

Conclusion

Contemporary art, with its numerous and constantly emerging new directions, wherever possible, seeks to break rigid regulations – this is the basic principle of contemporary art that does not tolerate any form of dogmatism. The main features of contemporary art can be expressed through concepts like “free”, “anti-dogmatic”, and “anti-totalitarian”, which make up the main tasks of contemporary art are: revealing totalitarian characteristics in social reality and preserving those by developing alternative, ideologically neutral, ways of art.

Since any cultural phenomena, be it everyday ideologically engaged thought or work of art, inevitably finds its representation in signs, we have applied it to the opposition of totalitarian-contemporary art, revealing cultural codes accordingly. In totalitarian art, semiotic analysis explicates such signs and symbols: the appeal to classics as a pattern; ruling party spirit principle – the works of art must represent the party (Communist, Fascist, Nazi and so on) from the positive side only, and characters depicted must be the party members; “people” (narodnost’) principle (in the sense of accessibility of art to the people’s masses perceiving and representa-

tion of their lifestyle); life-asserting, optimistic pathos and revolutionary-romantic heroic spirit. One more characteristic and signs of socialist realism were: the prevailing social-historical myths and solemnity in their interpretations like the idealization of nature, false pathos, historical falsity, excessive rational organization of the picture, the hyperbolic scale of artworks and so on.

On the flip side, contemporary art shows just the opposite symbols: the repudiation of classical traditions, pluralism in methods, revoke of subject-object relationship, subjectivity and absurd, formalism (repudiation of forms), and aspiration for lifting the borders between art and reality. The above-mentioned symbols find their philosophical grounds in postmodernism culture. Contemporary art is part of a cultural dialogue taking place in small groups. The very topics of this dialogue between artist and audience are politics, personal and cultural identity, family, community, and nationality. As a whole, it is diverse and eclectic in the sense that it opposes uniformity, any organizing principles, especially ideologies. That means that contemporary art could be considered an instrument for tracing, revealing and even combating totalitarianism in culture and even in life. So, it is not by chance that the recognition and respect for contemporary art in spiritually advanced societies tend to coexist with respect for basic democratic principles.

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