American Journal of Art and Design
2023; 8(2): 37-45
http://www.sciencepublishinggroup.com/j/ajad
doi: 10.11648/j.ajad.20230802.14
ISSN: 2578-7799 (Print); ISSN: 2578-7802 (Online)

Between Aesthetics and Imagination: The Ongoing Transformations of Ukrainian Art in the Times of the War

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To cite this article:

Maryna Protas, Natalia Bulavina, Igor Isychenko. Between Aesthetics and Imagination: The Ongoing Transformations of Ukrainian Art in the Times of the War. *American Journal of Art and Design*. Vol. 8, No. 2, 2023, pp. 37-45. doi: 10.11648/j.ajad.20230802.14

Received: April 21, 2023; **Accepted**: May 16, 2023; **Published**: May 29, 2023

Abstract: The paper attempts to examine, under the conditions of the war against Russia, the highly relevant question of the relationship between the ongoing Ukrainian war-influenced nation-building process and the nation's art practices. The latter are considered by the authors to be of utmost importance as both the reflection of the former and, at the same time, as something that can influence it, thus, possibly slightly changing or altering the overall shape that the Ukrainian nation, which is being born, will take. It is suggested that imagination plays a major role as something that allows one to go beyond liberalism's utilitarian or deterministic understanding of a nation. Accordingly, an artist is called someone who can, at least hypothetically, overcome a double limitation — that of processes of globalization and standardization of art market products and, on the other hand, total conditioning by the past of the nation. The Ukrainian nation is considered as a project in the process of making, an important role in which could be played by the artist's imagination, relatively less determined by tangible parameters and determinants. In accordance with this statement, numerous examples are provided of how artists of modern Ukraine interpret, in the languages of different styles and genres of art, the ongoing war and the changes caused by it in the collective imagination of the Ukrainian nation, the process of formation of which continues. Using the "world-system", according to I. Wallerstein, method of comparative epistemology, the authors of the article prove the possibility and the effectiveness of studying the cultural habitus of Ukraine from the standpoint of transcendental aesthetics.

Keywords: Ukrainian Art, Contemporary Art, Imaginary Community, Art Episteme, Geography of Art

1. Introduction

The interrelationship of the global, regional and local has probably never been felt so instantly and strongly as it can be observed for some time due to the events in Ukraine. Suburbs and satellite cities of Kyiv, where bloody crimes were committed by the Russian war machine, or small towns of the Donbas steppe, where fierce fighting is going on, instantly gain publicity, which results in something more than just a certain kind of awareness of people around the world. Instead, it can be argued that a media body of a certain geographical topos is created, a body in which the spatial aspects are closely intertwined with, or even secondary to, the mediatized experience of suffering and deaths of thousands of people and living beings.

However, if the mediatization of everything — including, of course, the events of the ongoing war — takes place in a, de facto, autonomous mode, outside the subjective manifestations of the will or wishes of the executioners or victims, due to the very fact of a full integration into the everyday life of the "optical unconscious" that Walter Benjamin once dreamed of and warned about, then many more questions arise regarding the artistic mediation and reflection of these events — or, to be more precise, regarding the role and function of the artist in the modern global media landscape.

Among the attempts at such kind of reflection, we can mention the series of photo reports "Massacre in Bucha and Irpen" by Vojtěch Dárvík Máca, which won the "News" category of the 28th Czech Press Photo'2022 competition, and which was exhibited in Prague's Národní muzeum until the end of July 2023. You can also recall a number of reflections on the pain and suffering of the collective bodyliness of the Ukrainian nation, e.g., an intimate story about the first weeks

of the war can be found in the documentary film by the Ukrainian director Nadia Parfan "I didn't want to make a war film" (the film was released on the website of The New Yorker). Actually, the title itself — as part of the film — seems to us to be a non-accidental reflection on the call of the circumstances of real life, which the artist is unable to ignore: the reluctance to make "a war film" recedes into the completely cinematic background before the feeling of the need to provide the terrible circumstances of the war with a verified and precise, appropriate artistic form for the sake of... Of what? Well, if art sometimes has a goal, here, perhaps, it will resonate with Theodor Adorno's dream about "working through the past" [1].

Indeed, such study always begins "today", in the here and now of national existence. Such conclusions can be drawn from the apt observation of Peter Osborne: "In my opinion, one of the serious problems in the perception of cultural heritage lies in the concept of national cultures that seek unity in the past. Whereas in reality unity should always be sought in the present, only in the present.

For me, the concept of unity is largely a story about mutual dependence and the recognition of its fact. When you look for unity (or your own identity) in the past, you cannot see the connection between unity and interdependence. If you focus on the present, you can easily keep many important questions in view" [16].

Let us summarize, therefore, our starting position as follows: the huge and irrefutable advantage of the artist over the analyst is that art does not have to wait for the manifestation of a mass trend and for statistical results. An artist is someone who, while writing and turning the pages of the "atlas of Mnemosyne" (Abi Warburg) already today — always today — at the same time, from the watchtower of the present, looks freely into both the future and the past.

2. Art Episteme's Changes: Between the Concept and the Phenomenology of Spirit

Today, looking back on the experience of the year of the war, we can state quite real processes of internal transformation of the art episteme in the aspect of national existence: the cultural and artistic life in the country did not freeze and did not come to a halt, but, on the contrary, it has become more intense and — what is important — is continuing to diversify.

Here, it seems appropriate to recall Arthur Danto: generally adhering to a rather vague definition that art is whatever that carries meaning, he, nevertheless, in the monograph "What Art Is" ventured to give a cautious prediction: if modern artists began to create art, the essence and purpose of which would be aesthetic experience — that would be a real revolution [5]. In our opinion, the chance for such a development of events exists now in Ukrainian realities: some artists are returning to the traditions of aesthetic experience, recording the eschatological experience of survival in mortal danger through the medium of art.

In these conditions, the majority of artists de facto, that is, even if they themselves do not articulate it in this way, revise the fundamental art episteme, where the well-known postulate that at the turn of the millennium all art becomes conceptual is subject to refutation, because the phenomenology of a thing in a stressful moment becomes of a relatively lesser importance than the phenomenology of the spirit — moreover, some specialists have already claimed that "it should not be assumed that the philosophical theorizing prompted by contemporary art is wholly, or even mostly, correct" [7].

It so happened that the aggression played the role of a catalyst of double "epistemic disobedience", according to Walter Mignolo's definition, which clearly defined the self-identifying qualitative stages of national image formation. In fact, the process of self-organization of Ukrainian culture fulfills two tasks at the same time: 1) overcomes repressive Russification as a cultural trauma of the post-Soviet period, and 2) rethinks the uncritical adaptation of global public art at the turn of the millennium, and this frees the culture of the nation from the symptoms of "self-colonization" by the educational model of the commodified post-culture of consumer society, mistakenly perceived as the embodiment of true democracy. The process is coherent with what Marc James Léger says, that is, "tendencies that seek to reduce art's non-identitarian autonomy to the immanence of power and class society" are being rethought, because there is a real threat that "post-political artists and intellectuals no longer make distinctions between the existing conditions of biocapitalism and communist struggle" and "the avant-garde legacy can easily be made to serve any macro-political agenda as the official art of imperialist nations, to use Nicos Hadjinicolaou's scurrilous designation" [12].

Therefore, neo-avant-garde practices today try, in some places, to distance themselves from the servile neoliberal culture industry with its pronounced emphasis as a component of the biopolitical apparatus of power, since the interests of the people and purely artistic tasks, free from art-business benchmarking, are more noticeably given priority in the creative projects of Ukrainian artists, who independently synthesize contemporary visual experience with traditional qualities of national worldview. The latter, even in the time of Grigory Skovoroda, were known as cordocentrism (the predominance of spiritual feelings, rather than rational cognition, in the worldview), and were later supplemented by the definitions of seraphism (Christian respect for the sacred mystery of life combined with the freedom-loving militancy of the Cossacks) and Hellenism (where art is the essence of beauty, which gives it an invaluable transcendental quality), which indicate the empathic sensitivity of the Ukrainian worldview and the symbolic attitude to the form as a transcendent essence of beauty, which — such a form — is outside the phenomenal world.

To a certain extent, this corresponds to the call of the Paris Declaration of 2017 to return to spiritual foundations of art episteme, including a need to rethink the essence of the experience of cultural and historical traditions, because

"Europe, in all its richness and greatness, is threatened by a false understanding of itself. This false Europe imagines itself as a fulfillment of our civilization, but in truth it will confiscate our home. It appeals to exaggerations and distortions of Europe's authentic virtues while remaining blind to its own vices. Complacently trading in one-sided caricatures of our history, this false Europe is invincibly prejudiced against the past"; "The patrons of the false Europe are bewitched by superstitions of inevitable progress. They believe that History is on their side, and this faith makes them haughty and disdainful, unable to acknowledge the defects in the post-national, post-cultural world they are constructing"; "We need to restore a sense of spiritual greatness and give it due honor so that our civilization can counter the growing power of mere wealth on the one hand and vulgar entertainment on the other" [24].

Consequently, one can better comprehend Timothy Snyder's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the position that was stated in the summer of 2022 during a speech at the Yale Center for British Art, and in numerous other lectures and articles on the topic of the Russian-Ukrainian war. According to it, Ukraine's resistance is of global importance, because the war proved that Ukraine has been able to instantly self-organize, realizing — even more, constructing in this act of self-organization itself as an identity, as a nation. Hence, "A Ukrainian victory would confirm the principle of self-rule, allow the integration of Europe to proceed, and empower people of goodwill to return reinvigorated to other global challenges" [21]. Similarly, at the conference in Lviv on September 10, 2022, the Polish politician, a member of the Sejm of the II and III convocations, Myroslav Cheh, noted, referring to the opinion of the American President Biden, that Ukraine should not be viewed as a peripheral frontier, because in the world context it is now the center of existential opposition of democracy to destructive authoritarianism [4].

It is thought that in this context, the cultural strategies of Ukraine can be considered fundamentally important in terms of their possible contribution to global culture and art formation processes and practices, which might be considered to be in a deep crisis, because of which various experts keep making statements about the death of contemporary art. In essence, now in the art of Ukraine there is a confrontation between democratic values and neoliberal nihilism of the culture industry, which sharply delineates the landscape in the millennium after the socio-political turn of the world globalized art market into a unified total designization, which turns art into a "political economy of design", in the words of Hal Foster, because the artist itself becomes a commodity [8].

As the Minister of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, Oleksandr Tkachenko, noted, the war, through the reinterpretation of nowadays realities, gives impetus to unknown art narratives, that is why the Ukraine War Art Collection e-platform was created, which collects and studies all artistic reflections that appeared during the war, since "The art born during the war will speak for us longer than we live" [25].

3. An Imagined Community: Ukrainian Nation and the Role of Ukraine's Artists' Imagination in Its Becoming

Étienne Balibar, speaking at the London Summer School of Critical Theory' 2022, stated that the war for the independence of the Ukrainian nation, which the Russian Empire refuses to accept as a nation, is essentially a continuation of the anti-imperialist liberation wars of the 20th century [3]. He agreed with Bruno Latour that this war in Ukraine is existential not only for the Ukrainian nation, but for the whole world, which must take care of the planet, protect nature, which suffers as much as the people who are victims of the war. Environmentalists are alarmingly talking about the unacceptable losses of the ecosystem in the area of active fighting and combat and throughout the country, as well as in adjacent ecosystems, in particular, we could mention the shocking fact that tens of thousands of Black Sea dolphins have been killed.

Developing and sharpening the thesis of Etienne Balibar and, in some ways, arguing with it, we could state that the current war can also be considered as a catalyst for the creation of the Ukrainian nation as an "imaginary community" (Benedict Anderson's term), and this imagination that creates a nation as totality and integrity is obviously, among other things, an answer to the entropy of war — you can survive in the conditions of increasing chaos only by saturating your existence with certain types and forms of order. One of these might become the nation understood as an imaginary community [2].

However, Anderson did not include in his work a broader question that Bruno Latour would certainly have asked: namely, how does a nation, as the result of a certain kind of collective imagination, take into account the non-anthropomorphic horizon, that is, animals, birds, natural landscapes, geology, etc.?

Here, in our opinion, the field opens up for the further development of the idea of "imaginary community" — no group of people, even if they imagine themselves as a whole and passionately believe in it, will be able to live in an ideal world, which is constructed only and solely by this imagination and in which only this community is present. Nations do not arise and do not exist in a vacuum. Nature, therefore, as the background against which humanity exists, should not become that unworked-through rudiment that, like the "unconscious" of Freud, will be the container of everything displaced from the overly bright world of Enlightenment ratio. A vivid example of such an invasion of the unconscious is the fiction of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Arthur Machen and other writers of the first half of the 20th century, who — at least, this reading seems possible to us — wrote their works as a warning to the technocivilization of those times, to the industrial colossus, which, unfortunately, began to listen to natural and ecological issues only in the second half of that century. At the same time, a vivid example of how the gaze before which the history of a place unfolds can lead us beyond the anthropic

horizon is present, although somewhat rudimentary, in W. G. Sebald's "Austerlitz" [20].

The time of rational, rigorous imagination, as an element of nation-building in the 19th century Europe, has passed. However, it is necessary to integrate nature into imagination — thus, we are talking about a nation embedded into a specific landscape and unique ecological situation — avoiding, at the same time, entropy, so that the development of this process of "practical imagination" — i.e., an imagination that becomes the driver of concrete changes in the nature of the lives of millions of people who make their conscious choice regarding one or another ethos – did not reflect the course of events in Thomas Pynchon's short story entitled "Entropy", where instead of the primacy of ratio, one can see the opposite tendency towards a certain structurelessness and liquidity of the imagination of the postmodern type. (Needless to say, the latter piece of fiction can, and perhaps even should also be seen as a valid form of criticizing the Enlightenment's approach to what reason and history are — what can be questioned, though, is the ultimate endpoint of such criticism.) And opposites, as Walter Benjamin pointed out in his time, and which Adorno and Horkheimer picked up in the analysis of "The Dialectics of Enlightenment" (we are talking about the part in which Kant, de Sade and Nietzsche are compared), are often symmetrical to each other, acting, in fact, as forms of identity. However, this question is too complex to try to solve it in passing.

It must be remembered that by excluding the element of imagination from the process of nation-building and reflections on it, we automatically eliminate any chance for "utopian thinking" (Ernst Bloch), and, therefore, we condition the nation to its past, which, firstly, is determinism — which we cannot afford in the age of quantum physics, the theory of relativity and the philosophy of Bruno Latour, and, secondly, it automatically makes it impossible to develop in one way or another thinking about the future, the horizon of the future as that specific matter that can be considered an object of a certain kind of Kunstwollen, namely, the collective creative will of a community of people (a nation), which attempts at creating its own future by implementing certain forms of imagination of this future, rather than the implementation of algorithms — already existing in history — of what a nation is and how it should function. Moreover, only by recognizing the importance of the element of imagination will we be able to solve the unfortunate aporia universal — local, or global — unique, an aporia that exists rather because of a misunderstanding, and which has already been tried to be solved in many ways, including the so-called approach of "local modernism" (it is worth mentioning here the works of the Kazakh artist Aleksandr Ugay among the modern proponents and representatives of this direction, in particular his work for Galeria Labirynt done as part of his Gaude Polonia scholarship in 2017) and the interesting concept of glocalization.

Speaking of imagination, we would also like to mention here the Croatian Catholic thinker Ivan Illic with his reflections on the element of water as a source of a certain kind of imagination and on the sterility and unproductiveness, unimaginativeness of water as H_2O — the vision of positivist science, science before Bachelard, Foucault, Feyerabend and other outstanding thinkers who attempted at reforming the understanding of causality in philosophy and the social sciences in the same way that Einstein and Bohr undermined the remains of the edifice of nineteenth-century positivist physics [6].

So who, if not the artist, is that symbolic figure who has always held the keys to imagination? It is against the background of such a question, precisely under such problematization, that a number of works by Ukrainian artists become better understood: they are not, on the one hand, yet another expression of some conventional "artistic process" that had been under way even before the beginning of the war, and, on the other hand, they are more than just an expression of each artist's own opinion, more than a personal conceptual vision, or even more so, a judgment of value. On the contrary, they appear as broad or narrow, colored or black-and-white brushstrokes on the majestic canvas of the national imagination, an imagination that collectively constructs the nation as such, completing its image, thereby combining the present with what began centuries and centuries ago.

In particular, the magnitude of the catastrophe touched the heart of the Ukrainian artist Ekaterina Lisovenko, who made invective cycles of war chronicles on a daily and monthly basis. In those cycles, she recorded how the nation survived during rocket attacks, how it buried dead civilians, how it perceives dictatorial ruscism, for which people are merely "consumables" (March series "Garden of Sorrows"; April series dedicated to Mariupol and the deadly existence within the occupied territories of, in particular, women and children [13].

A cycle of paintings was dedicated to Mariupol by Serhii Zakharov, whose pre-war interests had been developing in the field of performative activism and who managed to flee from the occupied city, just as he once fled from Donetsk. The cognitive dissonance of the unjustified cruelty of the occupiers, who turned the flourishing peaceful cities of Ukraine into an apocalyptic hell, is painfully reflected in every work of this series of artworks (Figure 6).

Andriy Bludov in one of the tragic moments of the defense of Kyiv writes a series of canvases "Voices" (Figure 1), which one might try to read as a palimpsest of a thousand-year-old cultural heritage of the ancestors of Ukrainians who support us, contemporaries, by providing us with — as the painting suggests — the power of resistance and protection.

In fact, Ukrainian artists created a chronicle of the war akin to the engrams of the "Atlas of Mnemosyne" (Abi Warburg), where individual feelings were inscribed into the collective memory of the nation, influencing the formation of modern Kunstwollen as the cultural spirit/Zeitgeist of the era, thus preventing the positivist reification of the globalized art episteme, since, as Toby Rollo warned, progress in the direction of a modern rational society is dangerous, there are serious reasons for independent critics to be concerned about the possibility of a repetition of the situation with the justification of another cultural involution by scientists, in particular "in the contemporary context of rising fascism and

authoritarianism", where the spread of the global public art episteme since the millennium can be interpreted as a violation of democratic cultural values, because "a normative commitment to universalized notions of social evolution has the effect of closing rather than opening democratic thought to the hazards of authoritarian culture and its attendant modes of domination rooted in racialization, colonialism, and ableism" [19]. Isn't that why in Russia in 2021 they were so proud of exhibiting Urs Fischer's project "Clay # 4" on Bolotnaya Square of the capital? The question is almost rhetorical, because post-ethnic public art, losing touch with aesthetic judgment, becomes covertly tolerant of Nazi-totalitarian epistemes, resembling an empty container into which the players and theoreticians of the international global capital behind this type of art can put any — what is the necessary meaning, allowing the presence of this or that work in any context — even in the public space of a country that is about to attack a sovereign and independent neighboring nation.

Along with these private, intimate and chamber manifestations of artistic interpretation of the tragic events of the ongoing war, Ukrainian artists are often invited to large international art forums, such as the one that took place in November 2022, when Ukraine became a special guest of the Arte in Nuvola international gallery forum in Rome [26], or when the Künstlerhaus Wien opened its doors to the works of Ukrainian artists, who demonstrated to the world an indomitable will for a victorious peace with their own creativity.

It is symptomatic, however, that the return to the traditions of graphic art that remain deeply rooted in Ukrainian artistic soul can be considered the main leitmotif and the main artistic trend of the events that took place in Ukraine in February and March of 2022. In those tumultuous and tragic days, right in the midst of the chaos of intersecting emotional energies, such as resistance, grief and rage, in the midst of the constant hiding in bomb shelters and the uncertainty of whether to evacuate or not, many artists turned to the format of field sketches in their notebooks. During the evacuation journey, during rocket attacks… — they could even work on pieces of wallpaper that, as it sometimes turned out, were at hand in the cellar where they were hiding. The language of graphic art was the most mobile and adequate expression of a great mixture of feelings that were flooding with grief every artist's soul, just as that of every Ukrainian. And if the artist's interests included a professional study of the psycho-emotional states and reactions of a person under the influence of various circumstances, then there appeared a perfect in its details study, like the one by Iryna Vorona (Vorona 2022). She says: "Every Ukrainian now knows from his own experience what paralyzing fear is. A feeling that envelops the whole body, rising to the throat, but cannot get out because of an invisible hand that squeezes the throat. This fear is all-encompassing, it constantly flows through the body, from the anxiety, which keeps you constantly on edge, to the animalistic, connected with the instinct of survival... A person screams not when he needs help, but when he is burning from the inside. This is not a cry of despair or hopelessness, this is the last manifestation of emotion, bursting out before disappearing forever" [28].

As we can see from this quotation, the "invisible hand" of fear paralyzes the bodily, our natural-animal component as successfully as the "invisible hand" of the market (A. Smith) paralyzes, in the end, the artistic imagination, reducing it to a competitive struggle (the details of the process can be followed in the films of an outstanding German director Harun Farocki and his student Gito Steirl, boh of whom put under scrutiny, among other things, the processes of circulation of images in the world-economy).

Now, looking back, you understand the correctness of what was said, which is confirmed by numerous pieces of graphic art by other artists, who worked on a daily basis, chronicling and documenting the invasion as they were witnessing it with their own eyes. Here are the works by Inga Levy, with her textual and illustrative clusters of images, here are the sheets by Ekaterina Poltavskaya (Figure 3), who says that she had never thought that it is possible to create serious works literally on scraps of paper with a pencil and a red pen. Here are the works by Oleksiy Revika (Figure 4), Vlada Ralko, Sana Shahmuradova, Anastasiya Usenko, Marta Koshulinska, Serhii Zakharov, Olena Liberty (Figure 5), Tymofii Osypov, Volodymyr Kochmar... Artists of various profiles, from contemporary performance-activism, or children's books' illustrators to industrial design and sculpture.

Each of the artists in a situation of shock and stress (be it unconsciously or consciously) came to the conclusion that the artistic means of contemporary art are indifferent to the expression of such a difficult and deep layer of human experience, at a moment when the artist is not at all sure whether they will remain alive in the following minutes. Hence, as an example of how wartime experience can be reflected via art forms other than contemporary, we could cite the creative textile art project by Anastasiya Podervianska "Map of air alarms of Ukraine" (Figure 2), which was inspired by the map of Ukraine on the interactive online resource "Official map of air alarms of Ukraine", which turns bright red as soon as yet another air raid alert is announced.

The drawings are taken from the e-platform: UKRAINE WAR ART COLLECTION

Figure 1. *Andriy Bludov ("Voices", 2022, canvas, oil).*

Figure 2. *Anastasiya Podervianska ("Map of air alarms of Ukraine", 2022, textile).*

Figure 3. *Ekaterina Poltavskaya ("Grief", 2022, paper, pencil).*

Figure 4. *Oleksiy Revika ("Children", 2022, paper, ballpoint pen).*

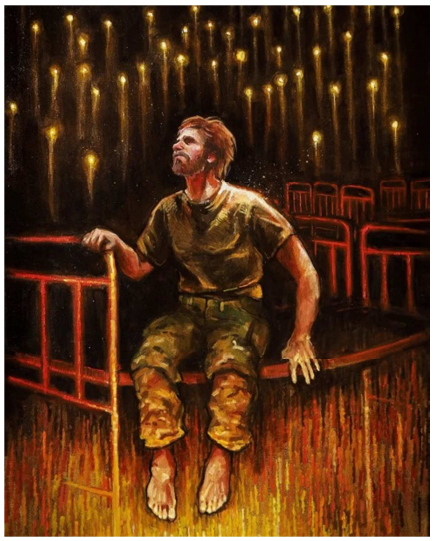

Figure 5. *Olena Liberty ("Olenivka", 2022, canvas, oil).*

Figure 6. *Serhii Zakharov ("Soil", 2022, canvas, oil).*

One can recall that a similar question was posed by the German curator and analyst Jorg Heiser back in the millennium, who was contemplating whether it is possible to reveal the topic of the Holocaust and its victims in contemporary art languages, in particular in the context of the vocabulary of pop art or kitsch. In the end, Heiser himself assumed that the de-skilling of a rationalized art episteme rather emanates a "fake catharsis". However, the German scientist maintains the hope that contemporary art's practices will outgrow the status of "corrupt" artistry of consumer society and develop into something truly productive, when, while maneuvering between mass production and an individual brand, an adequate artistic vocabulary will be created — the one that will be able to appeal to the "here and now", because it will be able to reflect on both humanistic and cultural and technocratic modernization, i.e. at the same time evaluate and respond to "new ways of waging war or torturing, or, just as well, new cures and remedies against diseases. The fact we have to face is that art, probably, is torture and remedy in one" [9].

On the other hand, the collective artistic imagination of the nation expressed through artists cannot be reduced to graphic art — that would be unfair. In European countries, Poland in

particular, there were also exhibitions with video projects by Ukrainian artists. For example, in the Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej "Zamek Ujazdowski" the exposition "Ukraine. Under a Different Sky", where special attention was paid to the installations by Oleksiy Sai "Bombed" and Yulia Zakharova "The Rule of Two Walls", which visualized the destruction by the aggressor of the life and fate of people and the entire country with its peaceful arable land [27].

However, it is worth remembering that to the extent that artists use the thesaurus of postmodernism, it remains true that it is not designed to express empathy or self-identification. As Donald Kuspit believed, "there has always been more contemporaneity than historicity", через що "nothing is sacred to artists who insist on their contemporaneity, because the contemporary is always profane": "History is no longer possible in postmodernism because of modernism itself: at its most vital, it is a history of self-questioning and self-doubt, leading artists to look far a field for their identity. <...> Indeed, defiance of and/or indifference to institutional judgment — to the approval or disapproval of the super-egoistic authority system — is the major means of so-called avant-garde advance. The more "enlightened" the authority system, that is, the more accepting of "strange," "alternative" art, the more it has to be outfoxed by the absurd that lies outside it" [11]. Therefore, in this case, art, as the highest act of aesthetic activity, according to Hegel, in order not to become a banal "Fury of disappearance", first of all, needs deep empathy and compassion, which might be the only ways to achieve the important effect of catharsis. Thanks to this latter, humanity might appear to be able to shake off the indifferent, detached saturation of the comfortable existence of the consumer society.

Perhaps this is what the Vice-President of the Council of Ministers, Minister of Culture and National Heritage of Poland Piotr Glinski meant when he emphasized: "The purpose of the exhibition is to share a traumatic experience that should serve as a warning for all of us. I wish the public that this exhibition will become not only a source of aesthetic impressions, but also a source of reflection" [27]. The problem is that the contemporary fixation on the phenomenology of the thing — the fixation that has been cultivated by the culture industry — has become a habit, due to which the thesis that "Contemporary art has great potential to be a means of conceptual self-discovery" [7] has become generally accepted. Meanwhile, we adhere to the opinion expressed by Hans Belting that the self-appointed universalism of globalized art harms the national aesthetic sense, which becomes post-ethnic and deficient due to the loss of self-identifying transcendental feeling. Robert Musil's novel "A Man Without Properties" can probably be considered the first literary premonition of the aporia of the universal and the local, the national (besides, it can, of course, be considered as an allusion to the fate of the oil and gas empire built by Russia).

The dominance of ratio does not save art from entropy: on the contrary, it turns into a triumph of the non-rational and the unconscious. As Derek Matravers states, the rejection of beauty devalues art, while its true value is not in its monetary equivalent, but in its aesthetic qualities. Because of that, the rejection of aesthetic evaluation is replaced by a conceptual search for the boundaries of art, where it annihilates in the concept. Although it would be logical to solve such questions by the scientific method of logic itself, since art is not suitable for scientific thinking, it is a branch of aesthetic feeling [15].

Jean Francois Lyotard, in an interview with Richard Kearney, once emphasized that "The SS torturer is low not because that Hitler's "theory" was false, but because he refused his own responsibility and believed that he was justified by the need to obey. Arendt speaks of this as the "banality of evil", that is, the vulgarization of responsibility by "necessity". The necessity here is poverty, but it, the necessity, is also a theory of the poverty of morality" [14]. Along the lines of this interview, Ukrainian artists are now trying to pass the extremely difficult test of war with dignity, consolidatedly demonstrating an active civic position and reviving the traditional Ukrainian peculiarity of the worldview, the ethical coordinates of which we propose to call the concepts of cordocentrism and seraphism, which have been present in the Ukrainian philosophical discourse for centuries [17].

4. New/Old Geography of Art: Revisiting the Russian Empire and USSR's Cultural Legacy

It is quite logical, then, that the processes of Ukraine's imagination of itself as a nation occur simultaneously with the processes of the world's imagination of Ukraine as a nation. Indeed, one might even argue that Russia's stubborn unwillingness to recognize Ukraine as a nation in the process of becoming — the unwillingness that has already resulted in crimes against humanity and genocide against Ukrainian people — can be perceived as a form of destructive, "negative imagination" of a kind. Therefore, it is worth emphasizing in this context that memory can be understood as yet another form of imagination, namely, the imagination of the past. Indeed, memory is never given to us as such, in some unambiguous actuality of events. Interpretations of events depend only on our imagination, and therefore, no events have a fixed, rigid meaning in the past — the past changes under the influence of nation-building processes, as well as the future. Imagining oneself as a nation in the past does not always mean contradicting the historical facts that assert the presence in the past of other, different from the nation, dominant types of identity and community formation. Imagining oneself as a nation in the past can sometimes mean a careful and precise construction of such a past that will support a utopian horizon in the future, in order to prevent its collapse.

As part of the process of imagining Ukraine as a nation by the world, we consider the fact that the rediscovery of the Ukrainian culture colonized by the Russian and Soviet

imperial regime projects is spreading across Western museums. It is still difficult to correct the mistakes of the past, but the process continues and the names of artists who are considered "Russian", — in particular, avant-garde artists, including the world-famous Oleksandr Arkhipenko, or Kazimir Malevich, who were born in Kyiv, — are gradually being returned to the imaginary community of Ukrainian nation.

We emphasize once again that, from our point of view, we are not talking about yet another appropriation of the intellectual property baggage of the past. What is being discussed here is a constructive process that looks for its roots in the past, imagining (in the most strict meaning of this ambiguous word) and creating them — however, of course, relying on the facts of ethnic and linguistic affiliation of famous figures of the past — where it seems to be necessary.

The experience of the London National Gallery, where in early 2022 Edgar Degas' graphic sheets — dedicated specifically to Ukrainian (and not Russian, as previously stated) dancers – were renamed to "Ukrainian dancers", was picked up by The Metropolitan Museum of Art where the title of the painting was changed in the early 2023 to "Dancers in Ukrainian Dress" (pastel over charcoal on tracing paper, 1899) [23]. An explanatory note next to the work now states: "The subject reflects the surge of French interest in the art and cultural of Ukraine, then part of the Russian Empire, following France's political alliance with that Empire in 1894". Moreover, the mass media constantly report that the process of recycling of Ukrainian identity continues, and the names of such world-famous artists as Ilya Repin and Ivan Aivazovsky are being returned to Ukraine. And art critic and journalist Oksana Semenik emphasizes: "that after her appeal, the Metropolitan changed the attribution of ballet dancer Olga Khokhlova, Picasso's wife, who is depicted in the work Head of a woman (1921). Now Olga Khokhlova, born in 1891 in Nizhyn, is listed as Ukrainian, whereas before she was attributed as Russian" [22].

Similarly, at the exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, a text appeared under the painting "Red Sunset" by Arkhyp Kuindzhi, explaining that the author is a Ukrainian artist, and that: "In March 2022, the Kuindzhi Art Museum in Mariupol, Ukraine, was destroyed in a Russian airstrike" [18]. Oksana Semenik also points out that the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick, New Jersey houses works by more than 70 Ukrainian artists that are still recorded as Russian; at MoMA this number reaches 40, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art — 20, and there are about 40 such Ukrainian artists in the Smithsonian American Art Museum [10].

Therefore, the process of returning to Ukraine of its appropriated cultural heritage — which we consider as a practical dimension of a powerful nation-building process based on collective imagination — must continue. In this context, a positive result was the decision of the Court of Appeal of Amsterdam on October 26, 2021 regarding the return of the Scythian gold to Ukraine after its demonstration abroad, regardless of the fact that the territory of Crimea, where the collection had been kept before the war, is temporarily occupied by the Russians.

5. Conclusion

While it might be argued that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has renewed the European philosophical debate between rationalism and empiricism, it is also true that the art reflections of Ukrainian artists automatically raise questions about the correctness of the revision of this debate by postmodernism and about certain nuances and limitations inherent in the application of postmodernism in the artistic reflection of the experience of war and the surge of nation-building that is connected with it. Partly, the original answer of Ukrainian art may lie in its unique, "glocal" combination of the universalism of democratic values with the traditions of serapism and cordocentrism, which have been so evidently present in the nation's "artistic memory" and that date back centuries. Hence, the dominant paradigm of post-conceptual sociopolitical expression loses its position to more autonomous art, which attempts to restore, based on transcendental aesthetics, the possibility of judgment of value. It is possible that the Ukrainian factor in the context of the global geography of art can become a catalyst for the ongoing world cultural changes.

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