New States - New Images? Visual Culture in the Service of the State in Central and Eastern Europe since 1918

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Between 23rd and 26th of October, 2003, an international conference, entitled „New States - New Images? Visual Culture in the Service of the State in Central and Eastern Europe since 1918" was organized at the Polish Institute in Leipzig by the Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum Geschichte und Kultur Ostmitteleuropas (GWZO). The conference, prepared by Marina Dmitrieva and Arnold Bartetzky, was a part of the project „Visual and Historic Cultures of East Central Europe in the Process of State and Social Modernization since 1918", started in the GWZO in 2000.

In her introductory remarks Marina Dmitrieva outlined the major themes of the conference: 1. art in the service of power, 2. the relationship between art, state, and the state's self-representation, 3. the ambivalence of state symbolism, 4. the connections between nationalism and modernity, traditionalism and modernism in state representations. Among the subjects of interdisciplinary examination were fine art and architecture as well as photographs, films, web pages, images on banknotes and stamps, temporal events like exhibitions and mass displays, all encompassed by the term visual culture. Arnold Bartetzky drew attention to the wide geographical reach of the presentations, including comparative studies on East and East Central Europe, but also, for example, on Germany, Turkey and Israel, and pointed out the specificity of state self-representation after the turning points in the 20th century: 1918, 1945 and 1989.

In the roundtable discussion on the first-day „Three Times New Europe" Kazimierz Wóycicki, Klaus von Beyme and Milos Havelka provided an historical approach to these epochal turning points. While Wóycicki focussed on histoire événement, describing radical changes in political and social terms, Havelka offered a longue durée perspective, arguing that many trends appeared in the middle of the inter-war and the post-war periods (e.g., cultural transformation, totalitarian tendencies, nationalist claims, „Westernization" and „Americanization"). Then, von Beyme refered to historical factors in artistic developments, and the effect of political changes on artists' lives and works. Post-1989 interaction between art and politics in Central and Eastern Europe is, on the one hand, influenced by globalization, new media, post-colonial and gender discourses, and, on the other, by regional and national perceptions of European heritage and culture.

Several presentations started by discussing the period after 1918 when in several East and East Central European states visual culture was often charged with national and/or ideological missions. As described by Giedre Jankeviciute, national, traditional, and folklore images dominated Lithuanian displays in the international exhibitions. Presenting Lithuania as the country of wooden crosses and folktales was perceived as the best way of promoting it. Roger Pilachowski analyzed the mobilizing effect of badges, medals, and posters in the Polish military organizations fighting for the independence (1914-1918). These images presented national symbols and a national leader (Józef Pilsudski) of a not-yet-existing state. In the case of the border between Italians and South-Slavs - as shown by Rolf Wörsdörfer - cemeteries, monuments, exhibitions, museums and public buildings played a role of sacred places and imagined frontiers. Also nature (a river, a mountain) and history (and its heroes) were re-interpreted and re-used in support of national identities.

Yet, as several papers showed, the inter-war art and architecture was characterized by an ambivalent mixture of traditional (often perceived as national) and modernist styles, and modernist art sometimes had national connotation. Beate Störtkuhl examined the use of neo-classic (as representing Polishness) together with modernist and cubist styles in building Gdynia, a new city on the small strip of land that was the Polish inter-war seaside. A similar ambivalent combination, presented by Steven Mansbach, occurred in a few state buildings in Lithuanian capital Kaunas, where interiors had both traditional and modernist de-

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signs while architecture was usually modern.

A different case was presented by Burcu Dogramaci who analyzed how the establishment of the young Turkish Republic led to modernizing and „Europeanizing" tendencies; these were expressed also in modernist architecture, mainly designed by German-speaking architects. Wolfgang Sonne described the urban planning of the early 20th century in several capitals, stating that the form does not have any inscribed meaning and the same urban plan may occur in different political systems (to find the meaning of the form one has to find other explanatory sources).

A preliminary conclusion from several of the papers may be that art follows political changes in an ambiguous way. It seems, however, that in the case of totalitarian systems, there might be a more rapid and visible change in art. Marina Dmitrieva described different styles utilized during revolutionary mass theaters, organized for propaganda and educational goals in a few Soviet cities in 1918-1920 whereas Hanna Grzeszczuk-Brendel analyzed an attempt of the omnipresent control of urban planning, architecture, art and design by the NSDAP in Poznan during the Second World War. An element visible in both Soviet films, and Nazi urban plans was satire, that might have played either conforming or undermining or both functions (papers by Hans-Joachim Schlegel and Lars Olof Larsson).

After 1945 the story partly repeats itself. Jacek Friedrich described how the rebuilding of historical old towns in Poland furthered the authorities in their attempts to win social approval and support, and thus legitimization. Yet, national style (itself a construct) was also combined with modern constructions representing Stalinist architecture. Piotr Marciniak presented a case study on the central and regional offices of the Communist Party in Poland. These „temples of power" - symbols of the regime - were placed in the cities' centers, often adding historic references, and using traditional space structures and traits of national design. The Knesseth-building and neighboring monuments of the Torah and the Wall in Jerusalem - analyzed by Ita Heinze-Greenberg - constructed between 1956 and 1966, refer to national remembrance and history, encompassing both past and future, mourning and hope, destruction and creation. Thus, the Israeli Parliament operates between the symbols of the Holocaust and the Old Testament. The official culture of remembrance, dominant in the post-war years, was altered in the 1960s in the Stones of Treblinka in Poland. Frank van Vree spoke about the uniqueness of this monument to the victims of Holocaust, which underlines the ideas of fragility and plurality.

The post-1989 changes were discussed in relation to city spaces, monuments, museums, television, and self-presentation on a web page. A common tendency noticed in several papers was the role of marketing and finances in shaping these objects and spaces. Irina Novikova questioned the changes in Riga's and Kiev's visual culture in relation to history, identity, gender and economy, focusing on three aspects: architecture, monuments and shopping. Different fates of Communist monuments in Bulgaria after 1989 were analyzed by Nikolai Voukov, and similarly the various (sometimes absurd) transformation of monuments in Western Poland by Janusz Dobesz. Arnold Bartetzky outlined a few examples of museums devoted to the period of communism in Hungary, Czech Republic, Germany and Poland. Different organizers, sponsors, collections, styles and names (Terror Háza versus SocLand) reflect different themes and attitudes to the former regimes, maybe also exemplifying different social and state approaches. Stefan Troebst examined how the self-construction of the Dniester-Republic (proclaimed in 1990, but not recognized internationally) on the internet is a strange combination of new measures utilized in order to gain outside recognition and to construct a personal cult of „President" Igor' N. Smirnov.

Finally, a small group of papers attempted the analysis of breaks and continuities in the 20th-century interactions between visual cultures and politics. Ella Chmielewska brought attention to signs (advertisements, plates, neon lights), composed of text and symbol, and related to particular places as objects with political, cultural, linguistic, and identity-related aspects. The visual landscape of Warsaw, the specific site of her analysis, underwent several traumas and destruction, which might be tra-

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ceable in signs. Mileta Prodanovic and Wilfried Jilge analyzed the changes of banknotes in Yugoslovia and Ukraine in the 20th century, and the way in which they represent political changes. Mass gymnastic displays as embodiments of state power in Central Europe were examined by Petr Roubal. Coordinated movements, uniformity, the cult of strength and youth, submission and dominance were organized to supplement and reinforce state's power. Subordination of the body might be seen in parallel to the cult of earth, described by Heidrun Alzheimer-Haller. She listed three approaches to this cult: mythological, ethnographical and functional (questions of legitimization, identity and memory), and mentioned several examples of earth's cult (heroes' mounds in Poland, meaning of soil in commemorations).

The variety of topics, methods, sources and hypothesis mirrors both the scattered state of research and the nature of visual culture itself. Nevertheless, the presentations and discussions that took place during „New States -New Images?" have several common traits. The influence of politics in art is common, yet not necessarily clearly inscribed in its form. New states, new regimes and new movements require new approaches not only to history, tradition, identity, and/or economy, but often also to images: art, architecture, new media, and, in my opinion, especially publicly displayed art - monuments, signs, displays, images during ceremonies. Several research studies described the ambiguous relationship between the search for modernity (often related to Western European models) and local/national traditions. Comparative and interdisciplinary studies, some presented during the conference, show the greatest promise for future research and discussion.

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