

Review Article

# Totalitarian Art and the Art of Resistance in the Ukraine of the 20th Century According to the Research of Oleksiy Rohotchenko

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## Abstract

The monograph of art historian Oleksiy Rogotchenko “Sixty Totalitarian Years: Fine Art of Ukraine 1920-1980” emphasizes the important and topical issues of modern art criticism, the issue of the interaction of art and power in the context of the deformation of the artistic space, the issue of the role of the artist and fine art in social communication under the conditions of the proletarian dictatorship. The extremely factual monograph acts as a kind of encyclopedia of “fine” art in the specified period, and beyond this, it encourages reflection and continuation of the discourse about the era of the “Great Fear”. The proposed review of the monograph actualizes the problem of the national in art. It is established that national art, as well as national identity in the totalitarian years, could not be anything other than a reflection and continuation of the policy of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The work of Oleksiy Rogotchenko is important in the context of understanding the anthropology of art of the totalitarian regime and the transformation of the role of the artist from the concept of free creativity to the proletarian artist, a servant of the ideological postulates of the proletarian dictatorship. It is noted that the development of fine art in Ukraine in the sixty totalitarian years took place on the basis of the ideology of proletarian culture in the expression of the method of socialist realism. Oleksiy Rogotchenko explores the phenomenon of resistance of the Ukrainian artistic society to the official doctrine, which is designated in the Ukrainian art historical discourse by the term nonconformism. It is proved that the method of socialist realism in fine art at the end of the dictates of the Soviet government had a tendency towards individuality and free creativity of the artist.

## Keywords

Oleksiy Rogotchenko, Fine Art of Ukraine, Totalitarian Art, Art of Resistance, 20th Century, Art History, Anthropology of Art

## 1. Introduction

A look into the past always reflects the desire to know the present, because the past leaves its mark on the present. The correlation of the past with the present acts as a measure of

progress and a possible answer to the problems of social development. So the look into the past sixty totalitarian years of the visual arts of Ukraine by Oleksiy Rogotchenko [1] turns

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out to be an attempt to comprehend social and artistic processes dependent on them, to find the key to understanding the phenomenon of the emergence of totalitarianism in art, the essence of the deformed creativity of artists of socialist realism and to show its inertial reflection in the creative life of the post-totalitarian period.

## 2. Ukrainian Avant-Garde of Early Xx Century

Oleksiy Rogotchenko's work is important in the context of understanding the anthropology of art of the totalitarian regime that prevailed in Ukraine in the twentieth century. The first twenty years of this turbulent century were years of free creativity of artists and the flourishing of numerous trends in art, which are generally characterized by modernism. The Ukrainian national art movement, represented by S. Vasylykivsky, M. Samokish, I. Yizhakevich, I. Krasysky and other artists, was filled with progress towards the revival of national artistic traditions and the creation of a national style. This progress was hampered by obstacles and prohibitions from the tsarist government and the deep Russification of artists and the art school. For example, the exhibitions of 1911-1913 in Kyiv were forbidden to be called Ukrainian. Pre-revolutionary Ukraine became the cradle of the artistic avant-garde, the leaders of which were D. Burluk, O. Bogomazov, O. Exter, V. Kandinsky, K. Malevich and others. It is fair to say that the avant-garde was established in the artistic space simultaneously with the eruption of national traditions and the establishment of Ukrainian art [18], and these processes were in interaction.

But further on is the path from a free artist to a servant of the ideological postulates of the proletarian dictatorship. In the preface to the catalogue to the "First Proletarian Exhibition", which took place in 1919 in Kharkiv, it is stated that the aim of the exhibition is to acquaint the proletariat with "bourgeois art of professional artists" so that "the proletariat itself can judge what to take and what to reject", and the artists themselves are invited to "go hand in hand with the proletarian artist" [2]. With the establishment of Soviet power in 1919 in Ukraine, the artistic intelligentsia, as noted in an article in the Kharkiv newspaper "Izvestia", "excessively went to Soviet institutions and competed for their services" [3]. This phenomenon is explained by the temporary coincidence of the interests of the proletarian dictatorship, with its desire to eliminate the old and create the new, and the avant-garde art movement, with its rejection of the old art and the creation of a new artistic language.

Researcher Anna Lyman has established that for a certain period, avant-garde revolutionaryism in art and political revolutionaryism of the first quarter of the twentieth century were combined in a single impulse of influence on society. The art of the avant-garde for a certain time became part of the revolutionary process. Denationalism was an attractive aspect for

the Bolshevik government and contributed to the political engagement of the avant-garde as a tool in the political indoctrination of Soviet society [4]. With the establishment of the dominant method of socialist realism in art, the avant-garde disappears from the spaces of creativity.

This is confirmed by Fedor Schmidt, who in 1919 states the rupture between the individualism of avant-garde art and the collectivism of socialists, explaining that since the establishment of their power, the destructive art of the avant-garde has come into contradiction with the desire to preserve what was created by socialists as a result of the revolution and is falling into oblivion [17]. The role of the artist in the social process changes from free artistic language with the viewer in the views of Alexander Bogomazov to the servant of the proletariat, from the boundlessness of David Burluk's art, Viktor Palmov's language of color to the limitations of art and its false coloristic language, from Alexander Arkhipenko's cubo-futurism, from Kazimir Malevich's suprematism and objectlessness, Vasyl Krychevsky's ornamental compositions, from the whole variety of directions of progress in art of the pre-totalitarian period to the worship of the ideology of the proletarian dictatorship in culture and art. National art, as well as national identity in the totalitarian years, could not be anything other than a reflection and continuation of the policy of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

## 3. Works of Kazimir Malevich as a Showcase of "Proletarianization" of the Free Art

Kazimir Malevich reflected such changes in a number of his works - from the "Red House" and "Red Cavalry" in the sense of establishing a violent ideology to a series of works of faceless peasantry, from which he once drew inspiration and strength for his art. Critic Adolf Donat characterized this series of works as "figurative images that reproduce soulless, faceless figures, similar to dolls, against the background of motionless landscapes, emphasizing the feeling of weakness and lack of vital energy" [5]. In 1930, this was already a consequence of the proletarianization of art, let's call this the first decade of violence against artists by the proletarian dictatorship, which ended in the erosion of personality.

In the works of the peasant series, Kazimir Malevich is consonant and with Rene Magritte, but their works differ in the ideological basis of understanding the development of society. If in Rene Magritte the basis of his artistic reception is the free creativity of the artist and the development of his creative imagination and his own views on the role of art in the rapid flow of industrial production with its consequent unification of social relations, then in Kazimir Malevich - the erasure of identity under the violent influence of the ideology of the proletarian dictatorship, the struggle against diversity as such. We see this in El Lissitzky [6] in his work "Suprematist Legend of Two Squares in Six Buildings" from 1922, which reflects the

struggle of the red square and its victory over the black square, as a symbol of red class politics, against black - social relations of a developed capitalist society in general.

Thus, the path of the sixty totalitarian years of visual art in Ukraine is the path of establishing the ideology of proletarian culture in the expression of socialist realism in art and the transformation of the artist from a free and energetic creator of his own creative imagination into a leader of the policy of the proletarian dictatorship by means of art. Against the background of the events of the current war in Ukraine, when every day we lose heroes, cities and villages, but full of the spirit of struggle, one comes to understand that although the book by Oleksiy Rogotchenko is about art in the totalitarian period, this book is also about the front, the front of the struggle against free art, the front of the struggle for totalitarian art. The question inevitably arises, how in the 90s of the twentieth century, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and, after more than sixty totalitarian years, in the space of Ukrainian art of the period of independence, a diversity of directions of artistic creativity arises, albeit distorted? Does this mean that the art of the totalitarian period, which was basically, with the exception of classical art, the art of socialist realism, also had secret mechanisms of free creativity?

#### 4. Persecutions of Non-conformist Artists and Slow Return to Originality

The almost documentary epistolary canvas of the art critic Oleksiy Rogotchenko confirms that no system is able to defeat the anthropologically conditioned creative process, which naturally required the artist to heuristics, to search for his "I" in art, to isolate it with artistic methods. Another thing, and this is stated in a thorough monograph, is that such creativity was persecuted by the authorities and the artist had to hide it. Who did not do this, like Mykhailo Boychuk and his school, as described by Oleksiy Rogotchenko [1], Alla Gorska and others were bloody persecuted. Their example warned artists and at the same time inspired them. And therefore, with the end of the period of totalitarianism, the sprouts of free art sprouted. It is not for nothing that the author chose the red color for the cover of the monograph - it is a symbol of the blood shed by the Bolsheviks and the suffering of tens of millions of people. The red color is a symbol of this historical period.

Oleksiy Rogotchenko makes a completely successful attempt to explore the phenomenon of "resistance of the Ukrainian artistic society to the official doctrine" [1], which is designated in the Ukrainian art-historical discourse by the term nonconformism. The author of a thorough monograph, although he claims that "nonconformism of the 60s - 80s of the last century is a transformation of the achievements of the avant-garde" [1], still rightly emphasizes its appearance at the turn of the 50s - 60s. Let's say that nonconformism is not a consequence of the consistent development of the avant-garde and modernism as a whole, but its ideological and theoretical

foundations, artistic language and examples of the work of avant-garde artists became the basis for the work of artists from the 60s onwards.

As for Oleksiy Rogotchenko's remark about the role of the art school of Mykhailo Boychuk [7] in the emergence of non-conformism, which he elevates to the level of a "counterculture of socialist realism", it should be said that the work of this school has its own origins in modernism and is modernism, but was not a denial or counterbalance to the dominant method. The tragedy of this school lies in the forcible introduction of the ideas of proletarian culture into artistic life and the inconsistency of the views of Boychukists with these postulates. The destruction of this school is associated with the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the introduction of regulated norms of creativity. Importantly, using the example of T. Yablonska and E. Volobuev, Oleksiy Rogotchenko emphasizes another form of departure from the dominant method - the transition to one's own styles in creativity [1]. In a difficult period of her life, Tetyana Yablonska, already in independent Ukraine in 1997, writes: "Now I have come to the conclusion that the main thing in art is the personality of the artist, his direct feelings, the poetry of his soul and the ability to captivate the viewer with this" [8], which indicates a final transition to free creativity. And such a transition, or erosion of the method of socialist realism, as shown in the work of O. Rogotchenko, became widespread in the artistic environment. It has become widespread not only in art - erosion is also occurring in social relations, society is gradually rejecting party control and embarking on the path of originality. In essence, we are talking about a breakdown in both economic and social policy and the policy of uniting the artist and the government. The dichotomy "artist and power" does not leave the horizon of relations in the artistic environment, but a new model appears - "artist and viewer", which Alexander Bogomazov [9] wrote about in the pre-totalitarian period.

The non-conformist artistic trend is evidence of the emergence of other directions of development of fine art. From now on, from the mid-50s, the artist tries to appear to some extent independent of the state, to overcome the fear for his own life rooted in pre-war history, but also post-war history. It is precisely the cultivation of the image of the enemy in the artistic space in relation to those artists who did not share a one-sided view of creativity, the cultivation of fear in the artistic environment, the practice of devastating criticism of the creativity of talented and freedom-loving artists that is the dominant of the artistic process in the first half of the studied period, which also extended to society as a whole. On the basis of the extensive evidentiary source base of his thorough work, Oleksiy Rogotchenko proves this and shows the change in approaches to artists in the period from the mid-50s when the government, through the Soviet Union of Artists, financially supported its ideological supporters. And as a result of such a policy, free artists were first tragically and bloody persecuted, and in the second period they became beggars and the

object of harassment. Oleksiy Rogotchenko, speaking of non-conformism, specifies the date of its appearance - autumn 1954 and calls it the art of resistance, not protest, as it is categorically defined in art criticism. Such an appearance is due to the death of Stalin in March 1953, the disintegration of his personality cult, the rehabilitation of the repressed and the return of survivors from exile, the cessation of repression. Against the background of such fateful events, the oppressed society, and with it art, began to revive. Let us agree with the opinion of Orest Golubets [10] given in the work that this period is identical in significance for Ukrainian art to the period of Ukrainization of the 1920s [1]. Continuing this opinion, we can say that during this period totalitarian art received its opponent - the art of resistance, the art of free-spirited artists, shrouded in the romanticism of creativity and national tradition. Such resistance exposed the artist to great troubles and few dared to defend their own idea of art, the role of the artist in society against the background of total surveillance by punitive and party bodies.

## 5. Soc-realism as Means for Further Control of the People

Regarding the interpretation of the method of socialist realism. In the creative heritage of Oleksiy Rogotchenko, this direction of research occupies a significant place. The author has been searching for a theoretical basis for the policy of totalitarian art for many years. Such a heuristic requires an explanation of the Bolshevik policy in the field of culture. He notes that in 1925, the leader of the Bolshevik Party, J. Stalin, proposed a political formula for cultural and artistic figures. According to his idea, culture and art should be national in form and proletarian in content. In the shell of the national, he hid the policy of denationalization (denazification), which was preached by V. Ulyanov (Lenin). So, the national form was filled with proletarian content and the name of this content is socialist realism.

To what extent was it realism? In the proposed monograph, Oleksiy Rogotchenko provides an answer. In his opinion and conviction, socialist realism is a synthesis of an imaginary and a real character that represents reality in painting [1]. The method of socialist realism consists in reflecting reality in its revolutionary development on the basis of the ideological institutions of the Marxist-Leninist theory of proletarian culture. From the point of view of the Bolshevik government, socialist realism acted as a method of contrasting the proletarian model of culture of Soviet society with the Western model of bourgeois society. Describing the state of development of art in Soviet Lithuania in the early 1950s, and this was only five years of Soviet rule in Lithuania, the Lithuanian art critic P. Svičulėne wrote that the remnants of bourgeois ideology in art were still manifested in the form of aestheticism and formalism. Nevertheless, the intervention of party bodies "helped our

artists to grow stronger, to create works that reveal the spiritual wealth of Soviet people, to educate the people in the spirit of Soviet patriotism" [11]. Under the conditions of party dictatorship, the method of socialist realism acted as an instrument of policy aimed at cultivating devotion to revolutionary ideas, and art was subordinated to such policy. Oleksiy Rogotchenko summarizes that the victory of "national in form, socialist in content" art turned out to be inevitable primarily due to the intervention of the communist party through ideology and punitive bodies, which exercised their repressive influence on the artist [12].

In Ukraine, the language of fine art of the Soviet period was also subordinated to the principles of the socialist realism method. However, unlike Lithuania, which experienced only the first Soviet decade and the manifestation of the achievements of the method was not impressive, in Ukraine in the early 1970s, as Platon Oleksandrovyč Biletsky claims, the socialist realism method in painting and art in general was already considered the highest stage of development of world art. As in Lithuania, so in Ukraine, art was party. Platon Biletsky notes that such a circumstance as party affiliation in no way narrows the possibilities of expressing the artist's individuality [13]. We do not deny this thesis, because it corresponds to historical circumstances, but we draw attention to the fact that such a view of creativity through the prism of party affiliation denies the anthropological, in the sense of natural, foundations of creativity. This can also serve as an example of the humility of artists and the perfect result of the totalitarian system.

A special contrast against the background of the anthropology of art is the quote by Platon Biletsky given by him in his theory of fine arts: "The party tendency of our artists is manifested in the unshakability of their class position, in their boundless devotion to the ideas of Marxism-Leninism. The partisanship of art excludes passive contemplation of reality. The purpose of works of socialist realism is to educate viewers in the spirit of the ideas of the communist party, to make them active builders of communism" [13]. It seems that this quote reveals the essence of the era of dominance of the Soviet method of creativity. Oleksiy Rogotchenko supplements it with his research and emphasizes that the resolution of the Central Committee of the RCP (b) of 1925 stated that the party as a whole cannot depend on the artist's adherence to any direction in art [1].

The above quote by P. Biletsky is also the answer to the art historians' search for the question of whether socialist realism is a form of avant-garde – the restriction of freedom of creativity by party affiliation is not inherent in the avant-garde, the purpose of which was to find new forms of limitless artistic expression. And although socialist realism is such a new form of creativity, its limitation is a distortion of the very idea of free creative expression. The avant-garde, by its very nature, denied art itself, but became a part of it. The method of socialist realism denied bourgeois art and applied the principle of party affiliation to realistic art. In contrast to the achievements

of the avant-garde, which modernized fine arts, socialist realism, with the ban on the leading role of the Communist Party in 1991, became history.

## 6. Totalitarianists' Search for a "Person of a New Era"

The work of Oleksiy Rogotchenko touches on another important topic, namely the anthropology of totalitarianism, or indoctrination - the change of a person under the influence of ideology and repression with their arsenal from party criticism and self-criticism [1] to deprivation of liberty or even life. The art of totalitarianism refers to the system of ideological influence on the subconscious and consciousness of a person with the aim of educating a new person.

Friedrich Nietzsche, given his views on the fact that humanity is not progressing, but even degrading, expresses the theory of a new person who will create a new community. This is how the ideal of the *Übermensch* or "superman" arose - internally disciplined, capable of spiritual transformation of one's own personality and responsible for the future [14]. He believed that "Self-improvement of a person is the path to affirming life, which a person is able to turn into an aesthetic phenomenon" [15]. So, F. Nietzsche expressed the idea of the emergence of a superman in the course of the development of science, technology and society due to internal growth, his superman has a positive goal - enlightenment and improvement.

Under the influence of revolutionary events, artists searched for a new person or a person of a new time. A characteristic reflection of this process is the work of Pavlo Volokidin "Portrait of a Student", dated 1918 [16]. In Ukraine, this is a war-free period of the existence of the Ukrainian state led by Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky, who made significant efforts to reform the state and art. It was during his reign in 1917 that the Ukrainian Academy of Arts was established, and in June 1918 the Congress of Ukrainian Plastic Artists was held, which decided to organize the Central Union of Arts.

Volokidin's "Student" is executed in a realistic manner, but is innovative in nature. The artist managed to see and reveal in the bright face of a young girl the birth of a new type of person, generated by the revolution: strong-willed, energetic, purposeful, viable and confident in her right to life, capable of fighting for a happy future. This work is a vivid artistic document of the era of revolutionary events under the influence of which changes in society and personality changes occur.

The Soviet government, for its part, also joined this philosophical discourse about the superman, which also sought to create a new person but on an ideological basis. That is, the core of the worldview of such a person is the communist ideology, which is the basis for the formation of other human qualities. This is the theory of the "Soviet man", or, as it was expressed during the years of totalitarianism, *homo sovieticus* - the Soviet man, the formation of which took place in the system of creating a new community ("community") - the

"Soviet people".

In the monograph of Oleksiy Rogotchenko, this phenomenon of the Soviet period is reflected by showing how, by what methods, the formation of artists took place in the creative environment, who shared and adhered to the requirements of the communist party and constantly followed its line. politics. Rogotchenko affirmatively and with arguments cites the facts of repressions during the period of the "Great Fear" (the second half of the 1930s) and material support from the Soviet authorities for such artists, because they were for them the bearers of official policy and its leaders [1]. All other artists, and especially those who did not share communist ideals and approaches to creativity and art during the period of stagnation, suffered economically. Against this background, a caste of Soviet artists emerges, bright preachers of the socialist realism method, for example, the director of the Art Institute S. Grigoriev, who severely criticized V. Yermilov for his avant-garde work and did not recognize him as an artist, and a caste of party functionaries in art who fought against manifestations of free creativity and artists who expressed their own opinions about art, and especially those who contradicted the general line of the party. The art of totalitarianism was party-regulated, and therefore unfree, which is what distinguishes it from the artistic process in the free world. The work of Oleksiy Rogotchenko proves that the "self-improvement" of the Soviet person and artist, his inner growth, the diversity of the inner world, enlightenment with new knowledge and the improvement of creativity based on his own method of artistic expression did not occur.

## 7. Conclusions

Totalitarian art of the socialist period is a complex phenomenon closely related to the formation of social relations based on imaginary theories of the socialist organization of life, which were implemented in practice by repressive methods. Such art is politically regulated and acts as an instrument of cultural policy with the aim of educating a new person of the Soviet type. The work of Oleksiy Rogotchenko is a valuable source for studying the multifaceted art of socialism, a starting point for researchers who seek to make a cognitive journey into the world of politicized artistic imagination.

## Author Contributions

Karpov Viktor Vasilyevich is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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