The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror
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The relationship between art and power, or art and war, or art and terror, has always been an ambivalent one, to put it mildly. True, art needs peace and quiet for its development. And yet time and time again it has used this quiet, of all things, in order to sing the praises of war heroes and their heroic deeds. The representation of glory and suffering of the war was for very long time a preferred topic for art. But the artist of the classic age was only a narrator or an illustrator of the war events – in the old times the artist was never competing with a warrior. The division of labour between war and art was quite clear. The warrior made the actual fight, and the artist represented this fight by narrating it or depicting it. That means: Warrior and artist were mutually dependent. The artist needed the warrior to have a topic for an artwork. But the warrior needed the artist even more. After all, the artist was able to find also another, more peaceful topic for his or her work. But only an artist was able to bestow on the warrior the fame and to secure this fame for the generations to come. In a certain sense the heroic war action was futile and irrelevant without an artist who had a power to witness this heroic action and to inscribe it into the memory of the mankind. But in our time the situation has changed drastically: The contemporary warrior does not need an artist any more to get fame and inscribe his action into the universal memory. For this purpose the contemporary warrior has all the contemporary media at his immediate disposal. Every act of terror, every act of war are immediately registered, represented, described, depicted, narrated and interpreted by the media. This machine of the media coverage is working almost automatically. It does not need any individual artistic intervention, any individual artistic decision to be put into motion. By pushing the button that let a bomb to explode a contemporary warrior or terrorist pushes a button that starts the media machine.

Indeed, the contemporary mass media has emerged as by far the largest and most powerful machine for producing images, indeed – vastly more extensive and effective than our contemporary art system. We are constantly fed with images of war, terror and catastrophes of all kinds, at a level of image production and distribution with which the artist with his artisan skills cannot compete. And in the meantime, politics has also shifted to the domain of media-produced imagery. Nowadays, every major politician, or rock-star, or TV-entertainer, or sport hero generate thousands of images through their public appearances – much more than any living artist. And a famous general or terrorist produces even more images. So it seems that the artist – this last craftsman of present-day modernity – stands no chance of rivalling the supremacy of these commercially driven image-generating machines. And beyond that the terrorists and warriors themselves begin to act as artists nowadays.

Especially video art became the medium of choice for the contemporary warriors. Bin Laden is communicating with the outer world primarily by the means of this medium: We all know him as a video artist in the first place. The same can be said about the videos representing beheadings, confessions of the terrorists etc. In all these cases we have to do with the consciously and artistically staged events that have their own easily recognisable aesthetics.

Here we have the people who do not wait for an artist to represent their acts of war and terror: Instead, the act of war itself coincides here with its documentation, with its representation. The function of art as a medium of representation, and the role of the artist as a mediator between reality and memory are here completely eliminated. The same can be said about the famous photographs and videos from the Abu-Ghraib prison in Baghdad. These videos and photographs demonstrate an uncanny aesthetic similarity with alternative, subversive European and American art and filmmaking of the 60-and 70s. The iconographic and stylistic similarity is, in fact, striking. (Viennese Actionism, Pasolini etc.). In both cases the goal is to reveal a naked, vulnerable, desiring body that is habitually covered by the system of social conventions. But, of course, the strategy of the subversive art of the 60s and 70s had a goal to undermine the traditional set of beliefs and conventions dominating the artist's own culture. In the Abu-Ghraib art production this goal was, we can safely say, completely perverted. The same subversive aesthetics was used to attack and to undermine a different, other culture in an act of violence, in an act of humiliation of the other (instead of self-questioning including the self-humiliation) – leaving the conservative values of the own culture completely unquestioned. But in any case it is worth to mention that on the both sides of the war on terror the image production and distribution is effectuated without any intervention of an artist.

Now I leave aside all the ethical and political considerations and evaluations of this image production because I believe that these considerations are more or less obvious. At the moment it is important for me to state that we are speaking here about the images that became the icons of the contemporary collective imagination. The terrorist videos and the videos from the Abu-Ghraib prison are impregnated in our consciousness or even sub-consciousness much more deeply than any work of any contemporary artist. This elimination of the artist from the practice of image production is especially painful for the art system because at least since the beginning of Modernity artist wanted to be radical, daring, taboo-breaking, going beyond all the limitations and borders. The avant-garde art discourse makes use of many concepts from the military sphere, including the notion of the avant-garde itself. There is talk of exploding norms, destroying traditions, violating taboos, practicing certain artistic strategies, attacking the existing institutions etc. From this we can see that not only does modern art go along with, illustrate, laud or criticize war as it did earlier, but also wages war itself. The artists of the classical avant-garde saw themselves as agents of negation, destruction, eradication of all traditional forms of art. In accordance with the famous dictum "negation is creation", which was inspired by the Hegelian dialectic and propagated by authors such as Bakunin or Nietzsche under the title of "active nihilism", avant-garde artists felt themselves empowered to create the new icons by destruction of the old ones. A modern work of art was measured by how radical it was, how far the artist had gone in destroying artistic tradition. Although in the meanwhile the modernity itself has often enough been declared passé, to this very day this criterion of radicalness has lost nothing of its relevance to our evaluation of art. The worst thing that can be said of an artist continues to be that his or her art is "harmless".

This means that Modern art has a more than ambivalent relationship with violence, with

terrorism. An artist's negative reaction to repressive, state-organized power is something which almost goes without saying. Artists who are committed to the tradition of the modernity will feel themselves unambiguously compelled by this tradition to defend the individual's sovereignty against State oppression. But the artist's attitude to individual and revolutionary violence is more complicated, insofar as it also practices a radically affirmation of the individual's sovereignty against the State. There is a long history to the profound inner complicity between modern art and modern revolutionary, individual violence. In both cases, radical negation is equated with authentic creativity, whether in the area of art or politics. Over and over again this complicity results in a form of rivalry. Art and politics are connected at least in one fundamental respect: both are areas in which a struggle for recognition is being waged. As defined by Alexander Kojève in his commentary on Hegel, this struggle for recognition surpasses the usual struggle for the distribution of material goods, which in modernity is generally regulated by market forces. What is at stake here is not merely that a certain desire be satisfied but that it is also recognised as socially legitimate. Whereas politics is an arena in which various group interests have, both in the past and the present, fought for recognition, artists of the classical avant-garde have already contended for the recognition of all individual forms and artistic procedures that were not previously considered legitimate. In other words, the classical avant-garde has struggled to achieve recognition for all visual signs, forms, and media as the legitimate objects of artistic desire and, hence, also of representation in art. Both forms of struggle are intrinsically bound up with each other, and both have as their aim a situation in which all people with their various interests, as indeed also all forms and artistic procedures, will finally be granted equal rights. And both forms of struggle are thought in the context of Modernity as being intrinsically violent.

Along these lines, Don DeLillo writes in his novel Mao II that terrorists and writers are engaged in a zero-sum game: by radically negating that which exists, both wish to create a narrative which would be capable of capturing society's imagination – and thereby altering society. In this sense, terrorists and writers are rivals – and, as DeLillo notes, nowadays the writer is beaten hands down because today's media use the terrorists' acts to create a powerful narrative with which no writer can contend. But, of course, this kind of rivalry is even more obvious in the case of the artist as in the case of the writer. The contemporary artist uses namely the same media as the terrorist: Photography, video, film. At the same time it is clear than the artist can not go further than the terrorist does, the artist cannot compete with the terrorist in the field of radical gesture. In his Surrealist Manifesto Andre Breton famously proclaimed the terrorist act of shooting into the peaceful crowd to be the authentically surrealist, artistic gesture. Today this gesture seems to be left far behind by the recent developments. In terms of the symbolic exchange, operating by the way of potlatch, as it was described by Marcel Mauss or by Georges Bataille, that means by the rivalry in radicality of destruction and self-destruction, art is obviously on the loosing side.

But it seems to me that this very popular way of comparing art and terrorism, or art and war is fundamentally flawed. And now I will try to show where I see here a fallacy. Art of the Avant-Garde, art of Modernity was iconoclastic. There is no doubt about that. But would we say that

the terrorism is iconoclastic? No, the terrorism is rather iconophile. The terrorist's or the warrior's image production has the goal to produce the strong images – the images that we would tend to accept as being "real", as being "true", as being the "icons" of the hidden, terrible reality that is for us the global political reality of our time. I would say: these images are the icons of the contemporary political theology that dominates our collective imagination. These images draw their power, their persuasiveness from a very effective form of moral blackmail. After so many decades of modern and post-modern criticism of the image, of the mimesis, of the representation we feel ourselves somewhat ashamed by saying that the images of terror or torture are not true, not real. We can not say that these images are not true, because we know that these images are paid by a real loss of life – a loss of life that is documented by these images. Magritte could easily say that a painted apple is not a real apple or that a painted pipe is not a real pipe. But how can we say that a videotaped beheading is not a real beheading? Or that a videotaped ritual of humiliation in the Abu-Ghraib prison is not a real ritual? After so many decades of the critique of representation directed against the naive belief in photographic and cinematic truth we are now ready to accept certain photographed and videotaped images as unquestionably true, again.

That means: The terrorist, the warrior is radical – but he is radical not in the same sense as the artist is radical. He does not practice the iconoclasm. Rather, he wants to reinforce the belief in the image, to reinforce the iconophilic seduction, the iconophilic desire. And he takes the exceptional, radical measures to end the history of the iconoclasm, to end the critique of representation. We are confronted here with a strategy that is historically quite new. Indeed, the traditional warrior was interested in the images that would be able to glorify him, to present him in a favourable, positive, attractive way. And we, of course, have accumulated a long tradition of criticising, deconstructing such strategies of pictorial idealisation. But the pictorial strategy of contemporary warrior is a strategy of shock and awe. It is a pictorial strategy of intimidation. And it is, of course, only possible after the long history of modern art producing images of angst, cruelty, disfiguration. The traditional critique of representation was driven by a suspicion that there must be something ugly and terrifying hidden behind the surface of the conventional idealised image. But the contemporary warrior shows us precisely that – this hidden ugliness, the image of our own suspicion, of our own angst. And precisely because of that we feel ourselves immediately compelled to recognise these images as being true. We see things that are as bad as we expected them to be – maybe even worse. Our worst suspicions are confirmed. The hidden reality behind the image is shown to us being as ugly as we expected it to be. So we have a feeling that our critical journey came to its end, that our critical task is completed, that our mission as critical intellectuals is accomplished. Now the truth of the political revealed itself – and we can contemplate the new icons of the contemporary political theology without a need to go further. Because of these icons being terrible enough by themselves. And so it is sufficient to comment on these icons – it makes no sense any more to criticise them. That explains the macabre fascination that finds its expression in many recent publications dedicated to the images of war on terror emerging on the both sides of the invisible front.

That is why I don't believe that the terrorist is a successful rival of the Modern artist – by being even more radical than the artist. I rather think that the terrorist or the anti-terrorist warrior with his embedded image production machine are the enemies of the Modern artist because they try to create the images that have a claim to be true and real – beyond any criticism of representation. The images of terror and war were in fact proclaimed by many today's authors as the signs of "the return of the real" – as visual proofs of the end of the critique of the image as it was practiced in the last century. But I think that it is too early to give this critique up. Of course, the images about which I am speaking have some elementary, empirical truth: They document certain events and their documentary value can be analysed, investigated, confirmed or rejected. There are some technical means to establish if a certain image is empirically true or if it is simulated, or modified, or falsified. But we have to differentiate between this empirical truth and empirical use of an image as, let say, a judicial evidence, and its symbolic value inside the media economy of symbolic exchange.

The images of terror and counter-terror that circulate permanently in the networks of contemporary media and became almost unescapable for a contemporary TV viewer are shown primarily not in a context of an empirical, criminal investigation. They have a function to show something more than this or that concrete, empirical incident. They produce the universally valid images of the political sublime. The notion of sublime is associated for us in the first place with its analysis by Kant who has used as examples of the Sublime the images of the Swiss mountains and of the sea tempests. Or with the essay of Jean- Francois Lyotard on the relationship between Avant-Garde and Sublime. But, actually, the notion of the Sublime takes its origin in the treatise of Edmund Burke on the notions of Sublime and Beautiful – and there Burke uses as an example of the Sublime the public exposure of beheadings and tortures that were common in the Centuries before the Enlightenment. But we should also not forget that the reign of the Enlightenment itself was introduced by the public exposure of the mass beheadings by guillotine in the centre of revolutionary Paris. In his Phenomenology of Spirit Hegel writes about this exposure that it created the true equality among men because it made perfectly clear that no one can claim any more that his or her death has any higher meaning. During the 19th and 20th Centuries the massive depolitisation of the Sublime took place. Now we are experience the return not of the Real but of the political Sublime – in the form of repolitisation of the Sublime. The contemporary politics does not represent itself as beautiful any more - as even the totalitarian states of the 20th Century still did. Instead, the contemporary politics represents itself as sublime again – that means as ugly, repelling, unbearable, terrifying. And even more: All the political forces of contemporary world are involved in the even increasing production of the political Sublime – by competing for the strongest, most terrifying image. It is as if Nazi Germany would advertise for itself using the images of Auschwitz, and the Stalinist Soviet Union - using the images of Gulag. Such a strategy is new. But not as new as it seems to be.

The point that Burke had originally tried to make is precisely this: also a terrifying, sublime image of violence is still merely an image. Also an image of terror is produced, staged – and can be aesthetically analysed and criticised in terms of critique of representation. This kind of

criticism does not mean any lack of moral sense. The moral sense is at place where it relates to the individual, empirical event that is documented by a certain image. But at the moment as an image begins to circulate in the media networks and acquires the symbolic value of being a representation of the political sublime it can be subjected to an art criticism as every other image. This art criticism can be a theoretical one. But it can be also a criticism by the means of art itself – as it became a tradition in the context of modernist art. It seems to me that this kind of criticism is already taking place in the art context but I would not like to name names at the moment because it would bring me away from the immediate goal of my presentation that consists in the diagnostics of the contemporary regime of image production and distribution as it takes place in the contemporary media. I would only like to point out that the goal of contemporary criticism of representation should be a double one. First of all this criticism should be directed against all the kinds of censorship and suppression of the images that would prevent us from being confronted with the reality of war and terror. And this kind of censorship is, of course, still there. Some weeks ago ABC refused to broadcast the Film of Steven Spielberg "Saving Private Ryan" because of the scenes of "graphic violence" in this movie. This kind of censorship legitimising itself by the defence of "moral values" and "family rights" can be, of course, applied to the coverage of the wars that takes place today – and sanitise their representation in the media. That was also the immediate reaction of some American journalists (Frank Rich from NY Times). But at the same time we are in need of the criticism analysing the use of these images of violence as the new icons of the political sublime and of the symbolic competition, of the potlatch in production of such icons.

And it seems to me that the art context is especially appropriate for this second kind of criticism. The art world seems to be very small, closed and even irrelevant compared with the power of today's media markets. But in reality, the diversity of images circulating in the media is highly limited compared to the diversity of contemporary art. Indeed, in order to be effectively propagated and exploited in the commercial mass media, images need to be easily recognisable for the broad target audience. This makes the mass media extremely tautological. The variety of images circulating in the mass media is, therefore, vastly more limited than the range of images preserved in museums of Modern art or produced by contemporary art. Even the terrifying images of the political sublime are only images among many other images – not less, but also not more. Indeed, already the classical avant-garde has opened up the infinite field of all possible pictorial forms, which are all lined up alongside one another with equal rights. One after another, so-called primitive art, abstract forms and simple objects from everyday life have all acquired the kind of recognition that once only used to be granted to the historically privileged artistic masterpieces. This equalizing art practice has become progressively more pronounced in the course of the twentieth century, to the same degree as the images of mass culture, entertainment and kitsch have been accorded equal status inside the traditional high art context.

Now, this politics of equal aesthetic rights, this struggle for aesthetic equality between all visual forms and media that modern art has fought to establish was – and still is even now - frequently criticised as an expression of cynicism and, paradoxically enough, of elitism. This

criticism was directed against Modern art from the right and from the left – so that Modern art was criticised for a lack of genuine love for eternal beauty and, at the same time, for a lack of genuine political engagement. But, in fact, the politics of the equal rights on the level of aesthetics is a necessary precondition of any political engagement. Indeed, the contemporary emancipatory politics is a politics of inclusion – directed against the existing exclusions of the political, ethnical or economical minorities. But this struggle for the inclusion is possible only if the visual signs and forms in which the desires of the excluded minorities manifest themselves are not rejected and suppressed from the beginning by any kind of aesthetic censorship operating in the name of the higher aesthetic values. Only under the presupposition of the equality of all the visual forms and media on the aesthetic level it is possible to resist the factual unequality between the images – as imposed from the outside, and reflecting cultural, social, political or economical unequalities. But at the same time the politics of aesthetic equality is also preventing certain images to raise the claim to the exclusive representation of the political sublime. Since Duchamp the modern art practiced an elevation of the "mere things" to a status of the artworks. This upward movement created an illusion that being artwork is something higher and better than being simply real, being a mere thing. But at the same time Modern art went through a long period of self-criticism in the name of reality. The name "art" can be used in this context as accusation, as denigration. To say it is "mere art" is even a greater insult as to say it is a mere object. The equalising power of Modern and contemporary art works both ways – it valorise and devalorise at the same time. And that means: to say about the images produced by war and terror that on the symbolic level they are merely art means not to elevate or sanctify but to criticise them.

As Kojève already pointed out, the moment when the overall logic of equality underlying individual struggles for recognition becomes apparent creates the impression that these struggles have to some extent surrendered their true seriousness and explosiveness. This was why even before World War II Kojève was able to speak of the end of history – in the sense of the political history of struggles for recognition. Since then, the discourse about the end of history has made its mark particularly on the art scene. People are constantly referring to the end of art history, with which they mean that these days all forms and objects are 'in principle' already considered works of art. Under this premiss, the struggle for recognition and equality in art has reached its logical end – and became therefore outdated and superfluous. For if, as it is argued, all images are already acknowledged as being of equal value, this would deprive the artist of the aesthetic tools with which the artist can break taboos, provoke, shock or extend existing boundaries of art - as it was possible during the whole history of Modern art. Instead, by the time history has come to an end each artist will be suspected of producing just one further arbitrary image among many. Were this indeed the case, the regime of equal rights for all images would have to be regarded not only as the telos of the logic followed by the history of art in modernity, but also as its terminal negation. Accordingly, we now witness repeated waves of nostalgia for a time when individual works of art were still revered as precious, singular masterpieces.

The fascination with the images of the political sublime that we can now watch almost

everywhere can be interpreted as a specific case of this nostalgia for a masterpiece, for a true, real image. The media – and not the museum, not the art system – seems to be now the place where the longing for such an overwhelming, immediately persuasive image is expected to be satisfied. We have here a certain form of a reality show that has a claim to be a representation of the political reality itself – in its most radical forms. But this claim can only be sustained by the fact that we are not able to practice the critique of representation in the context of the contemporary media. The reason for that is quite simple: The media shows us only the image of what happens now. In contrast to the mass media, art institutions are places of historical comparison between past and present, between original promise and contemporary realisation of this promise and, thus, they possess the means and possibilities to be sites of critical discourse. Because every such discourse needs a comparison, needs a framework and a technique of comparison. Given our current cultural climate the art institutions are practically the only places where we can actually step back from our own present and compare it with other historical eras. In these terms, the art context is almost irreplaceable because it is particularly well suited to critically analyse and challenge the claims of the media-driven zeitgeist. The art institutions are a place where we are reminded of the egalitarian art projects of the past, of the whole history of the critique of representation and of the critique of the Sublime – so that we can measure our own time against this historical background.