

The Renaissance versus the Avant-Garde

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ABSTRACT The essay contrasts two recurring phenomena of European culture: renaissance and avant-garde. The author discusses the paradigmatic Renaissance of 15th and 16th centuries and the paradigmatic Avant-Garde of early 20th century from the point of view of a practicing artist, interested in philosophical, social, religious, and political involvements of artists and their creation. The author shows the artistic and social history of 20th century as a struggle between the Avant-Garde and the Renaissance ideals, which, as he points out, found a fertile ground in the 20 years that followed immediately the Second World War.

KEYWORDS 20th century art theory; 20th century Christian social thought; avant-garde; existentialism; fine art; post-war humanist renaissance; renaissance

“We are born subject to the condition of becoming that which we wish to be.”

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*¹

1.

There is nothing more obvious than, yet also nothing so controversial as, the assertion that the Renaissance was not a singular phenomenon, but a cyclical one. There have been several renaissances. Indeed, they are an intrinsic feature of the history of the West.

This essay is offered to readers of *Forum Philosophicum* with the aim of giving them an opportunity to acquaint themselves with original contemporary philosophical writing in Russia. Unlike in the Western world, much of such writing is produced outside of the academic environment with its strict requirements pertaining to documentation of sources, etc. We present it on an “as is” basis, limiting our interventions mainly to taking care of the quality of the translation. More details may be found in the Editor’s Note. The abstract, keywords, and footnotes were proposed by the Editor.

Burckhardt and Michelet considered the Renaissance synonymous with a certain epoch. Burckhardt limits the Renaissance to a certain time and place: namely, 15th-century Italy. Today, however, it is generally accepted that we can characterize the art produced in the Netherlands and Burgundy in the 16th century as belonging to the Northern Renaissance. One may also speak of the Carolingian Renaissance, and of the Provençal Proto-Renaissance of the 12th century.

Michelet connected “the discovery of the world and of man” to geographical discoveries, and to the liberation of personal existence. He gave the Renaissance a precise timeframe. 100 years later, Febvre dubbed him a pedant. This change in worldview did not happen overnight—a fact which made it possible for Huizinga to call the Renaissance the “autumn of the Middle Ages,” thus not separating the era from the history of the Middle Ages itself.

Long before this, Aristotle had already noted that all art is invented multiple times (see the *Metaphysics*). The idea that an entire cultural era, encompassing both the arts and the sciences, could be reconceived and recapitulated, and that the strengths of a civilization could be resurrected, had become an integral element within historical studies. Toynbee, following Spengler, writes about the “philosophical equivalence” of civilizations—about how civilizations replace one another and go through similar processes. He sought to assure us that those recurring phenomena are not some kind of fate to which we have all been sentenced, but instead result from a set of general laws that are at work. What Konrad says, when writing about the universal character of the concept of Renaissance, is surely of essential significance in this regard, as he links that phenomenon not only with the West, but with the East as well. On this interpretation, the Renaissance is not linked to nascent capitalism, and Christianity counts as no more than an optional feature.

The religious character of the classical Renaissance is disputable. Some believe that this era represents a surrender to paganism: Losev, for example, writes about the damage done to Christianity during the Renaissance

1. “[H]ac nati sumus conditione, ut id simus quod esse volumus.” Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, “Oratio de hominis dignitate,” 10.48. Quoted in Latin and translated to English from online critical edition, edited by Pier Cesare Bori, Massimo Riva, Michael Papio et al., *The Pico Project—Progetto Pico* (Brown University; Università degli Studi di Bologna), accessed 10 March 2014, http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/pico/. Editors’ translation. The editor of the relevant section in the online edition, Massimo Riva, offers a different translation, more suited to the context from which the quote is drawn (editors’ note).

era, about its destructive titanism ("the downside of titanism"). Other researchers, however, consider desacralization to have been an inevitable next stage on the way to the liberation of the individual.

Religion's splitting up into sects in the wake of the Renaissance and the pervasive spread of capitalism is a process that lends support to this assertion. The Northern Renaissance is frequently associated with the Reformation. Protestantism is conceived of as the source of capitalist morality (Weber), which is tantamount to seeing capitalism as directly derived from the Renaissance; thus the ordinary man of our day becomes the heir to the Renaissance—just by possessing a bank account! And it is easy to determine just how logical this conversion of humanism into capital really is, for it is not so in the slightest degree. Nevertheless, the modern European bourgeois does consider himself the heir to the Renaissance. For isn't he free, and is not the Renaissance the doctrine of freedom?

There is a certain satisfaction to be derived from knowing that there have been many renaissances throughout history, as it is good when there is more of a good thing. But to know it is also alarming: if something had to be revived several times, this very fact entails that on multiple past occasions it had first fallen into decline. The idea of the inevitability of progress has accustomed us to thinking that today is better than yesterday, but with art this is not always correct. And if a new renaissance is necessary, that means there has been a decline. It may appear more pleasing just to sit back and watch as the achievements of humanity uniformly accumulate. Today's manager is inclined to believe that his grip on business is akin to the energy possessed by Michelangelo, but it is enough to realize that there have been several renaissances, with a few counter-renaissances in between, for the question of the nature of that grip on business to begin to look somewhat different.

It would be nice to be an heir of the Reformation and the Renaissance at the same time, and this is what we think, if we consider history in linear terms. But what if history were to be something that zig-zags? Being the heir to Michelangelo and, at the same time, believing in what Weber has to say, is a pressing need for the layman. He visits the shrines of contemporary art and Christian churches, welcomes the bombing of Iraq and fights for the rights of minorities. While it is feasible in everyday life, in the context of historical understanding this combination is unfeasible: the processes of the Renaissance and the Reformation actually stand opposed to one another.

Precisely how Luther regarded free will is well known. His role in the suppression of peasant uprisings and in the humiliation of the worker does

not resemble Girolamo Savonarola's behavior (no matter how tempting it might be to juxtapose the characters of these two, both of whom rebelled against the Pope). The avant-garde of those years, the Protestant Reformation, was, in all respects, the opposite of the Renaissance. The idea of Renaissance philosophy was shattered, and broke up into segments consisting of sects, banks and corporate interests. A nationalist understanding of the concepts of the "one" and the "good" became a necessity, and the new "instructor of Germany," Philipp Melanchthon, took Thomas Aquinas's works out of circulation. Reformation spread just like the wildfire of the revolutions of the 20th century. Just as Stalin's theories very quickly ceased to require the idea of internationalism, so that there was no use for Comintern anymore, so the Reformation consistently rejected anything that did not fit nicely with their idea of the nation state. It was a triumph for petty deal-making, small-time princes and small-minded nations. The Renaissance was stopped, and found itself forced into retreat.

If we embrace the notion of the unavoidability of the sequence "Renaissance-Reformation-capitalist society," then we will also have to admit that the Renaissance personality has mutated, in a natural manner, into the personality type of today's layman—into what Jacques Maritain called *homo oeconomicus*. But to assume that this is so would be absurd.

As a matter of fact, the classical Renaissance has handed down to us a sufficiency of statements defying all such speculation. It is from Renaissance aesthetics—no matter how short-lived the adoption of this cultural concept may have turned out to be—that the concrete ethical postulates of the time were derived. They directed the activities of many; they do not, however, prevail in the aesthetics of today.

Ever since the moment when Vasari introduced the term "Renaissance" as way of referring to a return to classical aesthetics, the term has been applied quite haphazardly. It has been used less to indicate a revival of the ancient paradigm than to invoke a clarifying of the cultural code. In the mode of its wider acceptance, "renaissance" signifies the self-identification of a formative idea—something taken as necessary for establishing a moral personality. The latter requires clarification, as independence in the Renaissance frequently went hand in hand with violence.

Alongside its wars of destruction, and whatever we might wish to say about those, the 20th century may be deemed to merit celebration in virtue of the fact that during its course there occurred another such European renaissance. It saw the emergence of an extraordinary concentration of spirit—one surely worthy of comparison to Florence in the 15th century and the time of Medici and Ficino.

At first glance, this statement may seem rather banal. The significance of the avant-garde—of the new type of art that arose in the West in the 20th century—is, after all, universally recognized. Here, however, we are by no means talking about the avant-garde. On the contrary, we are talking about a phenomenon concealed beneath the avant-garde, running in parallel and counter to it.

Today, as we look back over the last century, it is surely high time that we separated this phenomenon of “renaissance” from the bloody history that accompanied it. To properly recognize it as what it is, is to extract a humanistic perspective from those political oppositions of the century—fascists vs. communists, socialist democrats vs. capitalist democrats—that to our contemporary minds seem such an inescapable feature of it. And not only this: to single out the paradigm of “renaissance” in this way is to imply a break with art history’s addiction to the drug that is adherence to “progress.” Either art is contemporary, or it is not; either it is *au courant*, or it is out-of-date. These incantations, which have the reputation of being critical definitions, are in fact simply a drug. Nobody can really say whether or not it is good to be summoned to a future quite possibly fraught with war, or which is more important, violence or nobility.

To extract the humanistic paradigm from the century to which it belongs is to give the development of art a new start. It is like Dante’s humanism, which grew out of the soil of the political opposition between the Guelphs and Ghibellines but went on to form the worldview of an entire epoch, quite independent in its moral imperatives from political battles.

The 20th-century renaissance is not at all related to the popular phenomenon of the “avant-garde,” by means of which this century is commonly described. It often happens that researchers’ attention will concentrate on something secondary, while what was important during that time will remain in the shadows. What happened in Europe after World War II—that is, during the 1960s—is much more significant for the history of the spirit, and can only be assessed in terms of a renaissance aesthetics. It was, beyond doubt, the last occurrence of a European renaissance. As a period, it did not last very long: only from 1945 to 1968. As a phenomenon it emerged, prevailing over the existing avant-garde and ending in a new one—or, if you will, in a subsequent equivalent of the Reformation. It was a brief moment in history—though the reign of Lorenzo de Medici in Florence itself also lasted a mere 23 years. And if we do not recognize this attempt on Europe’s part, we risk remaining prisoners—of politicized ruminations, imposed during the Cold War era, and of the avant-garde posing as humanism.

Erasmus's and Luther's dispute about the existence of free will in a moral person continues today, and it is this dispute that constitutes the main puzzle in the drama of European spiritual history.

2.

The history of 20th-century art exhibits a peculiarity: the major artists have turned out to be superfluous. The story of how such art evolved is absolutely straightforward: it went from paintings to installations. The milestones were set up long ago, yet there is no place for the most significant artists in this story.

Volumes have been written about how, from a small wave of avant-garde artists, a storm grew and flooded the world. Open any book on art history and you will grasp the entire process in three minutes. First, there were anthropomorphic images, and now there are no paintings, but all possible methods are used to convey emotions and energy. Today, it has been discovered how to directly affect the brain, bypassing the image of one's own kind. This is radical.

Before, the word "avant-garde" referred to a group of innovators; today, this word signifies the progressive thinking of the majority. That there is progress in the arts, though, is not something one hears said explicitly. You cannot just claim that the beautiful has become more beautiful, that the good has become even better—but this is exactly how the arts *are* construed: from realism, it is said, we arrived at something more complicated. Step-by-step, styles became ever more radical. Academic drawing was rejected, then the canvas itself, and then the artist at the canvas. When listing representatives of schools, all are remembered, even the insignificant ones.

In a political party there is a difference between the leader and a member of the local cell, but everyone who holds the party card of the "All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)" is a communist. In an artistic movement, there is a distinction between the originator and a young artist who joins the herd, but everyone who draws blobs is an abstractionist. Partisanship is a fundamental characteristic of the artist of the 20th century. Take anyone: literally every artist belongs to a specific circle. The artist is obligated to join a party, if he wants to be identified as an artist. Those who cannot paint at all are considered primitivists—so they then count as a distinct party. The vast majority of masters are of no interest by themselves and do not create outstanding works, but their work acquires a significance within trends: in this way the party as a

whole gains strength. The art of a politicized century itself resembles the history of political parties.

The interesting point about this, however, is that the major painters of the 20th century remained non-partisan. Where would one assign Henry Moore? What school would Giacometti belong to? What would Balthus be, a Symbolist or a realist? Is Francis Bacon an Expressionist or a Dadaist? Picasso changed his style so many times that he defies classification. To what circle would Marc Chagall be ascribed? Sometimes he is assigned to the Expressionists, sometimes to the Surrealists, but he did not stay in either. Where would you put Georges Rouault? Lucien Freud? The terms “mystical realist” and “magical realism”—terms that fail to withstand even the most purely formal sorts of criticism—have been proposed, yet these less-than-one-dimensional notions cannot shed light on a Chagall, a Rouault, or a Picasso.

We cannot just leave those artists unilluminated. These non-partisans clearly had something in common, something that can be described very roughly by the words “human fate.” Their paintings depict our fates, stories and circumstances; but this is not a classification. There is, obviously, something that connects these artists, but it cannot be described in words. Looking at the canvases of Chagall or Rouault, or Picasso or Bacon, or at Moore’s sculptures, you think about people and about their lives, and looking at the works of Pollock or Malevich, Beuys or Warhol, Rodchenko or Rothko, you give no thought to the fate of man. But this is no scientific definition, so that criteria for membership of this group still need to be established.

Likewise, in the history of the Russian avant-garde, two Russian artists stand out as highly significant: Petrov-Vodkin and Filonov. It is easy to talk about constructivists, abstractionists, futurists and suprematists. They fit within the boundaries of a classification. But where do these two go? Petrov-Vodkin might be counted among the symbolists, but symbolism was earlier, during the Silver Age, and Petrov-Vodkin lived until 1939. His work is no less proper to the 20th century than abstractionism. Here is a paradox. Abstractionists are widely recognized for their progressive vision of the world, and realism is seen as an outdated concept. If you want to know about the 20th century, however, you need to look at Petrov-Vodkin’s paintings. Lyubov Popova’s will not tell you nearly as much. Does this mean that retrogressive thinkers are more informative than progressive ones? Can we draw the conclusion that progress is not connected with information? And what does someone like Filonov amount to? Is he a progressive? Why, then, does he depict anthropomorphic figures?

In addition to Filonov, one may recall Cherkrygin, Tyshler, Falk, Labas, Nekritin and Istomin. There was art of all kinds, not just art affiliated with a party. So along with the Bolsheviks and the SRs, there were people who did not join a party. They are not less significant than those who did.

Once we have removed the avant-garde from the center of our purview, there arises in front of us another history of art: one that existed parallel to it, as if in defiance of the general trends of the century. The tendency to perceive art as a battalion on the march came into being in the 1910s, and breaking ranks was certainly not encouraged. At this point, it was customary to frown condescendingly: indeed, some artists (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, Socialist Realists) did not understand the spirit of the time—but, well, if only they *had* followed global trends! Incidentally, by the 1920s a shocking rumor had wafted over from the West: that Picasso had abandoned experimentation and was painting realistic portraits. And recall Chesterton's ironical pages deriding the avant-garde. That English writer simply roared with laughter at abstract blotches, finding no spiritual principles in them whatsoever: well, well, . . . please do forgive me, though—after all, that Chesterton chap only lived until the 1940s, and even if he *did* manage to study just about everything, the fact remains . . . he was looking backwards rather than forwards, and so could never really have grasped the true essence . . . and ultimate meaning . . . of History! But, please, pay attention: my point here is that many people did indeed laugh at the avant-garde. There are works by Shaw, Wodehouse, Ilf and Petrov, Erdman, Ehrenburg and Bulgakov. Reread *Julio Jurenito* and *The Golden Calf*. Remember Noël Coward's comedy, *Nude with Violin*? And do you recall how Jeeves and Wooster ordered a portrait from an avant-garde artist in London?

These mocking jeers in no way resemble either the intertwining of arts and crafts, or the mutual understanding amongst creative people, that the classical Renaissance was itself famous for. What various circles of like-minded people were daydreaming about—some union of philosophers, writers and artists, similar to the community of Florentine humanists—did not come about. There was something, but it was different. Just as in our contemporary reality, which scatters only a confetti of widely dispersed ties, no one came up with an all-encompassing design: a poet who composes three lines without rhythm becomes friends with an artist who paints swear words on a piece of cardboard . . . This is not a union made up of extremely talented people. Magazine circles today see themselves as bearers of culture, but oftentimes it is a deplorable spectacle. Every small circle in the 1920s had their own, local theoretician to serve as a representative

of the group, a kind of “frontman,” like in a rock band. He played the role of interpreter (see today’s “curator”), which was necessary for the market. No figure emerged of whom it could be said—as with Ficino and Botticelli—that they thirsted for precisely the philosophical concepts through which elevated art and ideas could be unified. No one. No one at all.

It is telling that, in her books, Nadezhda Mandelstam describes the bohemian life of her time without recalling a single avant-garde artist. Where she was concerned, their names simply did not come to mind, even though her memory was quite exceptional. But there was no need for exceptional memory, as Mayakovsky, while summing up the art of the revolutionary period, could name only one work that responded to the scope of the problem at hand: namely, Tatlin’s *Third International Tower*.

It may certainly seem as if the artists achieved quite a lot, but on closer inspection what one sees is work that was executed rather briskly, but which then came to stand preserved in history—thanks to the market and ideology. The syntax elicited approval, and yet there was no speech. It reminds one of naval semaphores that convey no message, simply because the construction of the actual fleet never took place. Some people argue that the avant-garde had a philosophical program that was supposed to lead to a reconstruction of society (such as one may find in Plato or Marx, or in Ficino). But this is not so. There was a program among those who preceded the avant-garde of the 1920s. A program could be found, too, among those who replaced them. But the classical avant-garde did not have a program of any kind. There were manifestos that outlined intentions to have a program. If you open a text by Malevich, there is no philosophy to be found—only claims about how “God is still not cast down,” but should be so. These texts need to be read with a mindset that is already ecstatic. That certainly goes, alas, for the most representative of all books of the avant-garde: namely, Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*. Despite its title, the book contains not even one single idea of a general nature, being rather a peculiar excursus on Gestalt psychology. The compilation of an unwieldy dictionary and the lack of any kind of declaration was noted by many. The mockery of the “avant-garde” by great writers (Chesterton, Bulgakov) exhibits more perspicuity than did the activities of the avant-garde itself.

Does this mean that there were two histories of art? And, most importantly, what does one then consider to be that oh-so-much-acclaimed “spirit of the time”? How is the spirit of the time *responsible* for the time? That era (the 1920s) carried on marching right into a fratricidal war. If the avant-garde did not avert the war, is this because the avant-garde understood the spirit of the times, or because it did not? If it did, and did not

oppose the course being taken by events, this must mean that the avant-garde was something quite mindless, mustn't it? And if it did not, then in what sense was it avant-garde?

There was the Iconoclast Controversy in Byzantine in the 8th–9th centuries. (Iconoclasts held imageless mental contemplation to be the only correct way to worship God.) And there was an outbreak of iconoclasm in Reformation-era Wittenberg, in 1522. (Luther, compared to the Swiss iconoclasts, was only a fairly moderate destroyer of icons). And now we can say that this was the iconoclasm of the 20th century. The new iconoclasm rejected passionately both the anthropomorphic image and the unity of the world embodied in it. It wrecked this image with passion. Then the avant-garde grew tired.

By the time of the Second World War, the avant-garde was already over. It cannot be said that it was destroyed by repression. By the 1920s, it was already a closed academic discipline: squares were still being painted, but with no real enthusiasm. At the time, Lyubov Popova wrote in her diary the bewildered phrase, "What's next?" And then the perpetual motion machine broke. The avant-garde came to a standstill, as if a cog in a machine declared to be in perpetual motion had broken, or the doctors who had discovered the elixir of eternal life had themselves died. It is unbearable to acknowledge this fact, but the avant-garde came to a standstill all by itself. Thus, the next question will sound blasphemous. If the avant-garde in the 1920s died from old age and infirmity, then what is happening today? What does all our talk about art being "radical," "innovative" and "contemporary" mean? Asking these kinds of question is, indeed, truly unbearable, so we prefer to believe instead that the avant-garde still lives and will go on living forever!

True, distinguishing the activism and push of the newest "avant-garde" artists from the active stance of renaissance painters is pretty hard. After all, in both the former and the latter case it is a manifestation of personality, isn't it? As a rule, the difference between the deliberately shocking behavior—the *épatant* conduct—of an innovator and the push of a Bolshevik is easy to see: the first stands for freedom, the second for the barracks. But the difference between the conduct of a Michelangelo and of a Malevich passes unnoticed: they both expressed themselves in their work, so where does the difference lie? And if we say that Michelangelo created images, and Malevich negated them, this will not be accepted as an argument.

The consciousness of a freedom-loving people is arranged in such a way that to acknowledge that Lenin lives forever is crazy, but recognizing that the avant-garde will forever continue to move forward counts as perfectly

fine. To say that the idea of equality has died is seen as natural, but no reasonable person should embrace the thought that painted squares are nonsense. Believing in the living God is impossible, but, that an artist who drew a moustache on the Mona Lisa contributed to the freedom of mankind—that is something you can *certainly* believe in!

So that this kind of consciousness would feel comfortable, it has been accepted that the cessation of the perpetual motion machine in the 1920s and 1930s was forced. This temporary halt to progress was blamed on totalitarianism. It is deemed acceptable to hold that the terrors of Stalin and Hitler put an end to the avant-garde experiment. They love to say that the Vkhutemas and the Bauhaus were shut down in the same year, indirectly proving that these two tyrannical regimes were busy accomplishing one and the same thing—eradicating freedom of thought.

Another point, moreover, is that this claim, which flatters the avant-garde, does not correspond to the historical truth. None of the avant-garde artists suffered. It was the realists who were thrown into camps: Babel, Pilnyak and Mandelstam. Malevich was a successful commissar.

The Bauhaus was a capitalist utopia for artistic-technical advancement, and the Vkhutemas was a scientific-technical regulatory body acting on behalf of a socialist utopia. They only stopped existing because the progress they embodied had moved on to a new stage. They had successfully completed their task, and so were duly replaced with a different team. In the Vkhutemas, there was absolutely nothing humanistic, and the Bauhaus was simply a factory for social construction. Both these schools only produced one thing: regulations. Is it worth lamenting that some regulations were produced?

These two schools are polar opposites (capitalist and market-driven versus socialist); what links them is that representational art was brought under the control of a techno-scientific utopia.

Their combined efforts brought about the industrialization of art, which was exactly the same as what was happening in society during this era. Visual art was “dispossessed” by the Vkhutemas, just as Russian villages were being dispossessed. Visual art in Western Europe was centralized in much the same manner as the cities and principalities of Germany came to be united under the Prussia of Bismarck, Hindenburg, and Hitler. The pragmatism of the Bauhaus and the Vkhutemas went against the current of what is natural in art, displaying exactly the same character as so-called “technocratic socialism” and the “new order” that broke apart the traditional community and urban commune.

At this point, criticism of the avant-garde usually misses the mark.

3.

It is generally assumed that the avant-garde suffered under totalitarianism—that even if the fates of specific artists were not affected, and even if many avant-garde artists were participants or instigators of totalizing, inhuman conceptions (Marinetti, d’Annunzio, Malevich, Pound, etc.), what history has ultimately had to preserve has been a single overridingly grievous fact: namely, the occurrence of the exhibition entitled *Degenerative Art*, which was staged by the Nazis specifically in order to discredit the avant-garde. As the Nazis were responsible for this, it would seem to follow that avant-garde art must have been in opposition to them—that the Nazis came to recognize their antithesis in the avant-garde. Consequently (according to the usual line taken by such reasoning), the avant-garde must be committed to humanist values and opposed to totalitarianism. Volumes have been written about the opposition of the avant-garde to totalitarianism, purporting to prove that the avant-garde is the spirit of progress and freedom, and totalitarianism the opposite of this.

These statements are incorrect. It is an ideological fairy tale.

In historical reality, the opposition between totalitarianism and the avant-garde never existed, for three reasons. Firstly, there was no uniform “totalitarianism”: this idea is an invention of the Cold War. Secondly, Nazism considered itself to be very much at the avant-garde of humanity, and the idea of revealing to the world its final stage of development is equally inherent in both Nazism and Suprematism. Thirdly, and fundamentally, avant-garde art was itself actually totalitarian art, and did not have anything to do with humanism at all. There may be a reason for eliminating your competitor (in, say, a championship bout), but do we consider Röhm’s *Sturmabteilung* to have been the bearers of humanistic ideals, simply on the basis that they were eventually destroyed by Hitler? Certainly, the need for the kind of avant-garde that emerged in the 1910s and 1920s disappeared, but only because this type of avant-garde had been organically replaced by a different type of avant-garde, one *more* avant-garde and *more* Suprematist.

This was not for the most part something that happened through violence or intrigue (even if Malevich’s removal of Chagall from Vitebsk in order to replace him at the Academy, and Heidegger’s ousting of Husserl at the university, do count as intrigues). When the path of development of the avant-garde in the 1920s moved on from small squares to giant statues, there was no violence at all. On the contrary, the columns and colossi grew out of the squares and dashes in a quite natural way. They were the heirs of the squares, much as the Titans were the heirs of chaos.

The Kouroi and giants of the Third Reich and Stalinist Russia, muscular athletes devoid of any of the characteristics of real portraiture, and lacking even certain visual fundamentals, are not the antithesis of squares, but a direct continuation of them. The myth to the effect that the sculptures of the Reich and the mosaics on Stalin's palaces had displaced works by the likes of Mondrian and Rodchenko is, absolutely, a myth of the Cold War Era. No, that is simply not what happened! There is no essential difference between a titan and chaos. The history of past centuries was negated by Suprematism with the same rage as it was by the Nazis, and the reduction of the entire experience of humanism to "nothing" (Malevich's favorite stance) was of a kindred spirit with Hitler's similar declarations: they shared the attitude that regarded Christianity as a burden and a hindrance, and the squares and the faceless Titans are equally hostile to all genuinely elevated visual art. Moreover, the difference between the sign and the anthropomorphic Titan can be explained quite simply: paganism is by no means homogenous.

The conventional social category of "totalitarianism," introduced during the Cold War Era for the sake of the struggle with socialism and in order to theoretically unify the experiences of the Soviet Union and of Hitler's Germany, did a disservice to science: everything had to be adjusted to fit the ideological story. The circumstances required that "free democratic" art be opposed to the art of the complex construct known as "totalitarianism," despite the fact that what was being talked about was art of quite different cultures and societies. It could therefore happen that, just in order to make the entire schema simpler, one had to bring together unrelated masters from Russia and Germany while keeping silent about the similarities between American and Nazi architecture, or link artists of the 1930s from Germany and Russia while overlooking British military posters and keeping silent about Malevich's having drawn plans for prison cities. It was necessary to create a manageable schema for the post-war cultural world—and so it was duly created. Thus, it had to be obvious that canvasses with squares had been banned, and that monumental sculpture had trampled abstract artistic searching underfoot: as no one was willing to see that both the squares and monumental colossi had actually served a similar function, that both had shoved aside the very same image of the arts—namely, the humanist image of Renaissance man. The historical truth is that the art of the Third Reich, and American skyscrapers, and the avant-garde of the 1920s, and abstractions, are not fundamentally opposed to one another; their clashes were of a superficial, circumstantial character. Different stages in the unfolding of a single pagan art were just being put on display one after another.

Paganism has had many stages, and has shown itself in a different guise at different stages of history: the cult of Osiris, for example, does not look like the cult of the Maya. Suprematism and Dada do not resemble Breker's sculptural works, but all three are examples of the pagan art that came to replace Christian art.

The real opposition, then, was a completely different one. It was not "totalitarian vs. avant-garde," but "image vs. sign," "Christianity vs. paganism" and "Renaissance vs. avant-garde."

What happened in the last century is, essentially, a revision of the Renaissance conception of Europe at a fundamental level. The pagan component of the Renaissance wished to free itself from its Christian moral contents and, having on this occasion discarded the customary anthropomorphic form, moved on to an exposition of the elements, and the chthonic condition, internal to paganism itself. The process of bringing about a counter-Renaissance proceeded with the utmost consistency, responding systematically to each and every attempt at propounding a Renaissance aesthetic with its own mirror arguments.

4.

European culture entered the Renaissance of the 15th century equipped with the experience of Christian cathedrals and the symbolism of metaphysical art. Around the time of the end of the Middle Ages, intellectual decay was out of the question. The works and struggles of antiquity had not enlightened the mind—it would be an exaggeration to claim that. Their real aim was to give visible power to moral greatness. The process of incorporating antiquity into the Christian paradigm is best likened instead to the acquisition of an instrumental base, with the elevation of old values to a new level of technical sophistication.

The uniqueness of the phenomenon that we call the "Renaissance" lies in the fact that the Christian, monotheistic principle of morality comes into contact with a pagan one, even though any synthesis is impossible. And, for a brief moment in history, the impossible was overcome—for the sake of the greater glory of God.

"Pagan" is not a dirty word with which to characterize art. On the contrary, it represents a form of praise. In many respects, pagan art is more compelling than Christian art. It is brighter, more powerful and majestic. The gigantic lions of Babylon, the reliefs of Mesopotamia, the statues of the Aztec temples, the Colossi and Kouroi of ancient civilizations all remain unsurpassed in respect of their natural, chthonic greatness. In these

depictions, there is none of the warmth of soul we encounter in an icon, but this spark of the soul's spirit simply cannot exist in a colossus that is several meters in height and above all created to make a commanding impression. Such gigantic, uncompromising creations are blessed with the powerful beauty of skyscrapers and the brightness of Disneyland. Actually, the whole of modern culture, rather than aspiring towards the silence of the European cathedral, is oriented towards achieving the effect of pagan shrines. Nothing that mankind has invented is more alluring and fascinating than pagan art: the statues of Hammurabi, the Gates of Babylon, the Egyptian sphinxes and ancient athletes are all much more *impressive* monuments than are Romanesque churches and icons.

The power of pagan art is such that should one wish to influence a crowd, then one will, inevitably, take some pagan ritual as one's inspirational model. For example, when Christian civilization wants to immortalize its victories, it uses the Arch of Triumph, pantheons and steles. Christianity is in need of paganism.

Quiet prayer with a vigil lamp or celebrations in the Coliseum: which is more dazzling? The vulnerable mysteriousness of the subject of a Rembrandt painting, or the energetic gesticulation of Greek athletes?

Contemporary art is the heir to pagan gesture. The decorative, monumental pagan principle has, today, been judged to be of contemporary relevance. The energy splashed out into the world, a unique gesture—these are considered necessary for civilization.

This is another attribute of pagan art.

Every day, we hear the annoyingly-persistent phrase “art with contemporary relevance.” “He does not understand the time,” “Not everyone is taken to the future,” “The train of modernity has left the station,” “New York is a city where yesterday they know what you will know tomorrow,”—the pursuit of the very essence of the time, in all its elusiveness, has become the meaning of existence. A painter wishes to make “contemporary art,” not just art. And hundreds of progressive curators will help to convince him that what is “contemporary” is, indeed, what is essential. The “happening now,” the “*mainstream*,” the *contemporary*!

We must say, with all certainty, that according to the Christian worldview and the Renaissance understanding of culture there is no such concept as this—it just counts as completely meaningless.

Since God dwells outside of time, everything that appears to humans as part of an unrealized future presents itself to God as a feature of actual and current reality. It is via the eternal that the present is established as thus and so. In this consists the meaning of the Christian understanding of time,

as realized, in particular, by the Renaissance (see, for example, Pico della Mirandola's "Forty-five Conclusions according to Thomas"²). Indeed, it is written about by Augustine, when he states that "neither future nor past actually exist. Nor is it right to say there are three times. . . . [T]here are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things future."³

In this sense, the application to art of the criterion of being of "current" or "contemporary" relevance is pagan, and has no connection to the tradition of Christian art. When the popular conceptual artist Kabakov writes that "Not everyone is taken to the future," he is writing down an important pagan incantation, but from the point of view of Christian culture he is writing nonsense.

To not get to the future is impossible. In this lies the sense of faith and the meaning of art, particularly in that the eternal life is given to everyone, right away, without distinction, and forever.

5.

Picasso's paintings dating from the time of the dawning of fascism illustrate this phenomenon: one paganism was overcome by another, more ancient one.

In *Guernica*, a dramatic canvas, amazingly, no one is guilty. It depicts a *corrida* in which the bull has won: at the feet of the bull is the defeated bullfighter, with a broken arm, holding a broken sword. The ritual is itself pagan. The Spanish Picasso did not impart to the *corrida* any greater morality than was inherently there. It is a cruel painting. The horse is dying, a woman is screaming, but by the standards of the *corrida* nothing unusual is going on. The horse, as we know from Picasso's own *La Tauromaquia*,⁴

2. The author is referring to theses I.2.1–45 from *900 Conclusions*, which make up a chapter with the title "Conclusiones secundum Thomam numero XXXXV." Cf. the edition: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, edited and translated by Stephen A. Farmer, in *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486); The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1998), 218–31. The English title is quoted from this edition. Cf. also the online edition "Conclusiones CM," ed. Massimo Riva, Francesco Borghesi, Pier Cesare Bori, et al. (Brown University), accessed 10 March 2014, <http://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/pico/>. We have based the section numbering given here on this edition (editor's note).

3. Augustine, *Confessions* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 11.20.26 [246] (editors' note).

4. The book in question is an edition of José Delgado y Gálvez's [alias Pepe Illo] *La Tauromaquia o arte de torear: Obra utilísima para los toreros de profesión, para los aficionados y para toda clase de sujetos que gusten de toros*, illustrated with 26 aquatints by Pablo Picasso

is deliberately given over to the bull to be torn apart in order to enrage the beast. Victory on the part of the matador is by no means guaranteed, and in general, in the painting, no one is guilty, but there is a shared misery. In the works of this year, the theme of tragedy arising from the collision of destructive forces is often examined. The Greek myth about the Minotaur is being connected in those paintings with the *corrida*: there is a horse killed at the hands of the Minotaur, a Minotaur dying in the arena, released in lieu of a bull, and—something totally strange thing—a dying Minotaur in the clutches of a man with a falcon's head. This is in all likelihood referring to Horus, the Egyptian god, patron of the Pharaoh's power. A man with a falcon's head in a painting done in 1936 could symbolize only one thing: fascism. In this work, one detail is striking. The dying Minotaur is dressed in a harlequin costume. For Picasso's iconography, this is a significant garment. Harlequins are tramps, itinerant acrobats, troubadours, and excess in the realm of the new order. The Harlequin-Minotaur released into the arena, and having become the victim of the Man-Falcon, is a very strange *corrida*, but nevertheless, it is still a *corrida*. And, as always in *corrida*, there is no place for compassion: the catharsis of the scene is located entirely outside of Christian morality. The Minotaur is himself a cruel creature. In the *corrida* he plays the role of the bull, but the matador is someone even more ruthless. The pagan ritual in which force goes up against force, is important for structuring the nature's principle, for structuring myth, and, as Picasso emphatically shows, paganism is not homogenous. In his works from 1936, the hierarchy of layers in paganism emerges as important. The Minotaur's appearance is frightening—that much is obvious—but the Greek myth itself comes across as romantic, and the Minotaur arouses pity when faced with an absolutely ruthless cult, with the paganism of a merciless force. Facing a blind, ruthless principle, an ever more irrepressible, soulless creature, embodying absolute evil, is present. This is a Christian theme: the hierarchy of downfall, the levels of descent into darkness.

We rejected the Renaissance many times, but also gradually. The first step towards paganism was taken by the Reformation, but the time of Luther is remembered as being amongst the brighter episodes of humanism when compared with what came later. The paradoxical historical sit-

(Barcelona: Gustavo Gili), 1959. The book, reproducing the text of a work first published in 1796, did not contain reproductions, but original prints of Picasso's plates. In turn, Picasso's *El carnet de La Tauromaquia de Pepe Illo* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1963) is a copy of a sketchbook drawn by Picasso later on, and offered to the publisher. Both books were printed in a very limited number of copies. The former was subsequently reprinted by the Gustavo Gili publishing house in 1980 (editor's note).

uation in which a powerful paganism becomes the party that suffers at the hands of a paganism emerging from chthonic depths is displayed in a drawing in which a girl (Ariadne) is shown leading the blind Minotaur like a guide.

With regard to the political history of the century, we are led to conclude that the latest manifestations in the hierarchy of violence—of dark, chthonic power, generated by the natural course of things—is what has been called up out of the depths by the general course of our culture and the amorality prevalent within it. Nobody is moral, and we cannot judge the bull in *Guernica*, even though he trampled the matador. In *Guernica*, Picasso was not conveying some catastrophe that had befallen a benevolent world torn to fragments by an evil principle. Rather, the painter shows the interdependence of pagan natural forces leading the world to self-destruction.

There is no homogenous totalitarianism, but the debasement of man by man is infinitely diverse, because there are so many forms of inequality.

6.

Socialism, we may say, is akin to Christianity in that both doctrines are, essentially, doctrines of equality: both represent teachings concerning the unification of the oppressed.

The concentration of socialist and Christian ideas into a single image can be found in the work of Vincent van Gogh. Each painting by this great artist, who sought to single-handedly revive the Renaissance connectedness of all things, is a unification of two principles: social justice and theological interpretation. His *Sowing Seeds in a Field* is a hymn to peasant labor and an evangelical metaphor, the image of the Lord and the peasant at the same time. The unification of the art of painting, of socialism, and Christianity is manifested in the depiction of the artist's shoes.

Worn down by labor and a life spent in poverty, they support one another, like Picasso's itinerant acrobats—they are the very image of mercy and strength: the shoes (utterly base objects of everyday life, much as the peasant is the lowest member of society) become the main heroes of the painting. They are symbols of human dignity—a call for mercy and justice. I have not the slightest doubt that van Gogh, a socialist and a Christian, in choosing a hero for his painting, was referring to the Bundschuh ("shoe") uprisings. These corresponded to a peasant movement that took over Northern Germany, Friesland, and Holland at the end of the 15th century. A banner with an image of shoes flew over the peasantry as they

revolted, and van Gogh, who painted shoes on more than one occasion, was furnishing a new flag for the rebels of a new age.

On the banners of the revolting peasants, under the shoe, was written "Nothing except for the justice of God." But this is exactly the same requirement that van Gogh wrote in every letter; this is what Michelangelo and Savonarola required from life—and this is what Luther, Malevich, Warhol and the liberal *petite bourgeoisie* of every historical period had been afraid of. Besides, in one of the paintings (in total, van Gogh painted four canvases with shoes), just a single shoe is painted. This painting recapitulates literally the banner of the revolting peasants.

Following Vincent, another socialist, Chaim Soutine, continues the story of an impoverished life that turns into a symbol of salvation. Thus, Soutine's still life of a herring with two forks placed to the left and to the right of the plate becomes a portrait. It is not only a portrait of a beggar—the tines of the fork are skinny fingers, the narrow plate is his sunken-in rib cage, the saucer with soup is his head—but the portrait of a saint: the painting is painted according to the norms of the religious canon, and even has a halo. Yet the issue here also concerns the conversion of the objects of poverty-stricken everyday life into a manifestation of the moral life. Is this the same as the mystery of the Eucharist that turns bread into the body of Christ?

This unification of socialist utopias and Christian doctrine took place in post-war Europe, coming out of the ashes of a devastating war. During this short, twenty-year period, the experience of the pre-war avant-garde was overcome, and an extremely-detailed program was drawn up for the reconstruction of European social history. What is striking is that, along with the plans of de Gaulle and Adenauer for European states, the metaphysical pictures of Rouault and Chagall were painted, manifestos for pan-European peace were produced by Picasso, a type of resistance was manifested by Giacometti, and a new mythology was created by Henry Moore. These helped to create a new European artistic history—an effort comparable to that of Ficino's Florentine academy.

Nevertheless, the history of art that subsequently came to be written did everything possible to make sure that this event—the most significant in the history of Europe in recent centuries—passed unnoticed.

In the vast encyclopedias dealing with the history of 20th-century art, where everything is broken down into supposedly relevant topics (Expressionism, Surrealism, Fauvism, Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism, and so on), but most of the great sages—the inconvenient artists—are separated off to form a low-profile, marginal group, it sometimes happens that, in such a

monograph, a chapter is reserved for them. I once even saw them united this way: under the label of “existentialism.”

Such an artistic group obviously never existed. But the author of this definition was doing what all art critics want to do: he was trying to use one word to describe all of the individuals who resist straightforward classification.

Indeed, there is much that is compelling about the word “existentialism”: the term evokes references to the concept of “fate,” and some of the artists named were indeed close to existential philosophy. Albert Giacometti was under the direct influence of Sartre, and while life in Switzerland did not produce much in the way of limit situations, throughout his entire life he dreamed of living through some kind of drama. But what about the Catholic Rouault? The believer Chagall? They are by no means connected with atheistic existentialist doctrine. How to connect the escapism of Balthus, who spent his whole life avoiding limit situations, with the engaged stance of the existentialist? Of course, this is escapism of a specific kind: not running away from the world, but rather departure in a certain direction. Balthus was an extremely stubborn person and was very engaged by himself, but all this is not existentialism. Neither Moore, nor Petrov-Vodkin, nor Morandi, nor any of the other major artists yield to this classification, but we instinctively feel that this definition is almost accurate—as children are wont to say when playing hide-and-seek, it is already “warm.” It seems reasonable in some way to identify Chaplin and Remarque, Heinrich Böll and Siegfried Lenz, Manzù and Guttuso, Rossellini and Pasolini, Corinne and Korzhev, Vladimov and Shalamov, Hemingway and Mann, with this type of artist. There are, generally speaking, a great number of such artists who stray from classification. The easiest way to identify them is by negation: they are conscious, stubborn, consistent “non-avant-garde artists.” And as artists they are very traditional: they write novels and paint paintings, their genres are anachronistic, they create portraits, they cut across the stream of progress. The most correct term for them would be “abstract humanists.” Besides, such a definition was actually in circulation during Stalin’s campaign against rootless cosmopolitanism, and, of course, “rootless cosmopolitanism,” internationalism, and Catholic Christianity are all things that are intolerable for both the Reformation and the avant-garde.

We have been taught the history of art so long, and so assiduously, in terms essentially dictated by the opposition between the academic and the avant-garde, or between the conformist and the non-conformist, and by the formal dynamics of schools, that the main subject of 20th-century art has

been overlooked in these analyses—and not without reason. Everything has been done to push the main subject out of the spotlight and into the wings: namely, abstract religious humanism, of the sort that shows up *inter alia* in works opposed to war (see Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*).

All of these artists were anti-war artists; this is understandable, as humanism is the antithesis of war. The term “antifascists” would also be appropriate; all of these artists were anti-fascists and anti-avant-gardists, as the war of the 20th century was born out of fascism and avant-gardism.

We are thus in thrall to tenets that are known to be inaccurate: (a) fascism destroyed the avant-garde, (b) “totalitarian” art is anthropomorphic, in contrast to subjectless freedom, and (c) “democratic” art does not require an anthropomorphic image, because it expresses itself through free gesture. The first, the second and third are all ideologically necessary propositions, but they are all false.

The real issue arises on an entirely different plane. The civilization, still calling itself Christian (but for reasons that are now entirely circumstantial), maintains its triumphant character thanks to a pagan ideology, and its art long ago turned into decorative pagan art. This is quite disconnected from the conception of the Renaissance, as contemporaneity is the very opposite of that.

7.

The twenty years that followed after the war in European culture was—judging by the sheer volume of its achievements and the abundance of original, God-given talents—the last of Europe's renaissances.

It was a synthesis of Christian morality with classical civic mindedness. To the Renaissance understanding, a “free” person is a human who complies with a moral imperative and, at the same time, asserts his physical independence: Christian morality, armed with the ancient dignity of the citizen, constitutes the code of the Renaissance. If any of the components are renounced, then the “free person” is defective.

In the event of the pagan component triumphing, the heir to the Renaissance counts as a dangerous person. Very often, when we utter the word “individual,” we imagine a lonely mountaintop. There is even a widespread theory (arising from the opposition between totalitarianism and the avant-garde) that treats totalitarianism as a collectivistic principle, and freedom as an individualistic phenomenon. Yet, according to Neoplatonic philosophy (Ficino, Plotinus), individuality is revealed just and only in the service of the common good, and the “individual good” simply does not exist at all.

The individual good is just the desire to acquire things—speculation and profiteering: basically, not “good” as understood by Plato and, after him, the philosophers of the Renaissance. Plotinus’ terminology requires us to speak in terms of the One, which is the Supreme Authority with respect to the Mind, and even the Soul. The One is, essentially, the constitutive substance of general cognition. It is the goal, in and of itself. It is “free and solitary.” It is worth dwelling on this definition (taken by Plotinus from Plato’s *Timaeus*). In the *Timaeus*, Plato talks about how the “nature of pleasure” should not be “free and isolated” from the nature of knowledge. Therefore, Plotinus links the terms together as “free and solitary knowledge”—knowledge that can be shared with other people.

This conclusion is by no means contradictory. Speaking about the works of a humanist philosopher or a free artist, we envision circles of initiates, like the staff of today’s editorial committees; we imagine buzzing environments. The coteries of today’s fashionable people are in direct opposition to the humanistic academies; the latter do not seek support in their own circles, but rather disputes with equals. Erasmus could wait a long time for an answer from Luther, but his fundamental polemic was with the late Augustine, who by then could not himself answer him. What Mayakovsky called “Copernicus envy” excludes a temporary alliance with a fashionable neighbor. Humanist art is born in lonely and persistent deliberations that exclude the “opinion of the group.” The 20th century saw stormy debates amongst uneducated youth who considered themselves intelligentsia, while the Renaissance despised all vacuous jabbering. A frequent subject in the Renaissance was Jerome’s solitary cell. This is how the scholars of that time studied, free of all restless fads and biases. In Renaissance aesthetics, the expression “*sola beatitudo, beata solitudo*” becomes a metaphor for humanist activities that are subservient to no one. It is only thanks to be isolated from the dictates of popular opinion that free occupations can serve the common good.

It is worth adding that Marx imputed this requirement to the communist person, insisting on its uniqueness in Neoplatonist terms. Rabelais also writes about this, explaining the arrangement of the Thélème community, on the doors of which was written “Do what you want!” but where the desires of the members of the monastery consisted in each of them wanting to give service to all.

No other interpretation of “individuality” will correspond to the project of the Renaissance. The Renaissance is the union of the private with the communal, the individual with the universal.

Also, post-war Europe revealed artists who resurrected the traditions

of humanistic knowledge, in spite of the avant-garde and the Reformation. The proximity of thinkers and philosophers (Russell, Croce, Gilson, Sartre, Horkheimer, Lukács, Maritain), writers and playwrights (Camus, Brecht, Böll, Remarque, Shalamov, Ionesco), painters (Chagall, Picasso, Giacometti, Matisse, Moore, Falk, Favorsky, Guttuso, Korin) directors (Pasolini, Visconti, Fellini), and political and social thinkers (Adenauer, de Gaulle, Brandt, Schweitzer, Togliatti), allows us to describe this twenty-year period as the European Renaissance of recent history. The philosophers of this era could not just “say anything”: their words served as a guide to action, and they themselves were expected to act. Their individuality was manifested in their involvement in building societies, just as was once postulated by Plato, and as was resurrected by the Platonic Academy of Florence.

The artist of these years faced a dilemma formulated by Adorno and Böll: how to create art after Auschwitz? The activities of the artist of those years was informed by a moral imperative. During this brief period of twenty years, secular philosophy (the Frankfurt School), agnosticism (Sartre’s existentialism) and Neo-Thomism shaped the soul of the artist in such a way that social and religious doctrine was organically linked within him. During this time, Picasso joins the Communist Party, Hemingway converts to Catholicism, and the Jewish Chagall paints Christian cathedrals—and all this is no more strange than the diversity of views found during the classical Italian Renaissance, united by one passion: responsibility before their own kind.

The existentialism of the 20th century had an inarguable influence on writers (Beckett, Hemingway), while Neo-Thomism, as a rebirth of Christian doctrine, shaped the vision of religious painters (Marc Chagall, Georges Rouault), and the Frankfurt School’s social projects accorded with the critical realism of Heinrich Böll and Siegfried Lenz. At the same time, Russia’s socialist realism turned out to be a breeding ground for artists who were far from ideological, such as Favorsky, Kozhev and Plastov. Their work does not stand in opposition to the work of their Western colleagues, thus making a proper social characterization of those times even more complicated.

As in the case of Florence during the Medici era, this period of European history is distinguished by an abundance of utopian projects. Post-war Europe, experiencing a rebirth after fascism, was united by a sense of shame. Dialogues between representatives of existentialism and socialist realism, as well as questions about activism in the arts, prompted by a sense of social justice, were characteristic of the aesthetics of the time. Many mas-

terpieces of this era (Picasso's paintings, Moore's epic sculptures) stand as intersection points between those conceptions.

A boundary had been drawn by 1968, which was a watershed year that put an end to the coexistence of European projects and cast doubt on the possibility of a just utopia.

In subsequent years, this historical period, marginalized in our consciousness by a since fashionable postmodernism, had to suffer humiliation. Children found their fathers guilty for their problems, and primarily rejected the prescriptive and declarative nature of the period. It became fashionable to scold post-war advocates of utopianism for their adherence to doctrine, for their idealism, and for their representationalism. The time of Picasso and Brecht is remembered as if it belonged to the distant past. Postmodernism, with its relativism and lack of direct speech, made Böll's works and Falk's images seem funny and old-fashioned. The new era wanted statements that would be perceived as more complex and less romantic, and thus of greater contemporary relevance. American Pop Art and the new idols of the market pushed out previously well known masters: soon after, these were dismissed as relics of the past.

All the same, it is the era of Brecht and Picasso that has, in fact, formed the last bastion of European morality—a form of revolt that persists in the protest rhetoric developed by Sartre, Camus, Böll, Shalamov, Hemingway, and Picasso.

In a speech addressed to the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain on the occasion of the latter's 60th birthday (on 9th January 1943), Marc Chagall declared:

[I]t is not only the victims [of the Holocaust] that torture me and make me suffer, but also those who stay silent and frighten me, and, among those, the elite of the creative world, of the intellectual world. Because I feel it more, this silence, as a painter, instinctively . . . What can artists, writers, philosophers, scholars, create, when the soul, or conscience—the principal tool of creation—stays silent? And where are we going to find, earlier or later, that purity of soul necessary for creation and for life, if little by little, pressed by our enemies, we dull and freeze our soul?

It is already long ago, dear Jacques, that you and some other brave people rose up to defend these truths. . . . In France, at certain moments, they practically refused to listen to you. Some pretended to see in you only an orthodox Catholic. People like Andre Gide—not to mention stars of lesser magnitude—were complacent about their "Art for art's sake," and for them all sorts of "-ism" were allowed to flare up alluringly, while in all of this

frivolity and jest the abyss in which France was to plunge was being prepared. . . .

Do not think that speaking as I do is not the business of a painter. . . . Anyway, I was already saying this, thirty years ago. Everything interests us, not merely the inner, unreal world of dream and fantasy. To be interested in everything is not just a concern for literature. Without this, art is a dead thing and can neither touch us nor engage our emotions.⁵

These words could have just as easily been spoken by the atheist Sartre, the communist Guttuso, or the antifascist Hemingway, but they were said by a Jew, the sentimental artist, far removed from politics, named Chagall, and they were addressed to a Catholic. It was the greatest moment of European history: a moment when the social philosophy of existentialism found itself united with Christian morality and socialist doctrine. How short that moment was! To use the words of Sartre, it was a time of responsibility on the part of the artist. What defines the art of this time as Christian art is not only such works as the humanistic Russell-Einstein manifesto, Aurelio Peccei's Club of Rome, Tomás Maldonado's *Ulm* journal and socialist design, the philosophy of the antifascists and of the Christian Benedetto Croce, but also Shalamov's and Solzhenitsyn's exposure of Stalin's camps, Heinrich Böll's Christian prose, and Picasso's Christian sculptures, especially *Man with a Lamb*.

This judgment, somewhat unexpected given the usual conversations that occur about the post-war years, is very important in methodological terms. It is essential to realize that, in their analyses of European history of the last century, academics have been held captive by Spengler's theories, which, in point of fact, deny Christianity. Spengler did not include Christianity in his analysis of contemporary history, and, subject to his logic, social thought examined the 20th century's clashes of cultures and of schools without taking into account the fundamental European issue: namely, the problems connected with Christianity and the development of its denominations.

All the same, it is characteristic of the post-war period that the problem of values, postulated by Christianity, was posed by secular thinkers.

During these years, democratic socialist doctrine, and the doctrine of democracy that had been accepted by capitalist countries, were, for a brief

5. Marc Chagall, "Hommage à Jacques Maritain," *Cahiers Jacques Maritain* 61 (2010) : 8–9. A speech originally given in New York, on 9th January 1943, during Jacques Maritain's 60th birthday celebrations (editor's note).

moment, in unison. Only one thing could have united them, and that was Christian morality, which was understood as a social regulator. This theme was present even in socialist realism.

If we peer over the ideological barriers at what was happening in European art during these years, we see a phenomenal similarity between these artists, whose connections with one another imply no single common culture or school—not even any set of shared social views. The distinctive character of the representational structure of their works that allows us to point to a close relationship between Alberto Giacometti, Bernard Buffet, Lawrence Lowry and Dmitry Krasnopevtsev, is to be found in the dry, prickly manner of their drawings (called, in the case of Buffet, “art brut”), the spare color range, and the simple compositions, all of which bring together a proletarian artist from Manchester like Lowry and a Swiss intellectual like Giacometti, while alongside them stands Krasnopevtsev, a Muscovite bohemian character, as well.

The viscous, pastose way in which the paint is applied forces one to recall the work of a plasterer returning to his craft. The brutal brushstrokes are reminiscent of van Gogh and Soutine. The way in which the everyday can come to feel as dramatic as the cosmos establishes a connection between the native Londoner Leon Kossoff and the French Catholic Rouault, the Muscovite Falk and the Belgian Permeke.

What brings them all together is Renaissance humanism: in other words, fine art.

8.

It is this *fine art*,⁶ in the sense of the very body of humanistic culture, and these colors and smears of paint, meaning the very flesh of the painting, its sweat and smell, that should be the main subject of analysis.

The art of the avant-garde knew no resistance to violence at all—it was itself violence. But there are pictures by the gentle Catholic artist Rouault, such as *Homo Homini Lupus*, painted in 1944, and his *Judges*, that resurrect Daumier’s satires.

6. The term “fine art” is used here to translate two very close, but nevertheless slightly different, Russian terms, both loaned from French. The first of these corresponds exactly to “art plastiques,” the second to “la plastique.” “Art plastiques” may, when used more broadly, refer to the more serious and elevated arts generally, but used more specifically it refers to arts that employ a physical medium for the production of visual imagery. “La plastique” is a quality of beauty, and refers especially to such a quality as it is produced in a physical medium through some conscious artistic means. One may say, in French,

There are pictures by the same artist depicting saints—and in front of us rises the whole scale of values of his worldview, from the sublime to descent into the abyss. In these paintings, as in Picasso's, or the paintings of Chagall, the same *fine art* of the Renaissance was exhibited—the same as that for which Goya, Daumier and van Gogh themselves lived, as well as all who spoke about the daily issues of Christian civilization.

I would like to interpret this term broadly. In my understanding of it, European *fine art* is a legacy of the Renaissance, a legacy either unknown, or adopted only indirectly, in the case of not just Russia, but also Britain, and even America. Renaissance *fine art* is known only to European art of the kind that emerged out of the classical world, organically surviving the inoculation of Christianity and becoming a complete reality in virtue of its existence as an aggregate of knowledge, skill and craft. This combination can be expressed by perspective, the angle of figures and the interpretation of volume in space. Other cultures know nothing of that, or, at least, do not properly know it. This *fine art* existed only as a tradition located in Rome, that was passed on to Italy and, from there, via the Carolingian world, to Northern Europe. Europe simply does not know any other *fine art* culture. Outside of European *fine art*, it is not just difficult to deliberate about painting, but hard to conceive properly of the humanities at all.

As a matter of fact, *fine art*, understood as an agglomeration of examinations of the world, and as a perspective that encompasses bodies and volumes, is the mode proper to humanistic thinking itself. It is what Nicolas of Cusa meant when he said that “knowledge is comparison.” It is the unification of our examinations of the world, together with our skills for accomplishing things, into one existence. It is a peculiar *eidos*, given to us in our earthly life for us to use as an instrument. *Fine art*, then, is our grasp of the unity of the world—of the unity of all examinations and all disciplines. This is what the Renaissance is famous for: the joining into one of all knowledge, an interdisciplinary picture of the world.

It is this—that is, the juxtaposition of skill and craft—that marked Leonardo's artistic career. Unifying knowledge of the Kabbalah, ancient culture, and Christian doctrine into a single body of knowledge of the world—

“La plastique de ces gestes.” Thus, the meaning of “fine art” encompasses here also the physical material itself, and the skill involved in shaping it, as manifested by artists of a given era, school, or movement. See Marie-Éva de Villers, *Multidictionnaire de la langue française*, nouv. éd. ed. (Montréal : Québec Amérique, 2013), s.v. “plastique,” whence comes the example adduced above. See also Josette Rey-Debove and Alain Rey, eds., *Le Petit Robert 1 : Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*, 1987 ed. (Paris : Le Robert, 1987), s.v. “plastique.” (Editors' note.)

that was the subject that Pico occupied himself with. The unification of all kinds of knowledge manifested by John Comenius, Lorenzo Vallo and Michelangelo—this is *fine art*. It is what Thomas Aquinas was talking about when he described beauty by invoking integrity (*integritas*), proportions or consonance (*consonantia*), and clarity (*claritas*), which is understood as the ideal emanation of an idea. Aquinas went further: according to him, politics and economics are not natural sciences, but belong to ethics. Hence his description of beauty, which only counts *inevitably* as beauty when it is moral, so that the description of beauty is, *essentially*, the description of the unity of the world. A similar thought was expressed by Michelangelo, when he sought to explain what makes a perfect sculpture: “It should be so proportional that if it were to drop into the abyss, no detail that is bulging and out of place would fall off.” A similar thought was also expressed by Augustine: “The form of any beauty is unity.” Properly speaking, fine art is this combination of integrity, proportion, and clarity, and in the schools of Venice and Florence, in the studios of Rome and Mantua, we find artists who were most definitely preoccupied with combining these properties.

The proper understanding and appreciation of the integrity of a form was something transmitted throughout Europe as sacred knowledge. When one speaks about the “study of painting,” naïve people in non-European cultures think it is about shading and measuring the length of noses. American art schools, the Bauhaus and the Vkhutemas, taught something other than Renaissance *fine art*. No, this is about the sense of unity of the entire image, or about the unity of the societal. Favorsky’s felicitous definition of a composition was that “it is when part of the painting reminds one of the other part.” Apply this thesis to society and you get a program that is diametrically opposed to Suprematism. This constant measuring of one against another, a common principle manifested in drawing—this is *fine art*.

If one thinks about it even for just one minute, it becomes clear that what we are talking about above all else here is the Christian cathedral. It is the European Christian cathedral that is the most complete embodiment of the idea of *fine art* in this sense.

Germany’s (even Germany’s!) *fine art* renaissance arrived second-hand, and in the case of Britain the journey was even longer. In Russia, it was mastered by very few artists, and was a constantly misunderstood subject. The artists who called themselves “fine artists” found themselves alone. It was of absolutely no use in America. An American or Russian painter who has been taught the tricks of drawing may reckon that he knows European fine art, but this is an illusion—he does not feel it. The point is

that neither the American nor the Russian artist receives a training in how to feel the unity of the image, from the elasticity of the line to the direction of the gaze: this is European knowledge. *Fine art* is directly linked to the Christian approach to the image. Outside of this there is no *fine art*; there is, instead, the triumph of decoration and sign.

During the war, *fine art* came back to life in Europe. It arose in protest at one-dimensional time, like a last, desperate hope. During these years the love of Europeans for Russia was something genuine, justified by their common resistance to the threat of non-existence—to fascism. To an even greater extent, it reflected the fact that Petrov-Vodkin's image of the Madonna was close to Picasso's Madonna, that Chagall's images were comprehensible independently of any social model, and that there is a kindred approach to applying paint in the works of Rouault and Falk.

Christian symbols, however, are defenseless when faced with politics. The Cold War—the reformation for a new era—crushed the utopia of humanistic democracy. It forced former allies to forget about their communal plans for the sake of petty political gains. And if there were plans already in place, they were swept away by the new reformation itself.

Democratic art has never faced the problem of needing to combine Christian humility with pagan aggression. Today, such art is, in fact, entirely pagan.

Paradoxically, in order to affirm the imperative of personal freedom, the governments of the victorious democracies (they were different variants of the will of the people, but they all exploited the concept of “democracy”) had to herald their triumphs with exorbitant pagan temples. This victorious freedom demanded that it be embodied not in a humble, Christian church, but in giants that capture the imagination, such as the Empire State Building, the Palace of the Soviets and the colossal projects of the Third Reich. Why would the freedom of a Christian country manifest itself through pagan power? And yet the French Revolution, which proclaimed liberty, equality, and fraternity, turned to Roman symbolism, to just that era which, by definition, encompasses neither freedom, equality, nor fraternity. Today, this does not surprise anyone. Giant temples of individual freedom and altars to success and wealth have not let any memories of what was once called “the public good” remain.

The same “perpetual motor” of the avant-garde, which had already once come into disrepair, was started up again. Once again, the terrifying mantra that “not everyone is taken to the future” is spoken, uttered before the next in a series of global ruses. You need to be swift, or you will miss your chance—much as they say before a big war—to go there where everyone,

certainly, will be taken. It is only Christianity that promises eternal life to everyone, while pragmatic pagan belief warns that only the best will be taken. Once again, people have begun to talk about art possessing contemporary relevance, meaning art that serves the wealthy and has no relation to reality. They have found a new way to keep the machine going forever: an “economy without crisis,” “contemporary thinking,” a “global world,” the “new person.”

Gradually, the new avant-garde has strangled all that survived from the brief renaissance of the 20th century. The avant-garde itself, in a decorative guise provided by the market, has degenerated to the point where the criterion of its existence has become recognition by the milieu of wealthy, semi-criminal Londoners. This journey is logically complete. It began as a techno-utopia, went through the phase of collaboration with fascism, only to then reject the utopia of equality and end with bootlicking.

Everything has been done to ensure that the human image, built on the ruins of war by Brecht, Sartre, Hemingway and Picasso, has once again disappeared. Paganism has no face. The art of a victorious democratic system emerged, but it evolved just as Plato predicted it would: into an oligarchy, abolishing everything that could be thought of as embodying moral criteria of accountability. And where do we find ourselves now, if not in the midst of a victorious avant-garde, intoxicated by its own victory?

Even so, a yearning for lost unity—the phantom pain of *fine art*—continues to torture European consciousness. A new synthesis of paganism and Christianity is possible; one day, we may be able to adapt skyscrapers to serve as altars, and inject an immortal soul into an installation. All hopes, I would say, must rest with the resilience of the Renaissance, which many times already has raised Europe up from its ashes.