

THE IMAGE OF THE WAR IN DONBAS IN WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY UKRAINIAN ARTISTS

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to reconstruct images and symbols from the standpoints of hermeneutic and semiotic approaches in which the features of the war in Donbas (2014 - present) are expressed in works of contemporary Ukrainian artists. The analysis of works about the war in Donbas has shown that this topic is not singled out as an independent part in the studies of contemporary Ukrainian art and in the cycles of works by the authors themselves. War is not viewed only as an armed conflict: the authors primarily emphasize its moral side. Modern Ukrainian masters are in search of an artistic language capable of expressing the traumatic experience. The main themes of works of contemporary Ukrainian artists about the war in Donbas are 'war and man', 'war and its consequences', 'war and its symbols' etc.

Keywords: war in Donbas, contemporary Ukrainian art, the Soviet past, Luhansk oblast, Donetsk oblast, artistic image of the war in Donbas.

1 Introduction

The war in Donbas is an armed conflict in the territory of eastern oblasts of Ukraine, namely, Luhansk and Donetsk, which began in 2014, passed its active phase with many human losses in 2014-2015, and continues to the present day as simmering but not resolved. The conflict has been named in the media as 'war in Donbas', 'armed confrontation in Donbas', 'anti-terrorist operation', 'united forces operation', 'Russian aggression in Donbas' (official point of view of Ukraine), 'civil war in Donbas' (the point of view of the government of the Russian Federation) and others. Chronologically, the conflict began after protests and confrontation between the protesters and the government forces on the main square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) in the capital of Ukraine, Kiev, in November 2013 - February 2014 (an event that, having received the name "Revolution of Dignity", or rather, its political end - the change of power - caused an ambiguous reaction in different regions of the country and abroad). On April 14, 2014, the leadership of Ukraine, which came to power after the events on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti, announced the start of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in Donbas with the involvement of the Armed Forces of Ukraine [The sixth anniversary, 14.04.2020].

Art workers are known to always actively respond to significant events in public life. They can feel and foresee trends because the grand purpose of art is to improve a person, society, life in general. Thus, works of art of various types and genres created during the World War II are widely known. The theme of the war in Donbas is also embodied in works of contemporary Ukrainian artists. At the same time, this war has several features (in comparison with the World War II chronologically preceding in this territory):

- the war in Donbas combines regular hostilities with elements of hybrid war;
- tension arose between peoples and states that used to be a part of one state entity, the USSR, several decades ago, i.e., they have quite a lot of common pages of history, common points of historical and cultural memory;
- the war has a local character and is characterized by insufficient involvement of a large part of society, their mental, emotional and physical remoteness from traumatic events. Significantly, A. Lozhkina called her article on contemporary Ukrainian art 'Between War and Rave' (Lozhkina 2019), and an art critic K. Yakovlenko wrote in 2015, 'It's quite difficult to imagine that the war has already been going on in the country for the second year' (Yakovlenko 2015).

In this regard, it is necessary to consider how, in what images and symbols these features of the war in Donbas find expression in works of modern Ukrainian artists, which is the purpose of this article.

The culturological and art history analysis of works on this topic is at an early stage. There are several reasons for this. These are, firstly, the incompleteness of military operations and the aforementioned detachment of a part of society from traumatic events, external to the sphere of art and cultural sciences, but affecting the atmosphere of research (and the socio-cultural background in general). Secondly, these are the reasons for the internal plan: insufficient time distance from the analyzed event with its perceived belonging to the transformational era, i.e. the initial pluralism and mobility of the author's aesthetic positions, which - due to the uncertainty of the range of interpretations of artistic searches in each individual case - creates objective difficulties for cultural generalization.

The available theoretical works on art about the war in Donbas can be grouped according to the following main thematic areas:

- an overview of exhibitions, biennials, presentations with the participation of contemporary Ukrainian artists ((Kryzhanivska 2016); (Davenport 2019); (Miller 2017));
- reflection of authors on their works (in interviews or articles) ((Kadan 2018); (Yakovlenko 2017));
- review and analytical articles about Ukrainian art after the events on the Maidan (Revolution of Dignity), where works about the war in Donbas are included as a logical and chronological component (Lozhkina 2019);
- articles about visual art in the context of the confrontation in Donbas (Bodnar 2019); (Glushko 2017); (Kurban 2017); (Nabok 2016); (Yatsymirskaya 2015));
- direct analysis of works about the war in Donbas ((Oliinyk 2017); (Prokopenko 2019); (Tymoshenko 2019)).

2 Materials and Methods

In this article, the works of the following contemporary Ukrainian artists have been selected for analysis: Nikita Kadan, Tudor Ion Stegarescu, Alevtina Kakhidze, Lesia Tyshchenko, Mykhailo Diachenko, Serhiy Pushchenko, Oleksiy Bondarenko, Oleh Shchupliak, Roman Mikhailov, Kateryna Yermolaieva. The main principle of their selection is the presence of artistic representations about the war in Donbas in works of these artists, and the citizenship of Ukraine. Cinematic, photographic, and literary works are outside the scope of this study.

The methodological basis of this article is the interpretation of works of art from the standpoint of hermeneutic and semiotic approaches. Methods of analysis and categorisation are applied.

A related purpose of the article is to test the hypothesis that the 21st-century art does not praise war and does not apply military categories to art. It is pacifist and non-violent. Even the most radical descriptions of cruelty and horror are aimed at criticizing them rather than justifying them (Rybkovska 2015, 132-133).

3 Results and Discussions

The works of Ukrainian artists about the war in Donbas are rather difficult to distinguish from the total amount of works from the post-Maidan period. This theme cannot be called dominant in contemporary Ukrainian art. Firstly, it should be noted that there are quite a few Ukrainian artists, representatives of figurative and realistic trends, who have addressed the theme of the war in Donbas. The reason might be that this conflict does not fit into the literal forms of rational objectivity. Nevertheless, Mykhailo Diachenko addressed the traditional themes of glorification of Ukrainian soldiers and perpetuating the memory of the fallen (the series of works Baptized by Fire. In Fire, Thunderers). An artist Serhiy Pushchenko called his album Portraits of Volunteer Fighters in the War, thus marking the phenomenon of the volunteer movement caused by the hostilities in Donbas. Oleh Shchupliak created works about the war in his former manner of optical illusion inspired by works of Giuseppe Arcimboldo and Salvador Dali. His series is dedicated to the

Maidan, and his works about the conflict in Donbas are a part of it and do not stand out as an independent cycle.

On the contrary, some artists working in a realistic manner in the pre-war period used abstract motives, symbolic forms, allegorical means of expressing ideas in their works during the period of the hostilities in Donbas. One of them is an artist Lesia Tyshchenko, a native of Luhansk oblast. She created her series of works based on the results of several trips to the anti-terrorist operation zone. Against a black background, we can see bursts of pure local colours, white, red, yellow and blue combinations. In terms of plots and performance, the works are close to the folk painting. The main theme is the struggle between good and evil. The good is presented in the images of a soldier with a patch in the form of the Ukrainian flag on the sleeve; a white bird; a girl; a bride. Evil is in the form of crows, fire, explosions, a bear in an attacking pose, etc. In contrast to the 'pre-war' works, the author's manner has acquired the character of a sketch; the composition became dynamic and asymmetrical. Religious symbols of Christianity are widely used: cross, icon, angel, priest.

The artist from Luhansk, Tudor Ion Stegarescu, has also dramatically changed his style of painting. He was living in this city during the most active phase of the hostilities. The events of 2014 in Donbas divided his work into two periods.

The first one, pre-war, is characterized by impressionistic works in the genre of landscape, still life, and infrequent experiments with colour and form in abstract painting. The picturesque component dominates over the graphic one. The artist has a subtle sense of colour making it resonant and rich in iridescence, accurately and realistically conveys the state, lighting, and material. Painting often spiritualizes a rather ordinary nature motive making it aesthetically attractive.

The second period that can be called the military cycle of T. I. Stegarescu's works is the natural reaction of a person who creates, thinks and feels to a tragedy that has become personal. The language of symbols of expressionism and abstract painting has become a method of objectifying experiences that helps to live.

In the 2014-2017 series of paintings, the author's inner state is conveyed by the instability of the composition, blurred spots of colour, colourful streaks, sharp lines, disappearance of the bright and vibrant palette of the pre-war period. The colour scheme is contrast, intense to the point of disharmony.

The work of 2014 *Bearing the Cross* (Fig. 1) can be recognised as outstanding in style, performance, content, composition, and even the title. The cross in the artistic tradition of the peoples of Christian culture most often symbolized suffering, martyrdom (crucifixion) or fate, inevitability, sometimes eternity. In the work of T. Stegarescu, the cross - the basis of the composition - symbolically sets (evokes in the viewer) two intersecting associative-semantic series: 1) the existential unity of the fate of the opposing sides: carrying ONE cross, and this carrying cannot be avoided, from the ONE cross and its weight (cross presses like a reinforced concrete beam, oppresses) not to get rid of it (especially since the characters are hung on a cross, pinned, forever (?) tied to him, alone); 2) at the same time, the multidirectional symmetry of efforts on the verge of human capabilities (oppositely directed movement of two human figures, a red dividing line, a blood line) - what is it: the desire to break the cross and be content with a part of it (half, which - not being whole - will turn out to be in a fateful plan, useless and meaningless) or the thirst to possess it entirely, pulling it over to its side - but then, it turns out, together with the "other side"? Divided in half - bloody at the place of a fault - the once single living space is read not so much as a place of collision, but as a place (and time) of rupture and emptiness: no contact, no desire for dialogue itself, no meeting - even meeting of eyes ... rush in opposite directions with the tenacity of Sisyphus ... Whoever they, the characters of T. Stegarescu, may be, for the viewer they are unhappy and doomed, unable to even look each other in the eyes, as has been customary from time immemorial, to meet face

to face with the enemy, with trouble, with Fate ... The image of the cross-intersection: there is only one cross. Fate. War. According to the author, this image was inspired by his visit to a checkpoint, where the level of tension and danger is high.

As it is known, there is a black stone of meteorite origin built into the wall in the Kaaba that is sacred for Muslims. According to Islamic tradition, at first, that stone was white but turned black because of the sins of people. T. I. Stegarescu's *Three Angels* (2014) may be evidence of the distortion of the image of Trinity by Andrei Rublev. But we look at it through the dim glass of time filled with human sins.

Winter Sky over the City (2014) creates a feeling of an inverted reality (Fig. 2). We can see a devastated (almost surreal) land and an ominously coloured sky of war. The roar of aircraft and the explosions of shells are heard. Dry snow-covered sunflowers in the foreground are as an allegory of the Ukrainian land in the grip of the military conflict.

The motive of a lifeless space, a post-civilization that has outlived itself can be found in the works *Winter Angel* (2014), *Post-Industrial Landscape* (2015), *White Ants* (2015). And the harvest of souls passed away prematurely is depicted in *Angel Picking Green Apples* (2016).

Dream in the Open Air (2015) depicts a fragile truce, memories of silence and serenity of the pre-war past, and defenselessness at the same time. In the light spots in the foreground, one can see a kind of a female figure. From another point of view, these may be the remains of something organic, his/her eternal sleep.

Images of a tragedy, a new reality in the artist's life distorting his external and especially internal world are symbolic in his works. These are loneliness (*Vienna Chair* (2015)), winter (*Winter Sleepwalker* (2015), *Summer Dream in Winter Garden* (2014)), a bullet (*Still Life with a Bullet* (2015)), people hiding from shelling in the cellar (*Two in the Cellar* (2014), Fig. 3), tripwire mines (*Tripwires* (2014), Fig. 4), stopped time (*Wall Clock without Mechanism* (2016)), dried flowers (*Dry Roses* (2014)), etc. Also, we can often find the motive of an angel without a face his works. This image does not carry a positive meaning. Similar objects and images (without faces) are known in the folk pagan art (Ukrainian motanka doll), in art history, e.g., surrealist works of Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dali (a period when art turns to pre-Christian images and symbols again). Although images of angels were known in Judaism, still, it is an Orthodox icon that is the source of images of angels. The icon is often called just as 'holy face', for it is the faces of the depicted that are its most important component. It is known that it is not customary to depict saints side-faced in the Byzantine icon. Only negative characters are presented in this way. Christian iconography knows no faceless depictions of angels.

A motanka doll, being without a face, could attract the spirit of a deceased or an unborn person according to popular beliefs. But according to the philosophy of surrealism, faceless images expressed exceptional wisdom of realizing the limitations of rational thinking and understanding the meaning of absurdity for penetrating the essence of things. For Salvador Dali, such an image was a way to evoke a feeling of 'disturbing strangeness' (Bransky 1999, 485). In combination with the war theme, the image of an angel without a face is almost a ghost, a soul in confusion and sadness, not just strangeness but an organic expression of irrational death, an illogical phenomenon of fratricidal confrontation.

Portrait of Anaesthesiologist (2014) is an unexpected look at the problem of illness, pain (possibly injury). The viewers find themselves in the image of a patient, to whom consciousness returns after anaesthesia. The first thing they can see (we can see) is a face with glasses, a caring and attentive look of a doctor. But the reality, the environment is still blurry, fragments of images of drug-induced (delusional?) sleep still flicker in it.

Immortelles (2014) is a burst of hope. In the simplicity of alive dry wildflowers, there is a glimpse of colour and light, belief in the end of hard times, and a return from madness to spirituality.

Analysis and comparison of the works of two periods of Tudor Ion Stegarescu make it possible to determine the vectors of the war's influence of the war and the direct experience of the hostilities on the artist's work:

- the war changes the vector of creativity: we can characterize pre-war works as 'reflection' but wartime works are 'expression';
- the content and the theme of works are changing: charm and admiration are replaced by reflections of an existential and ontological nature; the author's works state uncertainty, reflections on death/life, danger, pain, uncertainty and transience of human existence, etc.
- the stylistics of the author's works is changing; his wartime works can be characterized as close to expressionism (as opposed to the impressionistic pre-war pictures), expressionistic avant-garde that was also historically born under conditions of tension and hostilities.

At the same time, the greatest attention to the topic of the war in Donbas is paid by Ukrainian representatives of conceptual, non-figurative, contemporary art.

One of the significant events in this area and on the topic considered in this article is the works of Nikita Kadan *The Possessed Can Witness in the Court, Shelter, Victory*. The author explains his creative method in the following way, 'passing through the present day (engaged in the 'museumification of modernity') before it is somehow described by certain professionals of historical and mythological construction' (Kadan 2018).

The Possessed Can Witness in the Court is a museum exposition of objects from the Soviet past. They are selected in contrast to the current events in Donbas. The author explains the title of his work in such a way, 'The possessed (of course, by the spirits of history) who can witness in the court (surely, we are talking about the court of history) is an invisible character in the work. He/she is driven by the released force of contradictions, which he/she directs for the sake of breaking any ideologised illusion of the "natural order" of historic events' (Kadan, 2018). Silent evidence of military exhibits is an exposition of suspended shells in the flight of the stairs of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine as one of the methods of talking with the viewer about traumatic events. Significantly, Nikita analyses the work about the war together with his works based on the materials of the repressions of 1937-1938, the events in Volyn and Lviv in 1941. The author considers it 'working with historical material'. His position is 'not to be one of the means of propaganda' and, at the same time, 'not to stay above the battle' but 'to direct the energy of wars against themselves'. That is, reflection about the present is woven into earlier facts and events of the history of Ukraine, 'a work of art becomes a 'stop-reminder' actualising those stories of the past that are capable of giving an intelligible political form to the present day' (Kadan, 2018). An analysis of the abovementioned works shows that, according to their author, the Soviet period (the Soviet past) is the culprit and the cause of the military events of the early 21st century in eastern Ukraine.

Nikita Kadan's *Shelter* (Fig. 5) is a two-tiered installation. On the upper tier, there are the ruins of the exposition of Donetsk Regional Museum of Local History complemented by car tires (a reference to the Maidan and the barricades), and on the lower tier on the two-tier shelf (looking like bunk beds), there are boxes with earth and sprouted agricultural plants along the perimeter of the volume. In both tiers of the installation, the Maidan and the war in Donbas are intertwined:

- on the upper tier: the broken ceiling and the damaged museum exposition as traces of the war, and tires as a sign of the barricades on the Maidan;

- on the lower tier: bunk beds from bomb shelters in the settlements of Donbas and mini-vegetable gardens from the protesters on the Maidan.

The title of the work *Shelter* is sarcasm. In fact, there is no shelter. Unresolved problems of the past and the present attack everywhere.

The art object *Victory* is a rethinking of *Monument to Three Revolutions*, the work of the Ukrainian artist of the early 20th century Vasyl Yermilov, its negative replica cleared of communist symbols. A new element is introduced into the composition as a symbol of war (two cups glued together with molten remains from a house destroyed by an artillery strike in Lysychansk). In the work, the cause of the military conflict of 2014 is named through symbols. These are the revolutions of the early 20th century under the flag of the communist ideology. *Victory* is both sarcasm and an indication of the need for victory over the Soviet past.

To understand his artistic method, Nikita Kadan offers the following allegory, 'Imagine a construction in which you constantly have to make changes to the foundation, while you are on the upper floors that are being endlessly finished' (Kadan, 2018). The author's position is historical and dialectical.

The next method of conversation with the viewer is the choice of a genre, which can be conventionally called a 'psychological visual reportage'. *The Story of Strawberry Andreevna, or Zhdanovka 2014-2018* by Alevtina Kakhidze is an exposition of drawings-stories in the style of diary entries about the life of the artist's mother in Zhdanovka, Donetsk oblast, which is not controlled by the Ukrainian government, and the propaganda products of the self-proclaimed authorities. The artist is interested in the internal state of the characters, their assessment (bewilderment), the search for answers to questions, but not an external factor (chronology of the military events). These 'external' events are perceived 'by default'; they are 'out of question'. This can be called a reaction displacing traumatic events that have not yet become memories. A torn, multi-style reality does not make a coherent work. A common man is in the life-threatening propaganda noise of absurdity and hatred.

Such psychological and even psychosomatic depth is inherent in the installation in the Ukrainian pavilion at Venice Biennale 2015 'Synonym for 'wait''. As a reality, the video installation presented on one monitor an image from nine video cameras directed at the doors of the flats of Ukrainian servicemen being at that moment in the combat zone in Donbas. Each visitor could temporarily become a family member of the servicemen on the front, and personally feel the time burden of uncertainty through art. The impression was complemented by performance. The project authors sat down at the kitchen table in front of the monitor for a long time, peered at the screen in tense expectation, did not eat anything at that time, and only drank water. So, the topic of presence and absence, endurance, stamina, courage of a person in war was brought up. As José Ortega y Gasset put it, a work of art is an event that takes place in the soul of the viewer when communicating, interacting with the work of art.

Another aspect of the topic is the motive of personal memories, and the fate of the internally displaced persons forced to leave their homes in Luhansk or Donetsk oblasts because of the war. Kateryna Yermolaieva, a displaced person from Donetsk, proposed an artistic reconstruction of the places where she grew up: grandmother's house, parental home, and family summer cottage. The installation combines objects painted in an achromatic colour scheme, empty white spaces (as signs of oblivion of certain elements of the furnishings or events that have been erased from memory), and real objects of memory like grandmother's kerchief, perfume bottles, photographs, etc. This is not only an opportunity for the viewer to enter the artist's personal space. This is the pain of the gone, from which you are forcibly separated, and, at the same time, the sweetness and warmth of memories, reconstruction of the space, where you became who you are.

By his installation *Burn of the Real* (Fig. 6), the artist Roman Mikhailov draws attention to the suddenness of the war, its unexpected start for the overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian population. Unfortunately, this burn and the accompanying pain are a fait accompli.

An unexpected consequence of the bloody events in eastern Ukraine is the interest in the provincial cities of Donbas, the rise of local history, rediscovery of the province, provincial museums. As Alisa Lozhkina notes, whereas at the beginning of the 20th century, the future was the deity of avant-gardists, now the past is the fetish of contemporary Ukrainian artists (Lozhkina 2019).

In fact, the war in Donbas in Ukrainian art has become an occasion to reflect on the state of society, to rethink the relationship of Ukrainian society and culture with the past, present, and future. Artists are looking for an answer to the question why the war has become possible, although they do not say it. Artists do not reproduce real facts, do not submit reports from the front but focus on the human aspect of events. The war is perceived through the prism of a man. It is artists' attempt to resist the war, not on one side or the other, but to the image of the war as such.

Generally, it is clear that the events of the war in Donbas cannot be reflected by copying. This process is mediated by ideological constructs, images of historical and collective memory.

4 Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of works on the war in Donbas has shown that this topic is not singled out as an independent section in the studies of contemporary Ukrainian art and in the cycles of works by the authors themselves. It is presented along with the themes of decommunization, overcoming the Soviet heritage (first of all, in its mental form), events on the Maidan in 2013-2014, problems of the depressed regions of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, the political situation in the country as a whole. That is, reflections on the war in Donbas are mediated by ideological constructs, images of historical and collective memory. The war is not contemplated only as an armed conflict; authors emphasize its moral side. In works of artists, we can see not an image but a concept of this or that event. Modern Ukrainian masters are in search of an artistic language capable of expressing the traumatic experience.

The main trends in depicting the war in Donbas in Ukrainian art are:

- a change in the way authors express their thoughts in their works: the narrative is replaced by the fragmentation of consciousness and feelings, a discordant and disharmonious colour scheme; the artistic language of figurative and realistic painting (including impressionistic) ceases to be adequate to new sensations and impressions;
- shifting the semantics of images to non-military meanings, focusing on the sensory experience of the author, character, viewer;
- a chain of traumatic events of the past is being built, in which the war in Donbas is becoming a topical link;
- an imposition of reflection on the war in Donbas on the cultural trauma of the interethnic relations between Ukraine and Russia; expanding the context of the topic to the need to overcome the Soviet past and to form a new Ukrainian culture;
- an ambivalent character of artistic pictorial statements about the war in Donbas: the glorification of Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers in the 'friend-or-foe' opposition and, on the other hand, the desire to 'direct the energy of wars against themselves' (pacifist sentiments).

The main themes of works of contemporary Ukrainian artists about the war in Donbas are:

- war and man, his/her inner spiritual world, psychology, memory, experiences, memories;

- war and its consequences, burns, wounds;
- war and its symbols - bullet, winter, shrapnel, shells;
- war and its causes (Soviet past, Russian aggression).

These are the images found by artists to convey the concept of the 'war in Donbas':

- fire (as an ambivalent symbol in the 'friend-or-foe' system);
- time (through the past, present, future, expectation, presence, absence);
- an angel without a face (irrationality of the event);
- the Soviet past of Ukraine (subject, event, cultural memory);
- cross (suffering, the complexity of the situation mediated by the past that cannot be changed).

In general, it is not yet clear what imprint this war will leave on the group consciousness of the Ukrainians, and how much its events will be reflected in Ukrainian art in the long run.

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