

SELF-IDENTIFICATION OF UKRAINIAN FINE ART AS A FORM OF THE NATION'S RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Russia's attack on Ukraine released from the subconsciousness of the Ukrainian nation a powerful archetype of unity based on identification, which once prompted the ancient Scythians and Cossacks to defend their ethnic lands with courageous resistance to the enemy. Now, this very unity adjusts the collective consciousness and worldview, preparing them to make the spiritual-historical geocultural memory of the Ukrainian people relevant again, forcing to review the role of ancient traditions in modern art and transforming the cultural and artistic vocabulary with the essential individual empathy of figurative expression. The crucial part of this latter is a conscious perception of the roots of Ukrainian ethnicity belonging to the ancient Indo-European community of peoples. The globalized post-modern paradigm, which legitimized on an international scale the homogeneous narrative of post-truth as a "paradigm without a paradigm", and which reduces the existential essence of a modern person to the state of a post-ethnic subject without subjectivity, thus, loses its dominant position for a certain time, yielding it to a reactivation of the transcendental ecstasy of Renaissance imagery and a reassessment of the form-creating possibilities of figurative artwork in the context of the synergy of the ethnic Ukrainian mindset based on cordocentrism with the Kantian-Hegelian meta-physics of the spirit, which has been an integral element of academic education in Ukraine since the Enlightenment.

KEYWORDS: Decoloniality; National Self-identity; Ukrainian Fine Art

INTRODUCTION

Russia's attack on Ukraine has motivated representatives of the Ukrainian artistic community to rethink the art episteme and everybody's own professional activity in the context of decolonial resistance to repressive Russian ideology. Artists of Ukraine have found themselves at the epicenter of catastrophic events, which led to some of them becoming enlisted into the armed forces and defending their country, some – dying heroically; while others migrated abroad, or, having lost their workshops and homes, moved to more peaceful regions of Ukraine.

History, according to Alexander Kluge, has a cruel sense of humor, forming something like a "dialectical irony", which has a cyclical nature and returns with unforeseen events of "sanctioned violence" (Winfried G. Sebald) just when one expects it the least. However, it is precisely in these moments of rupture of gradualism that the true beauty of high art has a chance to be born, which actualizes the transcendental connection with absolute time and space – the ancient *aletheia*. Therefore, the artists affected by the ongoing war have had to reevaluate the possibilities of artistic expression almost instantly, in order to, among other types of resistance, resist evil professionally (Figure 2). The fact that that very artist, who used to be an adept of contemporary art practices, legitimizing the deskilling accompanying the advent of the aesthetics of globalization, in the situation of war, has turned to the artistic vocabulary rejected by postmodern benchmarking, the vo-

cabulary relevant to the ecstasy of feelings and capable of informing the viewer about the subtlest nuances of the experienced tragedy, has become symptomatic. Such a Renaissance-modernist vocabulary is coherent with a powerful reflection of artistic consciousness, because it revives the traditions of Kantian-Hegelian transcendental aesthetics, which also gives artists the opportunity to express respect and admiration for the courage of the soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Figure 3). So the artists, without hiding their sincere emotions, turned to the regional traditions of fine arts, using elements of sacred painting, baroque, avant-garde, expressionism and surrealism, or academic stylistics of expression. The approval of the essential self-identification of the socio-cultural and artistic epistemes, free from fake imperial stratagems, is the main goal of the cultural formation – image formation in particular – of the Ukrainian nation today, and this is precisely what determines the purpose of this publication.

SELF-IDENTIFICATION AS THE DOMINANT MOTIVATION FOR CREATIVITY IN THE CONDITIONS OF WAR

Perhaps, one should not be surprised by the fact that the theme of war and related horrors has become prevalent in modern exhibitions and competitions. For example, the hardships of emigrants and forced refugees were the subject chosen by the Transcarpathian sculptor Mykola Hleba, who won the Chainsaw Carving Cup “Living Heritage Events” in London (2022), performing a picture of a crying boy who was lost on the border with Poland, – a story well-known from the media and social networks (Figure 8). Artists often explain their creative position by resorting to the genesis of the war unleashed by the Russian Federation, in particular, the centuries-old historical and cultural context of the oppression of the Ukrainian people by the Russian Empire, and then by the Soviet regime of the USSR, which tried to falsify history, distort the “unneeded” facts about the ancient culture of the state of Kyivan Rus, destroy its language and art.

For instance, Mykola Yakimchenko, a Ukrainian artist and lecturer at the V. Stefanyk Institute of Arts at the Stefanyk Precarpathian National University, says: “Russia's negative influence has lasted for four hundred years. It is a quasi-formation, a pathetic militant sprout of Kyivan Rus. Suffice it to mention Kazimir Malevich from Kyiv, Mykola Gogol from Poltava, Arkhip Kuindzhi from Mariupil, Ilya Repin from [one of the regions of Ukraine] Slobozhanshchyna.... Culture is a spiritual training, it is a school that should nurture a person with high moral qualities, while Russians [in this war] have shown themselves as looters, pillagers, rapists. [This means that] their culture has not fulfilled its task, so it is dead, unable to teach anything.... We are a nation that cannot be defeated. Just as the Russian Empire had been failing to do it for centuries, they will not succeed now. Unity is our strength... After all, only a thorough academic education can be a proper background in the search for individual artistic identity” (Yakymchenko, 2022).

Academic education has also been inspiring a mother of three children – a famous Ukrainian artist Daria Alyoshkina, who was forced to move to Krakow, where she is still involved in a lot of creative and exhibition activities, transferring part of the earnings to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Having parents who are sculptors themselves, she dedicated herself to participating in the revival of the ancient folk tradition of carvings, which she actively propagates in both Ukraine and Europe. Huge and miniature (Figure 1, a–b) graphic and laconic decorations of windows, stage spaces, and walls of theaters, museums, and shopping establishments cut out of paper, her graphemes appeal to ancient ethnic amulet symbols that were drawn by ancestors on ceramic dishes, when painting the walls of the dwelling, were carved on everyday household objects, embroidered on carpets and towels. Thus, in the conditions of war, the language of symbols, which connects the ethnic group with the spiritual culture of the ancestors, provides powerful energy to resist the enemy, really working for victory. She emphasizes: “I have always been inspired by the culture and traditions of Ukraine – from the

sacred drawings of Trypillia to the poetry of modern authors. Ukrainian culture is the foundation of my work. I am fascinated by folk craftsmen and modern artists who are engaged in carpet weaving, painting Easter eggs, ceramics. Today's war is, in particular, for Ukrainian culture, for its identity. We have to win it. We, Ukrainian artists, have our own cultural front. So we have to "shout" out loud with our art about real events and that Russia is killing us!"; "On the 10th day of the war, I organized a sale of my smaller carved paper works – vytynanky, and thus was able to send money to the Armed Forces of Ukraine – it kept me going psychologically, it supported me mentally. I transferred the pain and shock from the details of the terrible crimes committed by the Russians in Bucha, Gostomel and Irpin into those vytynanky. That was my prayer for the innocent souls of Ukrainians" (Alyoshkina, 2022). It should also be noted in this respect that the folk tradition of motanka dolls has become the main theme in the work of many female artists, for example, Mar-ta Pitchuk (Figure 10) or Oksana Vdovichenko (Figure 6).

Under the conditions of this war, art truly becomes a weapon, and its vocabulary, leaving aside the contemporary abstraction of the aesthetics of globalism, revives the figurative language of empathic expression. As rightly emphasized by Dr. Md. Mokhlisur Rahman, "Language is more than just a means of communication. It influences our culture and even our thought processes. <...> Humans use language as a way of signaling identity with one cultural group as well as difference from others" (Rahman, 2021). Another artist, Oleksandr Lukyanenko, who had lived for his entire life in his native city, but after a full-scale invasion, had to flee with his family from Mariupol under severe shelling and under tragic circumstances, demonstrates this difference between humanistic Ukrainians and the occupier's army exactly (Figure 4). His painting, which conveys the horrors of war and the suffering of peaceful people who have been forced to hid in basements without food and warmth for weeks, were on display as part of the collective exhibition "Mariupol – the soul of Ukraine", which opened in June in Kyiv, in the Central House of Artists as part of the All-Ukrainian cultural and artistic project "Unconquered Ukraine", supported by the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine and the International Charitable Organization "Foundation for Goodness and Love" (Figure 5). The artist, hiding in the basement, noted the horrors of the barbaric genocide in a diary, recording the tragedy of a dying city: "We are hiding in the basement of a house, in the dark, the basement is lit by candlelight only. There are more and more people, about 25 people now. It's cold and damp. The house is shaking from the shells.... There's snow outside, real winter in March, it's 10 degrees Celsius below zero there. <...> Corpses everywhere. The dead are placed in funnels under houses. It is impossible to bury them. The wounded were unlucky – there will be no help. <...> The shelling does not stop during the day nor at night. My heart is pounding from this roar" (Kovalenko, 2022).

The tragedy of another city of the country – which was once the capital of Ukraine, the city of Kharkiv, and which is now being razed to the ground, – was recorded by Artem Pogrebnyi in a series of confessional paintings, in particular, depicting surreal dreams on the theme of the ruins of a once beautiful city with a lot of people, a city that was sincerely admired by all guests, but that now looks like an empty ghost from another reality, where there are no human beings, no feelings, no warmth of life and dreams, no children and no future... (Figure 9).

At the exhibition, there are many other stories of the hard struggle of Ukrainians, which were seen by fellow artists, emphasizing even in the brutalities of war moments of love for life, for small animals that are warmed, treated, given shelter. Many animals died from Russian shelling of once flourishing villages and cities, many pets were seriously injured, but many were saved by Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers, because people are sensitive to the sacred secret of life, showing great respect for it, and, therefore, compassion for the suffering of any divine being.

Even the ceramic rooster that survived on top of the cabinet of one of the high-rise buildings during the shelling of the Kyiv region deserved sympathy, for when the floor and ceiling fell and the house was completely destroyed, the rooster and the cabinet on the wall were still there, a symbol of the indomitability of the Ukrainian people. This rooster, which is now part of the exposition of the Museum of the Russian-Ukrainian War, has been copied countless times – from decorative park sculpture to easel versions in ceramics or paintings.

RELEVANCE OF THE SELF-IDENTIFICATION MOVEMENT IN MODERN CULTURAL CREATION

Piotr Sztompka, explaining the revolutionary phenomenon in East-Central Europe at the end of the 20th century – the phenomenon that resulted in the collapse of the USSR and the accession of the former Soviet republics into the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance, emphasized: “a shift from autocratic, centralized, mono-party system, to the Western-style democratic regime” allowed for these independent states to carry out “radical change at all levels of social life for great masses of people”; “At the intellectual and artistic level, it meant the shift from controlled and censored circulation of ideas and values to free and pluralistic expression with open access to world culture. <...> It was a time of great national solidarity, regained dignity and pride” (Sztompka, 2010). However, now the authorities of the Russian Federation are trying to turn back time, because the society of this country was not fundamentally reformed, and agreed to the creation of a new quasi-empire, just as it agreed to the suppression of movements for national identity in Belarus or Ukraine, with the logical consequence of both things being the acceptance of the ongoing war against Ukraine.

Ukraine went through a difficult period of transformation and finally moved away from the episteme of colonial lawlessness – something the terrorist state has not done. Although Sztompka warned that “Changing from Homo Sovieticus to the modern Westerners, abandoning the crippled and deficient East European identity and acquiring a full-fledged, proud European identity required time” since “freedom is not only a gift but an obligation and sometimes a burden” (Sztompka, 2010).

Ukrainian artists and scientists are aware of the vulnerability of their own position, because in the conditions of the war crimes committed by the Russian Federation on the lands of Ukraine, they – just as the nation as a whole – are “balancing between life and death”, but every artist is the embodiment of a free country, which means “A hero is anyone who has an idea and follows it in everything”. Thus, it is clear to everybody that although it is possible to temporarily evacuate from Ukraine, it is utterly impossible to evacuate Ukraine from one’s heart, to quote Oleg Mykhailiuta, the frontman of the band “TNMK” who has been defending the country in a volunteer battalion since the beginning of the war (Barsukova, 2022). All Ukrainian artists deserve to subscribe to his words, in particular Svyatoslav Virsta, who believes that in order to protect the country, and at the same time, to prevent the darkness from swallowing you, we must professionally organize the surrounding chaos, transforming it into a new reality, defeating it with the beauty of the heart through artistic creativity and all kinds of help to the needy, showing sincere unity with the whole world to defeat evil (Figure 7). It is possible that a hundred years ago, W. Yeats had a similar motivation, declaring: “Transformed utterly: A terrible beauty is born” (Yeats, 1916), and now these stanzas are gaining new relevance in Ukrainian art, demonstrating the strength and high level of resistance of the spirit to the onslaught of the enemy that bears the “imperial, sick, criminal-authoritarian identity with lost humaneness”, according to the apt description by the Ukrainian dissident Yosyp Zisels.

Ukrainian philosopher Andriy Baumeister, on the 26th day of shelling of the territory of Ukraine wrote a post on

social networks, where he reiterated: “rashists (the term used to refer to a unique mixture of fascism and ideas typical of the Russian mindset that supports the war against Ukraine) fight only against: against humanity, against any, even the most elementary morality. And against everything holy. But, as we know from the old textbooks on ontology, when evil approaches its limit, it gradually turns into nothing. It starts to self-destruct. There is no longer anything human. Nothing from the mind, nothing from the feelings. Soulless machine of destruction. Which sooner or later will destroy itself from the inside. I would really like it to be helped – by all the world – to do it, as soon as possible...”

CONCLUSIONS

The modernized episteme of transcendental aesthetics, on par with the artist's awareness of his own uniqueness as a subject of national cultural-formation process, allows through the general, namely the suffering of the people from the war and its crimes, to express individual empathy, since historical consciousness adjusts with spiritual worldview, which adjustment determines the Hegelian aspect of cordocentrism that is so typical of Ukrainian mindset, while keeping the image-formation practices of the nation in a moving balance of the integrity of the existence of the past and the future.

Ukrainians heal the wounds of the war by uniting around the idea of self-identity, by making the experience of their own history relevant again and by turning to traditions and dreaming of victory and glorious rebirth of Ukraine, the Mother, who will protect and preserve the people of this country and their future.

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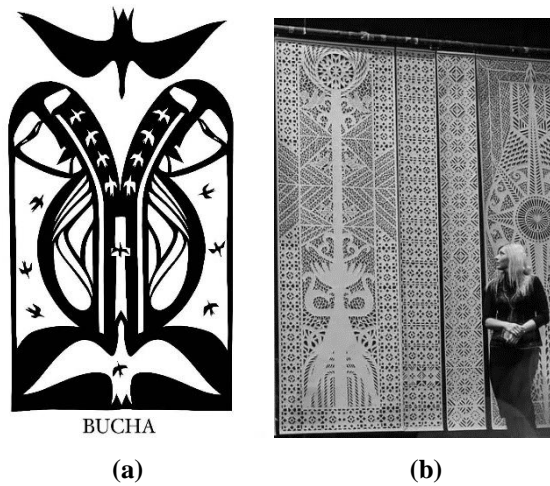


Figure 1: *Alyoshkina D. a) Bucha; b) Vytynanka; Paper, 2022.*



Figure 2: *Babak V. Ukraine-Mother, Canvas, Oil*



Figure 3: Shereshevsky V. Azovstal, Lieutenant Colonel Denis Prokopenko; Canvas, Oil. 2022.



Figure 4: Lukyanenko o. Rainbow in the Window;Canvas, Oil. 2022.



Figure 5: Exposition «Mariupol – Soul of Ukraine». Central House of Artists.Kyiv. Graphics. 2022 June 2022.



Figure 6: Vdovychenko O. Life-Giving Motanka



Figure 7: Virsta S. Angel; Metal. 2022



Figure 8: Gleba M. War; Wood 2022



Figure 9: Pogribnyy A. Fragments of Sleep. The Sky Is Through. Day 120; Canvas, Oil 2022.



Figure 10; Pitchuk M. Motanka Victory; Canvas, Oil 2022

