

Lev Kreft
History and Everyday Life

In times of modernism, one of the most accentuated, used and abused possible functions of art was its ability to produce meaning, give sense and promote social values. In a way, since art has been functionalized before modernism to give the metaphysical world some perceptive existence for a religious purpose, in modern times art was expected to produce persuasive and mobilising images of the historical dimension of unending progress, emancipation and hope. This led to some of the divisions that were presumably overcome by the post-modern approach, such as the division between art in mass culture and art as an expression of truth, or the distinction between high elitist art and low popular art. Some philosophers specifically stressed the difference between the art which has become lost in the already existing reality, and the art which opens new perspectives of advancing human progress.¹ Kant introduced in his third *Critique* the difference between human happiness and human culture as the two ends (*causa finalis*) of nature, with this distinction being useful for art as well. We may also conclude that in modernism human happiness was associated with everyday life as its *Lust*, while human culture depends on higher and sublime processes of history as its driving force and enthusiasm. This feature of the distinctive and opposed qualities of history and everyday life was acknowledged by those artists who subdued their art to history, and therefore proclaimed that love, even in its non-romantic avant-garde image, and lyricism as such, have to be abandoned for the sake of the art of revolutionary enthusiasm. The case of Mayakovsky and his poetic expression of this necessary shift is well known. If we envisage this feature from the side of the public, we should also remember that Lenin said that during revolution, in his occasional and rare spare time, he could not allow himself to enjoy the

¹ Besides the well-known case of Adorno and his insistence on truth as an essential characteristic of art, there is also Marcuse who wrote in 1977: »The *nomos* which art obeys is not that of the established reality principle, but of its negation. But mere negation would be abstract, the 'bad' utopia. The utopia in great art is never the simple negation of the reality principle, but its transcending preservation (*Aufhebung*) in which past and present cast their shadow on fulfilment. The authentic utopia is grounded in recollection.« (Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension. Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Beacon Press, Boston 1978, p. 73.)

better part of his artistic favourites because their works made him too soft for making the revolution.

For a long period of time it was believed that the business of the artist and art is to promote history, and that all the other dimensions of art are of lower importance and value. In the history of painting we can find a typical example of such a view. I have in mind Leon Battista Alberti who believed that he invented the correct way of representing Nature. As Cecil Grayson characterised the aim of this through the window of representational »realism«: »It does not follow from this methodological realism that the spectator should see a scene of 'real life'. The ideal Albertian painting will have as its subject what he calls a 'historia', inspired most probably by the reading of literature...«² Here, 'historia' is still more or less a story, and what is new is Alberti's »insistence on the 'historia' as *the* object of painting, and on the choice of the subject, its organisation and execution, as the greatest achievement of the artist.«³ 'Historia' is still not a History, but it became that later, after the famous conferences of the French Royal Academy,⁴ and reached its apogee in David's paintings of the French revolution and Napoleon. Still, in his praise of the painting, in what was at the time the well-known literary fashion of *lauda*, Alberti already knows that the skill of painting history has something to do with the divine power which elevates objects, actions and persons from everyday life to eternity. This dimension is shown at its best at the end of his essay: »This is all I had to say about painting in this book. If it is such as to be of some use and convenience to painters, I would especially ask them as a reward for my labours to paint my portrait in their 'historiae', and thereby proclaim to posterity that I was a student of this art and that they are mindful of and grateful for this favour.«⁵ The difference between history and everyday life is not a property or nature of objects, events or persons. It is the difference of importance and praise we attribute to them, and the actually used gesture of attribution could be that of artistic touch.

Dissatisfactions with the outcome of historical processes, especially with

² Cecil Grayson: »Introduction to *The Art of Painting*«, in: Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, Ed. by Cecil Grayson, Phaidon, London 1972, p. 13.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁴ The development of historical painting with all the necessary texts from this process is well shown in a recent and still unfinished presentation of history of different *genres in painting*, where historical *genre* is presented in its first *volume* (*Eine Geschichte der klassischen Bilggattungen*, Vol. 1, *Historienmalerei*, Eds. Thomas W. Gaethgens and Uwe Flechner, Reiner, Berlin 1990.

⁵ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, Phaidon, London 1972, pp. 105-107.

the results of revolutionary changes which afterward appeared as great expectations betrayed and great illusions lost,⁶ brought to the surface new visions of the historical function of art, one of these also being to invade, occupy and colonise everyday life as a decisive terrain for the victory of beauty over the ugliness of industrial production and urbanisation, and for uncovering the aesthetic dimension of meaning, sense and hope. This did not mean that everyday life had been adopted, recognised and inaugurated as such. It was promoted instead as a decisive battlefield for historical goals and ends. Art accepted this arena of combat, sharing a belief that the historical change, redemption and salvation have to begin and be won here and not on the grandiose historical scenes. This tendency is especially present in artistic movements from the end of the 19th century on, with *aestheticism* and *avant-garde* being their typical representatives. The difference between the usual aestheticization projects such as those found in John Ruskin, William Morris or our Jo_e PleÖnik, and *avant-garde* programmes which critically followed them, was the *avant-garde* idea that Art as a modernist institution had to be destroyed, its idea of beauty abandoned, and its usual manner of dealing with history and everyday life overthrown before it could help to create new conditions of everyday life. These supposedly new conditions include (a) new universal languages that only art can bring to life; (b) the subjugation of art to modern technical means, industrial discipline and useful purposes as its new criteria instead of old larpourlartistic and aestheticist criteria; (c) revolutionary propaganda as the main task of artistic engagement, together with such trivial, but nevertheless difficult civilisational steps as learning how to use a toothbrush; (d) the opening of new spiritual dimensions on the way of humankind to attain perfection, etc. Then, as in later period of the 20th century, everyday life became an important category and field of research in philosophy (Husserl, Heidegger, Lefebvre, Heller

⁶ Again, Jacques-Louis David is the best example of both enthusiasm and its aftermath. He was a radical follower of Jacobinism and an enthusiastic admirer of Robespierre, and exclaimed on July 26, 1794, a moment before the fall of Jacobins to Robespierre who threatened the Convention that he would commit suicide if he did not succeed in his historical mission: »If you drink hemlock I will drink it with you!« The next day, David escaped from Paris and thus escaped certain death as one of the most exposed supporters of a totalitarian regime (as we would characterise it today). In May 1795, when accused of having been a follower of Robespierre's bloody dictatorship, he replied: »Since this period, which has opened my eyes, I have maintained a reserve and circumspection in my conduct to the point of timidity. Learning from a harrowing experience to mistrust the appearances of patriotism, freedom, and good faith, I have broken every connection with the men whose company I kept before my detention.« (Both quoted in: Warren Roberts, *Jacques-Louis David. Revolutionary Artist*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill & London 1989, p. 94).

and others), sociology (Schütz, Berger, Luckmann, Garfinkel, Goffman, Cicourel and others), history (especially in the French Nouvelle Histoire school and its analyses of the history of everyday life), psychology (beginning with Freud's famous *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagsleben* from 1901) and other disciplines of *studia humanitatis*.⁷

Post-modern conditions, with all their ambiguity, were claimed to be the end of all such historical and artistic projects, beginning with Daniel Bell's proclamation of the end of ideology to Fukuyama's statement that history has come to an end. In philosophical discussions late Lyotard's announcement of the end of great narratives has been used and abused quite frequently. Those who embrace with delight such final conclusions about history and its expired licence, and speak about post-modern conditions in terms of emancipation of art from servitude and of liberation of everyday life from ideology, historical demands and political burdens, are often accused and confronted as reactionaries, commercialised thinkers and intellectuals without an ethical dimension. Still, attempts to introduce public engagement and historical pathos in contemporary art, as in the Kassel *Documenta 8* by Schneckenburger in 1987, were usually not successful, lacked the sublime power of former works and initiated conflicts arising from misunderstandings.⁸

In socialist countries the reception of post-modern issues took place under social conditions of totalitarianism in its last breath. As the dimension of history and of everyday life colonised by history was the battlefield of emancipation, quite a number of artistic means and techniques developed which dealt with the desanctification of history and decolonisation of everyday life. Their origins were in avant-garde art, although not in the part which embraced political revolution and communism, as the already-mentioned

⁷ For a good review of the contemporary meanings of »everyday life« as a theoretical category in the humanities, cf. Mirjana Nastran Ule, *Psychology of Everyday Life (Psihologija vsakdanjega življenja)* (ZPS, Ljubljana 1993).

⁸ In an interview for *Documenta Press* No. 4 (August 1987) Schneckenburger stated: »Strong reactions ('shameless theatricality') were caused by Robert Morris's work of art. A general mood of the end of the world was stated, also concerning Merz and, in any case, Beuys. There were critics who sarcastically spoke of a 'funeral – parody'. Is the necromancy intended? – Manfred Schneckenburger: I have nothing against sarcasm. Concerning Morris, most critics make it too easy for themselves. His pictures are manifestoes of the return of arts to the discourse of the extreme burdens and traumata of our past, anticipating an apocalyptic future. When today artists cease seeing linear patterns of development, but merely a coinciding of beginning and end, then it is here that the best philosophical brains are meeting. Foucault predicts the fall of mankind, and read up on the controversies, starting with Günther Anders or André Glucksmann! Who mentions necromancy, in spite of the so complex and subtle vision by Beuys, can't be in their right mind.«

Mayakovsky, as well as productivists, proletkultists and some others did. Instead, they promoted cosmic anarchism which put revolutionary change on a symbolic and spiritual level and not on the level of material and organisational revolution. Totalitarian art and ideology were exposed and abused without direct confrontations, but by using their methods and imagery in a manipulative way. This kind of art did not offer any immediate parodical sense. Its battle for the unoppressed aesthetic dimension avoided language and forms of direct combat for or against progress in art, as counter-revolutionary art or radical art did before. Russian formalists and Bakhtin understood parody as a struggle between new and old discourse, and saw in parody a means of progress in artistic language. What they did not have in mind was the kind of artistic practice which often allows for ambiguity and speculations.⁹ Other origins of this kind of critical art of the eighties were in *witz*, which is more than just a joke, especially under authoritarian or totalitarian rule when sometimes it is the only means of short and victorious emancipation of everyday life from much bigger and insurmountable forces of history.¹⁰

Witz is a rather different means of struggle for everyday life and against its occupation by history, as parody is, for parody is based on a struggle between the old surpassed language and a new progressive one which eliminates it from discourse. *Witz*, on the contrary, confronts the ruling

⁹ Such speculations occurred in the case of the imagery and methods of the Neue Slowenische Kunst group from Slovenia, for example, where it was not (and for some is not even now) clear what their attitude was to totalitarianism in its fascist, Nazi and communist forms. They themselves proclaimed totalitarian artistic manipulation as the principle which enables art to free itself from totalitarian politics which manipulate art. Their signs taken from Malevich were seen as Nazi signs, as in the case of Malevich's black cross, which was referred to by politicians, the police and the general public as a Nazi swastika.

¹⁰ That *witz* can become a work of art is well known, but proven also by Jaroslav Hašek and his influential and eternal *The Brave Soldier Švejk*. Jokes and anecdotes of the really existing socialism often show their ability to diagnose and not only to alleviate the personal burden, like in those two which explain the basic methods of Leninism in terms of the revolutionary suppression of lust. The first relates that Lenin always had a wife and a mistress, so that the wife thought that he is with his mistress, and the mistress believed him to be with the wife, while he was then free to study, study and study. The second tells of a painting at an annual exhibition on the theme of Lenin's life, sponsored by the great Stalin. There was a painting entitled 'Lenin in Smolni', and Stalin said: »This is very good, I remember seeing him there!« There was another one called 'The Young Lenin', and Stalin said: »It shows how high can a man come if he follows the Party!« But there was also one called 'Lenin in Warsaw', and Stalin said: »I can see Krupskaja in bed, and a young gardiste with her, but where is Lenin?« »Well, in Warsaw, of course.«

ideology on its own terms with laughter, but does not introduce new or more progressive discourse. The strategy of *witz* is also linked with the confrontation of the sublime, and grandeur with banality and triviality, thus employing images of history and everyday life intertwined in a surprisingly short embrace during which basic properties slide from one side to the other, with history perceived as something banal, trivial and a part of a ritual turned into an empty routine, with everyday life as something profound, meaningful, liberating and sublime.

In the 20th century art had to cope with history and everyday life more than ever before, and invented or repeated more strategies and tactics than ever before. It marched into battles under all possible banners; it escaped from the battlefield with all possible or impossible excuses; it shared and instigated enthusiasm and fanaticism alike, condemning them just a moment after, like *omne animal triste*, it helped to produce an historical meaning successfully or as an obvious failure.¹¹ At the end of a century it announced the final armistice. History became just one of the possible topics, everyday life became just one of the valuable perspectives of reality, while reality together with history and everyday life went through processes of total, global and universal aestheticization and, at the same time, through a process which denied reality its privileged and certain status of measure for other dimensions of possible and impossible worlds.¹² It appears that the expression »virtual« reality is just an unnecessary complication, for all possible realities are more or less virtual, with the exclusion of the utopian reality as the only one completely banned from the group of possible realities, and from poetically interesting worlds as well.

¹¹ As the career of David is typical for historical art from the times of revolution, Picasso's tries to bring it into life again and is typical for 20th century. While his *Guernica* really made history and produced history, his *Korean War* represents a false and empty self-mannerism.

¹² Referring to Leibniz's philosophy of possible worlds, I have in mind especially Baumgarten's aesthetical explanation of the artistic use of utopian and heterocosmic worlds. First, it is important to note that in his view the artist is »*quasi factor sive creator*« and the artwork »*quasi mundus*«, which means that art can be of help in preparing the second birth of the human being, his first birth as *imago Dei* is physical, and his second spiritual (§ LXVIII). In this *quasi mundus* we find fictions, i.e. fictitious entities and their represented objects that are possible or impossible in the existing world, which transforms them into real fictions, and fictions alone. Those fictions which are impossible just in the really existing world are heterocosmical, while those impossible in all possible worlds, the real world included, are utopian; heterocosmical fictions are poetic, while utopian ones are unsuitable for any kind of representing, and cannot be poetic (§ LI). Cf. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, bilingual Latin and Serbo-Croatian edition, ed. by Milan Damjanović, BIGZ, Belgrade 1985, pp. 56-57 & 40-41.

How can an aesthete as a philosopher determine whether such a framework of art's ideology is the final stage and outcome of a story of history and everyday life in art, and of art as the maker of history and everyday life? It may be that it is a final stage, as in the aestheticization of everyday life which, contrary to all expectations, lacks any higher and sublime meaning and follows no end. It may be that it is a final stage as in a revolution of everyday life which did not produce new and advanced human beings, and is, on the contrary, suspected to be party to totalitarian atrocities. These questions are similar to those treated by Augustine in his four books *On Christian Doctrine* about the interpretation of the Scripture, and introducing the difference between things and signs.¹³ His explanation of what signs are is connected with his idea of history and its meaning, namely, of history as what actually happened (*res gestae*) and of history as a sign for what we can hope for. His problem in *De civitate Dei* we can formulate as: »Is History a kind of Scripture?« An affirmative answer would mean that we can see through the historical process into the essence of things. We might ask ourselves in a similar way: »Does art today show any signs of an epochal meaning, be it in history and/or in everyday life?« Following the example of Augustine, this does not mean that we ask for the moments when History makes its great steps towards liberation and emancipation. Such steps were announced recently as fulfilments of national dreams. We cannot do this, even if we would wish to, because there is no great national art preceding, presenting or following these events, as there had been in the 19th century, and there is no Great Art of History any more, not even of such a fake kind as in the times of Gerassimov.¹⁴ We are also not interested in the art of everyday life which follows the paths of aestheticization or avant-garde revolution. Even if we would wish to do so, the means for these effects, if they could still be possible (and mostly it is said that they cannot be achieved any more), would not be typically artistic. Everyday life is today colonised by cultural products which cannot be differentiated into artistic and non-

¹³ »All instruction is either about things or about signs; but things are learnt by means of signs. [...] No one uses words except as signs of something else; and hence it may be understood what I call signs: those things, to wit, which are used to indicate something else... For to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake.« (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2 D Augustine: *City of God, Christian Doctrine*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody 1994, p. 523.)

¹⁴ In reality there were even two Gerassimovs, Alexander and Sergei, constantly praised for their skill of making Lenin's and Stalin's portraits, other scenes from the historical victory of humankind, and scenes from everyday life of the new species called the new Soviet human, the most collective animal of all.

artistic ones, the consequences being that there is no art of everyday life which could be anything more than merely culture.¹⁵

Following Augustine's example from *The City of God* we should examine the special moments in time when history stumbles, falls and collapses, while everyday life is in deep trouble as a result. These are times when historical decisions are reached on the level of everyday life and as a part of everyday life necessities, and when the anarchy of Great History reveals the profound and not at all banal or trivial dimensions of everyday life, for with the fall of History all ritual, habitual and other orderly patterns of the direction and decisions of everyday life lose their power. Such moments were the basis for Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of history, with the help of Péguy's differentiation between periods and epochs. Hence in *Humanism and Terror. An Essay on the Communist Problem* from 1947, he states: »For we too have lived through one of those moments where history is suspended and institutions that are threatened with extinction demand fundamental decisions from men, where the risk is total because their final outcome depends upon a conjuncture not entirely foreseeable. When the collaborator made his decision in 1940 in terms of what he believed to be the inevitable future (we assume he was disinterested) he conflicted with those who did not believe in this future nor wanted it and thereafter between them and him it was a matter of force. When one is living in what Péguy called an historical period, in which political man is content to administer a regime or an established law, one can hope for a history without violence. When one has the misfortune or the luck to live in an epoch, or one of those moments where the traditional ground of a nation or society crumbles and where, for better or worse, man himself must reconstruct human relations, then the liberty of each man is mortal threat to the others and violence reappears.«¹⁶ It is a special feature of our times that one part of the world lives in a period, while the other lives more and more in an epoch, and what was a history of socialist redemption before is now just a struggle to enter from the realm of an epoch into the realm of a simple period.

The fall of Rome in 410, which indirectly inspired Augustine to write his *City of God*, and the fall of the Berlin Wall together with the Soviet empire crumbling and Yugoslavia falling into ruins, may be a far-fetched comparison. Still, we may ask how can art articulate such moments when there is really not ascertained, ready and offered meaning, purpose or end, and how can

¹⁵ Marcuse would most certainly use the expression »one-dimensional« for such a situation of art in everyday life.

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, Beacon Press, Boston 1969, pp. xvi-xvii.

it manage to produce a meaning, a purpose or an end from its own aesthetic power?

From the historical example of the fall of Rome, we know that it can accomplish this. Besides Augustine's answer, which is well known, it is important to mention that a spiritual and artistic answer was ready even before the fate of Rome was accomplished, by the so-called turn of eyes from the visible to the invisible world.¹⁷

Has the Fall of the Berlin Wall been artistically depicted as a great historical event? Were enthusiastic images of victory over the totalitarian rule organised in epic spectacles? And how was the great liberation and emancipation of everyday life presented? It has all been done in the media, in culture, and not by art. The artistic preparation for the fall has been very involved and important, and now we hear deploring voices from everywhere that art is not on the historical level any more. Evidently, because history has come to an end this does not demonstrate that history has any end (*causa finalis*) at all.

What we can find in art today are signs showing that the interplay between history and everyday life forced individuals to get into trouble, to feel despair and to commit violent atrocities or subject themselves to violence of a transition from a period to an epoch, and from an epoch (sometimes unsuccessfully!) back to a period, i.e. normal life. In post-communist art there is sometimes (through the fall of History and through the problems of everyday life, with the aid of very special artistic strategies and tactics which may produce meaning, sense and purpose even today) a window opening onto transcendent and metaphysical *heterocosmic* worlds, and the world on the other side of this opening becomes accessible for a moment D not from the viewpoint of history, but just from the perspective of everyday life.

¹⁷ In philosophy, this turn has been developed by Tertullian who not only condemned Roman spectacles and wrote rules for the everyday life of a Christian, but concluded his book on the spectacles that the best ones are those which were never seen by any eye, heard by any ear, and do not even live outside the human hearts D those of the struggle between faith and non-faith, those of the final judgement, and others which may be seen only if we turn our eyes inward. (Tertullien, *Les spectacles*; a Latin D French edition, ed. by Marie Turcan, Les Éditions du CERF, Paris 1986, pp. 216-329.) Martin Jay acknowledges this phenomenon as »the visionary tradition D based in part on a theatricalized interpretation of the injunction to imitate God (*imitatio Dei*) and in part on the neo-Platonic search for the colourless »white ecstasy« of divine illumination and finds its repeating tendency in the waning of the Enlightenment's reliance on sight, as »the revival of a neo-Platonic desire for an ideal beauty that could not be perceived with the normal eyes of mundane observation,« while the »third eye« of inspired revelation could still arouse enthusiasm (Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, pp. 39-40 and 106-108.)

A good illustration of this thesis is the Czech film »Kolya«, but we could mention what has now already become a *genre*, i.e. the films concerning the tragedy of the former Yugoslavia and the Balkan wars of today, such as *Underground*, *After Rain*, and even *Nice Villages Burn Nicely*. I stress »Kolya« because it is a summary of all countercultural strategies of the Czech cinema developed from the sixties on. At the same time, it resolutely opens this metaphysical dimension accessible through everyday life experiences, using methods and techniques which enable us to »see through« history and everyday life, and to turn our eyes inward, bringing a metaphysical and an ethical dimension to the surface in times and conditions which are most unfriendly to such an endeavour. Both ways help us to sense the higher meaning and purpose which emerges even in times of the Fall of History and the Chaos of Everyday Life, perhaps even as a last resort on which we may rely upon.

At the time of the fall of history and the collapse of everyday life routine, art grasps its object differently. This difference is similar to the difference between nakedness and nudity.¹⁸ While in modernism history and everyday life were nude, i.e. on display, under post-modern conditions they are just there, without any special reason for display. It is politically incorrect to display history and everyday life objects inspiring enthusiasm, as it is politically incorrect to display naked bodies as objects inspiring lust and still call this art. In post-communist post-modern conditions, with their manifold and multiple transition from a period to an epoch and vice versa, some artworks show successfully how history and everyday life can be shown in their nakedness, forced to reveal themselves, and by doing so open a window to a tiny, delicate and definitely heterocosmic room of meaning, purpose and end which does not serve historical enthusiasm or everyday lust, but transcends both by a force of aesthetic vision.

In post-modern conditions of post-communism, who could ask for more?

¹⁸ The now already classical text on this difference is John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* based on the BBC television series and published by BBC and Penguin Books first in 1972: »To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.« (P. 54 in the 1981 edition.)