

THE ARTIST AND THE SYSTEMS

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Abstract

In this research, it will be analyzed the relationship that exists between the artist and the systems in general, and especially with the totalitarian systems. Through a historical lens, a general or universal survey of this report is made possible by raising the proper questions about the functional elements that build up this report. During the history of mankind, the walls of the temples, churches or royal palaces, have been clothed with the images created from the artists. After this horizontal (historical) point of view of the phenomenon, the research examines more in detail the last century, in which the relationship of the artist with the systems in extremely multiform. It has a special position under the totalitarian regimes, when the artists are represented as tools, little pieces of a giant mechanism. In totalitarian systems, the role of the artist is one of a state functionary, paid from the state and as such constrained to create according to the rules that were set from the state itself. In effect, the artists in these regimes play a key role for the materialization of the state ideology, enriching the propaganda machine with artistic images, illustrators of a fictitious reality, which do not reflect the truth, but the ideal described from the ideology. At the end of this study, it will be clear that the relationship of the artist with the system is a “game”, old as time itself. It is defined from the conditions that the commissioner or donator dictates, whether this is the state or a private individual. The service offered from the artist, the work of art, oscillates always between a spiritual creation (Art for Art) and the Art that the taste of time demands, defined or oriented from the commissioner.

Keywords: art, artist, system, totalitarian, creation.

The Artist and the Systems

The artists have always served to the ones in power and the power itself, whatever its format has been. Throughout the history of mankind, the walls of the temples, churches and royal palaces have been adorned with images created from the artists. They have served the systems, either zealously or by obligation, but rising above the conditions in which they were, they have CREATED.

At the beginning, they were just handicraftsmen¹, persons who were able to create, but in their status they were equal to carpenters or bakers. Later on, they fought with the system to reach their own social status. The deliverance of the artist, his climbing over, beyond the function of a mere artisan, is proposed from Argan to have happened during the times of the maximum splendor of the Greek art. He says on this point: “Having a theory, almost to be considered as science of the art, changes fundamentally the social position of the artist. He is not anymore, like in Asia or in Egypt, a hand-workingman who works under the severe orders of the tyrant sovereign, following rituals with strict rules. He is a citizen who exercises a free profession, creator of an esthetic and technical culture, whose need is known from the society; he is the interpreter of great idealistic values, upon which the conscientious society builds its foundations.”²



Gravestone of a woman with her slave child-attendant, c. 100 BC
National Archaeological Museum, Athens



Family group on a
grave marker

The centuries that would ensue, the Middle Age, would be covered from “a continual mystical tension on God’s power on earth”³, while the church, just some centuries after gaining its official status, would recognize the value of the artisan’s artistic work, in the function of religious and moral education of the believers, and moreover would encourage it as a fundamental part of the church’s program and function.”⁴

¹ In the History of the Art, the creators of ancient civilizations are represented at the best of the cases as artisans only. The slaves or the free men, who were always at the service of the ones in power, are always without name. The first names of the creators would appear only in the classical Hellenic civilization. More can be read about this theme at: Zulli, Stefano “La storia dell’arte”- Le prime civiltà”, Electa, 2006

² Taken from: Argan. G. C. “Storia dell’arte italiane, 1”, Sansoni per la scuola, Firenze, 1991, p. 32

³ “Rinascimento”, Mondadori, Milano, 2002, p. 16

⁴ Argan. G. C., see above, p. 243

In this period of regress and strong collisions between civilizations, the artist was positioned in the lower orders of society, and is just and only a hand-craftsman, with the rights and merits that belong to its social class.⁵

At the end of this period, the reality of the European cities changed a lot. Being transformed from the commercial enterprises, at their center was still the institution of the church, but it was the flourishing of the trade the “weapon” which would bring the necessary wealth to transform them in big financial and cultural centers. It was the trade that would esteem, distribute and encourage the production, to turn it into wealth. The artists in this period were structured inside the families, in home-workshops, where the knowledge would pass from one generation to the other and the education of the profession would begin since in the childhood of the artist. The artists, owners of the workshops were financed from the requests that came from the civil or religious institutions, consolidating increasingly their economic and social status. For example, it was Giotto among the artists that thanks to his talent “lived as a rich bourgeois and not as a simple artisan.”⁶



Giotto, Lamentation, The Mourning of Christ, Cappella degli Scrovegni. Albrecht Durer, self-portrait in a Fur-Collared Robe, 1500

And now we enter in the “golden period”, the European Renaissance, a time when the formula “Man in the center of everything”, was simple, but efficient. “Without losing the density of the relationship with the divine, the man of the 15th century is freed from the middle-age “tails”, opening himself with a clear conscience towards the natural universe and researching his place as a responsible protagonist facing the world and the history.”⁷

European Renaissance re-conceived the function of art in society and put the artist at the center of the attention in a way that it never had happened before in any other era. The humanist spiritual re-dimension, oriented towards the physical need as well as the spiritual need, financed from an increasingly demanding and powerful bourgeoisie brought the conscientious separation from the middle-age ecclesiastic petrification. The artist himself was

⁵ Even in the 14th century, the artists would enjoy the creative freedom that an artisan would have. He had to respond in front of a commission although the work process in most of the cases was nearly the same as the requests of the time were. See, Antal, Frederick “La pittura fiorentina”, Einaudi, Torino, 1960, p. 398

⁶ Antal, Frederick, “La pittura fiorentina”, Einaudi, Torino, 1960, p. 398

⁷ “Rinascimento”, Mondadori, Milano, 2002, p. 17

considered as a very important element of the spirit of the age and the main actors of it were called with one voice as half-divine geniuses⁸.

Starting from this time, in the long centuries that came afterwards, the artists would stay closer in their relationships with the popes, kings or rich commissioners,⁹ attempting to give iconographic definitions, absurd glorifications, but also stylistic orientations. The personal “war” between the artist and the commissioner was about the thematic definition and sometimes the stylistic definition of the work of art, as a war for an esthetical imposition between the giver and the taker. Often, this relationship would be interceded from a third party: characters like Charles Le Brun¹⁰, the painter of the court of Louis XIV, who dictated canons and styles, attempting to establish doctrines, as would do the guardians of propaganda in the totalitarian regimes during the 20th century.



J. L. David, Death of Marat, 1793



J. L. David, Napoleon Crossing the Alps, 1801

This prolonged relationship in the centuries, seems to change the rules of the game only after the Industrial Revolution and the invention of photography¹¹, at a time when the western culture held an increasingly supportive attitude towards the personal esthetic research, in such a measure that in this period it is the artist who imposes to the system his taste. In an authentic research of personal art¹², the artists succeeded to position themselves beyond the thematic dictation and predefined tastes.

It would be the 20th century, the Century of the War, which would re-position the artist in ideological camps, in its status as well as in its mentality. Known as the century of the dictators and ideologies, it would produce emblematic figures as never before were produced, which would redefine the position of the artist, as a gear of the so-called “the modern era”.

⁸ Vasari at his work “Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori”, (1568) calls Michelangelo the “Divine” and the peak of possible human creation. He puts him at the top of a hierarchic pyramid, which according to him starts with Cimabue and peaks with the Tuscan genius.

⁹ The relationship between the artist and those in power increases the curiosity especially in the report between great names like Pope Julius II – Michelangelo, Leon X – Raphael, Francois I – Leonardo etc. More about this theme may be read at Janson, H. W. “Storia dell’arte”, Garzanti, 1979, p. 417-458

¹⁰ Charles Le Brun (1619 –1690), a French painter and decorator, famous above all for the decoration art of the Versailles, during the 17th century. More about this artist may be read at: Gareau, Michel “Charles LeBrun First Painter To King Louis XIV”, Abrams NY, 1992.

¹¹ The emergence of photography would position the artist at a new dimension in relationship with the request and also at a new place he would now have in society.

¹² With the term “personal art” we must understand the composition of the artists during the second half of the 19th century, in which the artist was freed from the thematic definition of the commissioner and the stylistic one of the time, but aimed toward a personal definition of his esthetic vision on the reality.

One of them, J. Goebbels, starting from 1933, as soon as he was appointed the Propaganda Minister, took the full control of every informative media and all the cultural and social life in Germany, being redefined as the “Dictator of the Culture”¹³. The figure of Goebbels is parallelized in the Soviet Union with A. Zhdanov, who from 1934 played an essential role in the dismantling and implementation of the Socialist Realism principles and from 1946 attacked openly the decadent pessimistic literature and the formalist tendencies¹⁴.

In front of such characters, the artist seems doomed to be submitted. In fact, during extreme dictatorships, the figure of the artist is transformed in just the one who materializes the will of the hierarchy; those who materialize the state ideology, enrichers of the propaganda machine and illustrators of a fictive reality, not very different from the artists who painted the pyramids or the churches at the Vatican.



O. Paskali, “King Zog”, draft, gesso; O. Paskali, “Duce”, bronze O. Paskali, “Enver Hoxha”, marble

In a totalitarian state, such as the Soviet Union or the Socialist Albania, the artist was a state employee, paid from the state for a defined service. The state would offer the canvasses, the paint, the clay, gesso or the bronze. It would give the studios to the artists, organize the exhibitions and the competitions, buy the works of art and assign the awards, would put and remove artists from state positions, would appoint standards and privileges. One part of the artists profited from the “generosity” of the state to gain more favorable positions in the artistic hierarchy of the system. Another part took what they could and some others were self-distanced waiting for the change. Others still (less fortunate) were made demonstrative examples of the state’s strength, and all together obeyed to its iron will, with the minimal claim for the change of this status quo. They (the artists) were an undivided part and “gears” of the state propaganda, pieces of a giant mechanism. They worked for it till at the last hours and this was and remains the only possible optic to see and judge an artist under a totalitarian regime.

In the opposite ideological course, the artists during the same century, as in a race with themselves, developed their creativity in esthetical styles and currents, under a terminology more and more close to a multi-dimensional man. Not conscious, (differently than the ones in

¹³ J. Goebbels was the key figure of bringing the propaganda at a historical level. There are a lot of books written about him. On the topic: Irving, David “Goebbels: Mastermind of the Third Reich”, Parforce, 1999.

¹⁴ Zhdanov Doctrine was developed in 1946. It proposed that the world was divided into two camps: the "imperialistic", headed by the United States; and "democratic", headed by the Soviet Union. It was known as a doctrine-cultural method with the name of “zhdanovism”, and had a great impact on the soviet culture and later, on the Maoist China. More on this topic may be read at Stites, Richard “Soviet Popular Culture”, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

the other camp) they were the opposite direction of two antagonist ideologies, where the direct competition was spread in multiple fields, starting from the armament, the invasion of the cosmos and till at the lifestyle. The artist in the “Free World”, as he established tens of artistic currents, never directed his attention towards the east, but he consolidated calmly his esthetic meditation, helped from an increasingly strong economy. During almost half of a century, the other half of the globe nearly was not taken in consideration from them, enough to say that the books of art history did not consider worthy for more than some pages the art of Socialist Realism.

The importance of the art is reflected in a very good way at the impact it had on the masses of people, in each of the camps. To reach this, they were supported from a consistent private or state economy, which was a similar format of what had happened in any other historical period, where the art blossoms beyond the ordinary in consolidated economies.

The epilogue of the world’s division in two camps was projected under the ruins of the Berlin Wall. At the eyes of everyone this marked the end of the Cold War, which had gone on for 4 decades, with visible and invisible adversaries, which, at the end, victorious or defeated would be simply witnesses of a new history with the same protagonists. On “the next day” of the Wall’s fall, the artists (now unemployed) would not be separated anymore from those walls, but would become all together (again) parts of the same international artistic system.

The ‘90s would be rewritten under the dictate of the winner. The Socialist Realism would be closed in museums, to awake the curiosity of western eyes as a bizarre phenomenon developed at the doors of civilization. The eastern artists hurried to go in the west offering their work with new esthetic perception for the artistic world panorama. They, sometimes selling the paradoxes of their transitioning native lands and sometimes re-proposing as a brand the communism icons and clichés, were positioned quickly at the center of the artistic world system. Profiting from a mystical aureole and from a different esthetic vision, they rapidly oriented their attention towards the international visual language.

And so we come at the world we know today... A world where “the medium is the message”, while the society runs towards “the global village”¹⁵ and where the artist goes through his own steps with a revitalized sensorial device, both from the virtual reality and from the touchable one. This is a world where the technology is the preposition of everything, while the artists, according to McLuhan, “manage to grasp the message of the cultural and technological challenge decades before it begins to transform the society.”¹⁶ This concept was debated also one century ago from W. Lewis who says: “The artists are always engaged to write a detailed history of the future, because they are the only persons who know the nature of the present.”¹⁷ The artist, in this new reality, has the tendency to “move from the ivory tower to the tower of control.”

Beyond the predictive prophetic role, the contemporary artist, favored from the technology, enjoys today a global and social impact, although his reflection often risks to be absorbed from the same vertiginous whirlpool of information’s super-production, with increasingly suspicious filters. This is a world where the boundaries are lost with the speed of cybernetic clicks, and where the future seems defined from the swallowing symptoms of globalism.

The purpose of the artist at this new system of values and anti-values is the same one, the one that has always been: to reach the center of the system, to have the maximal audience and to reap all the good that it offers. In its dream for eternity, the center of the system is a warranty for a real possibility to be considered an historical contribution.

As a conclusion, we might say that beyond the spiritual food of the artist, his material and physical needs determine the report and the dependency with the system. Its composition, as

¹⁵ McLuhan, M, Fiore, Q. “The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects”, Penguin Books, 1967

¹⁶ McLuhan, Marshall “Instrumentat e komunikimit”, Instituti i dialogut dhe komunikimit, 2004, p. 78

¹⁷ Ibid.

it was thousands of years ago, in the cradle of the civilization, attempts a spiritual creation (Art for Art), but its product always remains conditioned from the relationship between the request and the offer, although this might be reduced in minimal compromises. The commissioner, the collector, the donor or the art dealer, pushes for the artist to be contained as much as he can within the frames of the system, with small and controlled “jumps”¹⁸. In the postmodern optics, although the creator attempts to be positioned as a freed person from the imposition of the critic’s taste, or potential collectors, even in the most optimistic case, remains “victim” of the same game, that was started thousands of years ago. The artist creates as he has always created. His primary objective remains his impact on his contemporary society, as well as in the future one, but his creative freedom (the total one), is always conditioned from the financial one, what makes him a little part of the same social gear, a little part of the same system, like in a game old as time itself.

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¹⁸ About the very long relationship between the artist and the commissioner, Rita Gilbert says: “The Queen, the Pope, or the President that commissions an artist for a work of art, may love the art, but the model that they ask is that of a masterpiece, which must increase their prestige and with it, his or her power.” Gilbert, R. “Living with Art”, Fourth Edition, McGraw-Hill, Inc, 1995, p. 51.