

On Art after the Failure of Real Socialism

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Some three years ago in Dubrovnik I delivered a paper on the prospects and hopes of perestroika in the so-called socialist countries. Then we had already as an example the liberalization of culture and the beginning of economic reforms in Hungary and Poland, but one could hardly dream of something similar in Bulgaria, where the regime of Todor Zhivkov seemed stable and unmovable forever and ever. The Soviet Union with the first manifestations of glasnost and the promises for economical perestroika appeared then to us (from Bulgarian perspective) as a source of hope that after all those years of state control over culture, the whole "socialist camp" will finally relax, at least in creating art freely.

From the distant point of view of an art historian, art might seem as a domain of human experience, which does not change greatly from one moment of social and political development to next. Still, for the living in that and not other particular historic time people it is gravely important and encouraging that with the current changes in the political reality there are real chances for dozens of works, stopped by ideological reasons to emerge, that the abandonment of obligatory optimistic content and obligatory soc-realistic form would open up new fields of expression. After all, the old Marxist conviction that culture can be understood neither in terms of itself, nor in terms of some "universal development of the mind" but in the whole social framework, proves to be good methodology for anticipations and predictions. Those were made quickly enough, sounding quite optimistic, but how were they fulfilled?

Some similar changes take place in virtually all East-european countries and after years talk of perestroika it is about time, when "perestroika" almost vanished from the political vocabulary, to look and see what are the results for art and culture in general.

It is already clear, that in the Soviet Union, after abandoning the realization of quick economical reforms and, of course, because of complex other political, social and national problems, the content of the term "perestroika" tacitly changed and whatever it means now, it is rarely connected with glasnost.

Glasnost was a good slogan when it helped to deal with some political opponents. Once glasnost went that far that not only the press, but the central TV tried to criticize the government and the president himself, the tolerance has ended. Not only one of the most interesting political-cultural television programmes "Vzgliad" was stopped, the news-reel was censored, but it was all done in the old known way - with throwing out of work disobedient journalists. Restrictions on art could be following, because as we well remember, art was one of the ways not only to express political views, but it was even treated as a source of information in the controlled socialist society. So, it proves early to say what the impact of perestroika on art in the Soviet Union is, because it is not clear what exactly is meant by "perestroika" there.

The idea of restructuring the socialist system has been abandoned in Bulgaria as soon as the restructuring began. Now we are talking about "transferring into politi-

cal democracy and market economy". So, that transition period, as far as political and some economic changes are concerned, is going much quicker than it could be expected. Naturally the relaxation of the censorship brought new hopes for art. It could be expected that the estimation of the works of art would shift towards their aesthetic values, because the political hints do not have to be hints any more. They become quickly out of date, sound banal, so count less. The quality is supposed to matter first of all. It could be even believed, that new artists, who have been compulsory or voluntarily silent would emerge on the cultural scene and become widely known.

Such were the hopes. The reality proves to be quite different. Certainly, some compulsory silent intellectuals emerged - only not on the cultural, but on the political scene, where their voices have little to do with art and sometimes even with culture. The freedom to say or express whatever theme in whatever form diminishes the attractiveness of those works of art which were interesting mainly with their dual political meaning - neutral, or even prizing on the surface and critical on a deeper level. Many artists proved to be creatively helpless in a changing political situation, which quickly changed the demands of the audience. They either go on with political insinuations that no longer have the importance and the taste of conspiracy or feeling feeble to make unengaged directly art, decide to enter "the big politics", which they are absolutely unprepared to do. Thus, up till now during the period of transition in Bulgaria almost no new valuable works of art emerge, while the political performances often look like bad theatre plays with false heroes and phoney martyrs.

As far as transition to market economy means economic reforms, it has a special impact on artistic life. After so many years of total rejection of the market mechanisms in the economic life, reformatory minded economists now tend towards an almost completely free market - with a minimal state intervention. It is difficult to tell which is more damaging for the cultural values - restrictions or purely economic justification. At any case, with restrictions diminished, we now venture the fruits of market criteria in art. The cinemas, once full with ideologically right Soviet film (of course, among them were some very good critical ones), now are bursting with American masterpieces with Schwarzenegger or add to the sexual education of the Bulgarian public with illuminative pictures as "Emanuelle".

The publishing houses less than four years ago had difficulties in ordering the translation of some recent philosophers for their non-marxist views. Now only the ones, especially critical to Marxism known to the broader public exactly for that, like Leszek Kolakowski, or some of the modern classics as Freud have a chance to be translated. Others, no matter now interesting theoretically, won't gather enough percentage of reader's interest to be profitable for the publisher. Having to pay their own paper and print, once generously financed by the State, the publishing houses now prefer to deliver crime novels, political kitsch, or Chinese horoscopes. In that situation the Bulgarian philosophers have diminishing prospects to see their works published earlier than in the next decade.

We could console ourselves hoping that it is just the beginning and that people soon would get tired of the cultural rubbish, if it wasn't for the Polish example. The plan of Balcerowicz, together with the enormous aid from the West gives opportunities for some remedy of the ruined economy of an ex-socialist country. Poland now looks like a bright and desired model to many of the Bulgarian economists.

But, what happens to the famous Polish theatre, to the most interesting of all East and Central European film industries, the Polish?

The answer is embarrassing and even depressing. The theatres which were one of the main attractions of Warsaw, Cracaw or Wroclaw are now empty, although the tickets for a normal performance do not cost much more than a ticket for the cinema. The last Warsaw theatrical gatherings passed away without any noise, presenting average professional skill and mainly old classical content. Left without any dotations some theatres closed down, others like one of the best Warsaw theatres "Studio", once at the front line of avant-garde performances, went for artistically suspicious experiments as the play "Tamara". "Tamara" gathered immense audience, but the only thing new and interesting about it was that the public was given exclusive dinner with the participation of the actors. That "artistic" trick assembled the nouveau-riches of Warsaw and gave the theatre some funds, because naturally the prices of the tickets were enormous.

Another known in the past with its successful presentations of difficult play writers as Witkacy or Gombrowicz theatre "Dramatyczny", having the same financial troubles, yielded to the well explored Western money-maker - the musical.

The "Polish wave" in the cinema is also far back in the seventies and early eighties, in a period which now is sometimes labelled to be culturally repressive. As to the book market - the most popular seem to be the memories of Gierek or books with titles like: "Dzierzynski - the Red Butcher".

Does that cultural impoverishment go necessarily with the transition towards market economy? If so, what chances has Bulgarian cultural life, which never was especially elaborate? Such questions bother me immensely, particularly in the context of the writings of some of the most serious Western critics. In the foreword to his collected essays "The Images Of God", Peter Fuller, art critic and editor of *Modern Painting* writes:

"Certainly, I found myself in little sympathy with much recent American and European art which seemed merely to mimic the mass media and to reflect the tacky surfaces of contemporary commercial reality."

So, Fuller comes to re-affirm the "art which made great claims", the art, as another contemporary critic George Stiner described it "touched by the fear and ice of God". The same tendency and much more religiously attached demonstrated the prolific British aesthete, Roger Scruton in his address to the International Aesthetic Congress in 1988. His paper was an appraisal of "the experience of the sacred".

Shall we also, following the development we began, come in some ten or twenty years to the same metaphysical longings presented by the English critics nowadays, or will we go back to the rough revolutionary Marxist theses as did Adorno in the sixties? The question is open and it concerns the theory.

If I am to risk a short term prognosis, I'll have to admit, that I do not imagine any rich internal market of cultural values in the foreseeable future. The reason is simple and inevitable - the difficult economic situation Bulgaria is in and is going to be in for quite a time. Even if we succeed in adjusting to the future global economy and there will be some prospects for participation in the world's cultural market, I don't think there would be bright perspectives for the development of the national art except as a good for export.