



## Art and totalitarianism in the twentieth century: Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union.

Art and totalitarianism in the XX century: Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union.

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### SUMMARY

In this article we propose to study the importance of the artistic phenomenon in its relationship with politics, for which we will start from the strong connection between the totalitarian regimes of the last century and the artistic production that developed in these, delving into the aesthetic conception that they dispensed, fundamentally until the first half of the twentieth century, the three regimes that are often cited as examples of totalitarian states: Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the socialist Soviet Union. Our intention is to present, in a general way, the way of understanding art within these systems, and the confrontation that has been taking place since then between, what we could call, the political conceptions of art in its programmatic form, against the idea of art for art's sake.

**Keywords:** Socialist realism. Heroic realism. Aesthetics. Political art.



## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to discuss the importance of the artistic phenomena in regard to politics. Firstly the Deep connection between the totalitarian regimes that were raised over the last century and their artistic and aesthetic conception will be analysed, giving specific emphasis on the Nazi Germany, the Fascist Italy and the Soviet Union. The purpose is to generally expose the different ways of understanding art in this context, confronting the political conception of art in its programmatic way, and the concept of art *for art*.

**Key Words:** Socialist realism. Heroic realism. Aesthetics. Political art.

My intention in this work is to present in broad strokes the ideas that, with respect to art, were accepted by the two main European totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, namely *fascism* (both in Hitler's Germany and in Mussolini's Italy), and *socialism* (in the Soviet Union and in the countries of its zone of influence). For this it is necessary to treat a part, which we could qualify as theoretical: *aesthetic theory*; and another eminently practical part: the artistic *production* itself, so that through this analysis we are aware of the relationship established between art and society itself, the main objective of this work.

To deal correctly with this relationship, it is interesting to expose artistic theory and its presence in the social life of two antagonistic regimes such as the socialist and the fascist, which represent, we could say, the two poles of the ideological spectrum of the twentieth century. The interest in taking as examples the two models that we will deal with is based, as we have just said, on the fact that, although we study two opposing systems and with ideas that are very distant, in both cases there is a strong relationship between politics and art, being able to extrapolate this equality to a large number of different historical contexts.

**Politics, art and history.**



When introducing a topic, the most illustrative thing is usually to start with the historical approach to give consistency to our argumentation, so we will place ourselves in the cradle of Western thought, namely, classical Greece, taking as an example two of the most brilliant men in history, Socrates and his disciple Plato.

The relationship between art and politics is already evident at the beginning of the history of philosophy, being proof of this that, the main promoters of the trial against Socrates were Anito and Mellitus, who speak on behalf of poets and artists, and whose slanders lead to the first great assassination of the history of thought, narrated in the *Apology*. Among the accusations that are poured on Socrates, those of profit motive, impiety, acting as a solvent of morality and as a corruptor of the young people who followed him stand out, therefore, the background of the conviction is based on the fear that Socrates' thought instills in the Athenian political power, which sees in it an agitator. It is not strange that Plato throughout his work confronts the poets and even expels them from their ideal republic, proposing in a certain way a control over the art and meter of poetry and songs (cf. Havelock, 2002, pp. 72 and following) fact that proves how conscious the thinker was of the importance and relationship of art and politics. Following this line we could affirm the influence that artists have on political life since ancient times, and how the greatest thinkers in history have often positioned themselves against the conception of a pure art, detached from ethics and the development of societies; going so far as to expel the rhapsodies from the *polis*, as in the case of Plato. In this way you can see in the *Republic*, one of the most important texts of the author, the importance of this question:

[...] we must examine tragedy and its champion, Homer, for we have heard some say that they know all the arts, all human affairs in relation to excellence and evil and even divine affairs. Because they say that it is necessary for a good poet, if he is to compose properly what he composes, to compose with knowledge; otherwise he will not be able to compose. It is necessary to examine, then, whether these commentators, when encountering such imitators, have not been deceived, and seeing their works do not realize that they are three times far



from the real, and that it is easy to compose when the truth is not known; for these poets compose apparent and unreal things. (Plato, 2010a, p. 201).

Plato lashes out at poets, whom he accuses of sometimes saying things they don't know, stressing the need for knowledge. An art produced by a creator who speaks in an unconscious way has an impact on society, and insofar as it can act as a destroyer of the political order and knowledge, it must be restricted – in case this is necessary – since, a republic such as that proposed by the thinker, is based on a rational social organization structured in three classes of citizens: the *artisans*, who possess the virtue of temperance and identify with the concupiscible soul; the *guardians*, characterized by courage and possessors of the irascible soul; and finally the *rulers*, who have the kind of rational soul, being wise. A state of these characteristics, crowned by a wise king – philosopherking – cannot tolerate an imitative poetry, unaware of the message it transmits and that, due to its easy memorization and repetitiveness, distances thought and reflection from that which is in its presence. The danger is therefore that an art of these characteristics distances individuals from the rational soul.

The question of art is of central importance for Plato because it can confuse or pervert those in charge of the correct political functioning of society, which logically will bring disastrous consequences, hence political power has a regulatory function, enhancing those artistic expressions that contribute to true knowledge (we therefore establish a link between, to put it Kantianly, theoretical reason and practical reason; if we know correctly what is true or false, we can also elucidate between good and evil; but if we are not able to attain truthful knowledge, we will not be able at all to deal with questions concerning ethics and politics); and censoring if necessary, those that lead to falsehood and the maintenance of tradition uncritically.

From these ideas derives the fact that poets, symbol of the Homeric tradition on which Greek oral culture is founded, serve as the sustenance of political power, while through the discourse they transmit they mutilate thought and therefore the possibility of reversing reality; while Socrates and his disciples, embody the new thought that effectively analyzes the issues critically, making it possible



to transform what is bad, even if what is intended to change has been conceived as good for a long time. Recall that in many of the discussions between Socrates and the artists and poets, they use Homer's words as *an argumentum ad verecundiam*, accepting what is said in their texts without questioning whether this is good or bad. To demonstrate this idea it is enough to refer to the Socratic dialogue regarding poetry, the *Ion*, in it, Socrates talks with the rhapsody Ion, expert in reciting Homer. The philosopher affirms that his interlocutor does not recite Homer for possessing a technique or knowledge, but that the nature of his "art" is explained by a certain "divine drunkenness", which we could relate to memorization (something that, as we know, is somewhat opposed to understanding: there is a tension between knowledge through mechanical memorization and knowledge through critical understanding). The fact that Ion recites Homer's verses in a row and yet is unable to do the same with other poets, such as Archilochus or Hesiod, proves Socrates' thesis; which answers the question of his interlocutor as to why he fails to recite other different verses, as follows:

It is not difficult, friend, to conjecture it; for it is clear to all that you are not qualified to speak of Homer thanks to a science or a technique; because if you were able to speak by a science or a technique, you would also be able to talk about the other poets, because in a certain way poetics is a whole. Or not? (Plato, 2010b, p. 74).

In these cases art is postulated favorable to the established power, on the side of Athens that sentences philosophy to drink hemlock.

There is then also a relationship between art and education (*παιδεία*), something palpable throughout the history of aesthetic thought, remember Schiller's text, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. In this dichotomy between art and knowledge, as we observe Plato puts the political sphere before the artistic sphere, art as a copy (*μίμησις*), is subordinated to the health of the republic. In turn, we could argue in many quotation marks that, from Altamira to Kandinsky, the history of painting has been the history of this mimesis, the copying and reproduction of reality through different forms; this, with a greater or lesser degree of realism.



As we well know, art evolves, but this evolution is not explained by a teleology as a sensitive expression of the *spirit* in its dialectical development, in the way that Hegel proposes in his philosophy of art characterized by a beauty of the abstract *form*. Faced with this idealistic vision, we can explain the change that occurs in the different eras and in the different artistic movements by several factors (if we want to put in parentheses the idea of the creative genius), the most powerful being those referring to the economic and social context, the times of crisis or economic bonanza in which artists develop their work, the hegemonic religion of the place, or the historical context itself, to which is added the fundamental thesis of this text, namely the *relationship between political life and art*; so, if, in pretending to explain the phenomena that engender the art of each time and place, we limit ourselves to reducing everything to a psychologism of the artist, we will remain, in the most superficial explanatory layer, being necessary to delve more inclusively into the factors that determine the aesthetic conception and artistic creation of man.

## Art and socialism.

We left classical Greece to focus on a very different place and time: the Soviet Union. This state did not leave anyone indifferent, counting its defenders and detractors by the thousands, something that is not strange if we take into account that (omitting the contrary opinions), the USSR was presented as the crystallization of the approaches of *scientific socialism* theorized by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The fact that a state claims to be a direct heir and follower of a philosophical theory is a fact to be taken into account, which is often overlooked; after all, to project philosophy onto a political state and use it as a reference for its development is – if analogy is allowed – as if the theses developed by Plato in reference to his political model, (mentioned in the previous section) had been put into practice by some government contemporary to it, or immediately afterwards.

The October Revolution was a before and after in the recent history of the West, of that there is no doubt, keeping an almost mystical interest for some, more than a hundred years away from its beginning. As we say, if in many respects the Soviets followed Marx's theses, understanding the history of art in the Soviet Union is synonymous with also understanding Marxist philosophy in its



artistic dimension, although this is generally overlooked in favor of other aspects such as economic or political; something curious, because if as we have been saying, the contemplation of the Soviets towards their philosophy was enormous, and throughout the twentieth century socialism poured its influence to half the world, not understanding the considerations of Marxism on art is similar to having a very vague knowledge of the history of art of the entire twentieth century (or at least of the countries that were not totally or partially capitalist). In addition to the interest that first-level art theorists, such as Lukacs, Brecht or Adorno, have shown in Marxist theory, indissolubly linked to the influence of social life on art itself, although it is true that they are far from the orthodox Marxist postulates in some cases.

In the previous section, we criticized the aesthetics proposed by Hegel due to its extreme idealism, something normal if we intend to make a criticism from the coordinates established by a materialist vision. However, Hegel must be granted the genius of constructing a method, the *dialectic*, which was assimilated by Marx and Engels as a fundamental tool in their philosophy, later becoming the official philosophy of the USSR.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of "turn upside down" (*Umstülpung*) that Engels illustrates in reference to the change in Marx's conception of the Hegelian method is well known: it would have turned around Hegel's system, which made the world rest on the head (primacy of consciousness and the subjective), to make it rest on the feet (primacy of the material and objective). Thus we move from a speculative idealism to the materialism characteristic of this system.

The Soviets, following the much-discussed differentiation between *infrastructure* and *superstructure*, understood art in relation to the means of production in which this activity takes place. Infrastructure would then be the material basis of society, namely the economy, the mode of production that a society has, while the *superstructure* would become the immaterial part of society, comprising art, religion, thought, legal institutions, and ultimately all the integral parts of ideology. In

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<sup>1</sup> As is known, the official philosophy of the Soviet Union was dialectical materialism, *Diamat*, which relied on the laws of dialectics to understand reality and human history (*historical materialism*), despite all the shortcomings of these approaches at the theoretical level.





the relationship between both spheres the predominant role is reserved, as is popularly known, for the economy, while the rest of the elements are determined by it, hence art is influenced by the political and economic framework in which it develops, not being able to contemplate under this conception the possibility of a pure art, abstracted from the material conditions around him. This brief outline of the Marxist conception of society can be illustrated with the following words of Marc Jimenez in the chapter that he dedicates to Marx in the text from which we help:

[...] in this sense the artistic activity and aesthetic concepts of a people are no longer autonomous but heteronomous. They depend on parameters over which they have no power, they are included in ideology, that is, in the representation that a society is forged at a given moment in its history taking into account the phase of material and economic development that it has reached [...] the genius that is concentrated in some exceptional artists is not a gift of nature or the effect of a divine fury, but an effect of the social division of labor. (Jimenez, 1999, p. 79).

The Soviet aesthetic conception will be positioned, while, based on Marxian approaches, against the idea of creative *genius*, pointing out the need for a combated art, committed to the social demands that are demanded of it. This was taken into account in the USSR, something that can be seen for example in Kandinsky's departure due to differences between his artistic conception and that officially advocated, after the Bolshevik Revolution, by the Soviet Academy of Arts, which was interested in what would eventually be known as *socialist realism*. hegemonic artistic movement thereafter.

An abstract art, which exalted a personal sensibility that was not aimed at expanding class consciousness and which, in addition, possessed a strong psychological component (which was interpreted as a petty-bourgeois vice), could not be allowed within the Soviet coordinates, so that artistic production was effectively controlled, like the economy, by the state. Therefore, a centralization of the artistic content was carried out, destined to harangue the message of the Bolshevik revolution, so it was necessary to produce a political art, which in addition to serving practical purposes and not only aesthetic -in the strictest sense of the word-, was easy to understand





and accept by society; hence the tendency towards a homogenization based on realism, and faced with complicated and abstruse creations, which could only sometimes be understood by an intellectual elite (or even only by its creator) and not by the people. Plekhanov, introducer of Marxism in Russia, reacts to "pure art":

In the socialist regime, the theory of art for art's sake will become purely impossible to the same extent that social morality, the vulgarity that is now an inevitable consequence of the aspiration of the ruling class to want to preserve its privileges, will lose its vulgarity. (Plekhanov, 1974, p. 123).

This conception that understands art as an end in itself (an "endless end", to put it with Kant), is something genuine of bourgeois theory, so, as we see, it is not detached from ideology. In the state, artistic production, which once served aesthetic and educational purposes, becomes another product, becoming produced in the form of a commodity; hence, all its possible value is eliminated and transformed into something empty, without any content or usefulness beyond that of contributing to maintaining the established social order. In this drift of art, bourgeois art is considered hegemonic, like everything that comes from the superstructure, which, in defending the interests of the dominant social stratum, has the support of the latter. The impotence of the artist who tries to escape from this tendency and orient his creation towards revolutionary ends is full, since although he were able to transcend the prevailing ideology and be maximally aware, he would be forced to reproduce, to a greater or lesser extent, the patterns that fall within the conception of ideological art, since the state (under this approach, it is also a tool to perpetuate the oppression of one class over another) will not support their work and even repress it; something that happens in all types of government, remember the case of the famous composer Shostakovich during Stalin's rule.

Returning to the critique of art under capitalism carried out by the Soviet aesthetes, as we have been saying, the artist is forced, if he wants to subsist in some way, to reproduce the canons that the market imposes so that they are accepted by the public; otherwise, despite the fact that his work has a high quality, it will be relegated to the background in favor of other manifestations that if



they fit with the prevailing ideology and the market, which is the one that, in the shadow, influences in a decisive way in social life. The control of art occurs as we see through the coercion that power exerts on the market, in its most concrete dimension; and discourse, in its most abstract dimension:<sup>2</sup>

[...] in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose function is to conjure up its powers and dangers, to dominate the random event and to dodge its heavy and fearsome materiality. (Foucault, 2018, p. 14).

The ruling classes, through the state, control what should be said and how it should be said, what enters and what is excluded in reference to discourse, doing the same with art.

The commodification of art causes an impoverishment of this: modern bourgeois art undergoes a process of impoverishment, being one of the points of Marxist criticism, the fact that under capitalism the works have become something interchangeable and empty of content and real value; in the same way that a worker in a factory is one more piece of the productive gear interchangeable by another of the same condition without any kind of consideration; the *artistic commodity* becomes changeable and sterile, and as a product, it is the market with its fluctuation and incessant change that determines and quantifies through the form money the importance of a work: "and we have seen that art for art became art for money" (Plekhanov, 1974, p. 136).

All this produces that works of an importance not comparable to those of the other eras are created (in which, as we pointed out in the introductory chapter, art was also ideological, but with a notable difference, and that is that at this time the artistic work had not yet degenerated to the condition of pure commodity). This transformation coincides with the very corruption of the system, while art is determined by the mode of production, which as in this case, is in an agonizing and terminal phase. To the impotence of the revolutionary artist who is forced to obey at least minimally to the dominant bosses, is added the fact of the strong training that a critic or an artist must have to

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<sup>2</sup> A sharp analysis of the *american way of life* in its relationship with aesthetics, and more specifically in what has been called the *cultural industry*, can be found in Horkheimer & Adorno, pp. 161-205.



carry out his work, something that as a general rule, positions them within the wealthy class, hence most artists throughout history have defended this conception of *art by art*: having assured their living conditions – these being also privileged – there is no need for them to reverse the social order, something that if it becomes a necessity for those who are exploited, forced to sell their labor power, but who due to their condition as workers, are also deprived of the education and training necessary to carry out the task of building a class art, different from the approach to art as a pure *commodity* (cf. Baudrillard, 1997, pp. 73 et seq.).

However, it is important to take into account the historical evolution in relation to social analyses. We cannot reduce everything to economics (as Soviet theorists often did). It is necessary then to accept the complexity of social relations and everything that influences them, such is the case, as we have been arguing, of what refers to the superstructure, a place in which art has a crucial role, and that is that, under the Marxist conception, the difference between man and animals lies in the fact that the human being has the ability to produce the means for his own subsistence through the labor (hence the importance of the economy as the rational organization of production that generates this work); we see again the difference between the Marxist materialist conception and idealistic conceptions, in which the difference between man and animals resides, for example, in the soul. Faced with this for Marx and his followers, man would be a being oriented to *praxis*, to work, and not to the contemplative life. From these antagonistic conceptions of human nature derive conflicting theories of art. The human being, unlike animals, produces independently of their physical needs having a surplus that allows the development of questions related to the sphere of the superstructure: art, religion, philosophy ...

In opposition to contractualist visions, such as those of Rousseau or Hobbes (man before his contact with society as a political organization is, respectively according to these two authors, intrinsically good, or on the contrary, *homo homini lupus*, and to secure his life he needs to create a coercive power that oppresses the low human passions); under Marxism, people do not keep an immovable nature, but are determined by the social environment in which they are framed, and by



the relations of production that are poured into the rest of the facets of reality. Following this line, Egbert points out emphatically:

Since for Marxists progress consists primarily in advancing towards the goal of classless society, it becomes the duty of the Marxist artist to use his art to support progress towards that goal, which will make possible the spiritual self-regeneration of man, accompanied by material abundance. Art is useful to help progress beyond class conflicts, which throughout known history have been so consciously expressed by politics, reaching their culmination in bourgeois politics. Economics is the key to such class conflicts. (Egbert, 1968, p. 97).

However, continuing the above, this predominance of the material base over the immaterial part of society cannot be understood as a kind of determinism that prevents transcending the established; far from it, we must understand the transformative power of art (hence its importance) and the need to imprint on the forms of consciousness through it, the seed of change; Something that the Soviet revolutionaries understood as indispensable, who once took power, taking over the means and the power that the state possesses, carried out a program of artistic propaganda in whose background resided the revolutionary ideas that gave fruit to the -literally called- *dictatorship of the proletariat*.

A proof of this is the interest of the Soviet government in the, known after the revolution as *the Russian Academy of Arts*, where thanks to state patronage a large number of artists were formed who aimed at transmitting the revolutionary message to the masses, carrying out an apologetic work of the ideals of the Soviet state. The influence of ideology on art seeped into all its manifestations. We will mention the following names as representative of Soviet art:

In music, Dmitri Shostakovich, with his symphonies 5th and 7th. In sculpture to the *Worker and kolkhoziana* of Vera Mujina (it is to point out the presence of women within the Soviet artistic production). In architecture to *Gagarin Square* (in honor of the homonymous Soviet astronaut). In literature the numerous works of Gorky, among which we could highlight *The Mother*. In painting, portraits of leaders stand out, such as isaak Brodski's Portrait of *Lenin*.



The aforementioned works stand out for the inseparable relationship between form and content. Faced with the methodological individualism of the artist, which we could trace already in classical Greece with the well-known phrase of the sophist Protagoras: "man is the measure of all things, of those who are in so far as they are, and of those who are in so far as they are not"; there is no doubt about the tension between the two visions, which we will call *the bourgeois conception of art* at the risk of this being anachronistic by basing its origin already on the Greece of the sophists and philosophers; and the proletarian conception of art insofar as it seeks to reverse the existing order of things and accepts the relationship of art and politics (using this shallow contrast for exhibition purposes).

The position of the artist, under what we have called *the bourgeois conception of art*, is marked by a strong individualism both thematically and methodologically. The artist is conceived as a *creative genius* endowed with a series of exceptional qualities that in many cases are explained in an almost mystical way – the use of the concept "genius" is not accidental – which produces the veneration of it. This privileged position of the creator of art predominant from Modernity, breaks in a certain way with previous times in which, as in Antiquity, the artist was little more than an artisan; or the Middle Ages, in which art had essentially a pedagogical and propagandistic objective, namely, to teach religious precepts and increase faith, so much so that, on many occasions, at this time not even the authorship of the works is known. This radical paradigm shift is not accidental, and following the Marxist line of argument, it can be explained by attending to the parameters that gave rise to the passage between *slave*, *feudal*, and *capitalist* societies<sup>3</sup> respectively, these being mainly the economy and politics.

Alienation, for Marx, would be less strong in feudalism, since under this economic form the exploited class (the feudal serf) works a part of its time for the maintenance of its own existence and another part for its lord, both being well differentiated. This occurs in reverse in the other two modes of production, the slaveholder and the capitalist; since in the first it seems that the slave works only

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<sup>3</sup> To put it this way, with the classic distinction between the different most important modes of production, exposed by Engels and that will serve as a reference to the whole *historical materialism* posterior: cfr. Engels, 1986, pp.152-190.



for his owner, something that is not so since he is responsible for providing the exploited with minimums with which he can survive. In capitalism, however, there is an imposture based on the belief on the part of the proletariat that everything he works and produces is remunerated in the form of a wage, something that, according to the notion of *surplus value*, is manifestly false. This supposed freedom and justice within capitalism, "contaminates" so to speak, the artist, who feels free and untethered when it comes to manifesting his *genius*, which no longer has to be subject to the dispositions of a master or to what religious dogmas dictate. Art is therefore proposed as pure entertainment, an *end in itself* that has no other pretension than to move the sensitivity of the viewer and express freely what the artist has desired.

Undoubtedly, these ideas are rejected by Marxist theories of art, labeling them as sickly:

[...] with the current social conditions, the theory of art for art's sake does not produce very tasty fruits. The extreme individualism of the epoch of bourgeois decadence closes to artists all sources of true inspiration. It leaves them blind to what happens in social life, and condemns them to the sterile barahúnda of their empty personal impressions and their sickly and fantastic fictions. (Plekhanov, 1974, p. 77).

The artist, in the USSR, far from possessing a divine halo that elevates him above the rest of mortals; he is one more person who, through his work, aims to propagate and maintain the message of the Revolution – in this case that of October – in the same way as any other member of socialist society. Everything would be oriented to the end that we have just mentioned, in such a way that the kolkhozian (or peasant) worked in the farms and fields to ensure the subsistence of the people; the factory worker contributed to the strengthening of heavy industry; and the artist with his work expanded the message and ideological ideas. We see how all the work of society is oriented towards the same end, and how the different parts that make up this productive *whole* are not constituted in an isolated and disconnected way, but are developed in view of that final objective.

The conception of art and the artist as a fundamental part of the social gear in countries with Marxist influences is total, something that is demonstrated when we observe the theme of the works



(developed of course in centers subsidized by the state, as we have mentioned above), in which images of strong and virile men predominate as in the case of metalworkers, that try to convey a sense of strength, for example. The form and content of the works denotes a strong realistic character, but not a simple realism, such as that initiated by authors such as Delacroix or Courbet, in whose works a reality with which many of these artists are not satisfied is raised in an aseptic way. It is true that in the simple fact of describing a decadent society like that of its time, there is already a certain germ of criticism towards what surrounds them; but this remains an art for the social class that produces it, namely the bourgeoisie; that with a certain resignation describes what he is involved in, projecting in the works all the ideological burdens that surround the artist, so he faces a clear impotence when it comes to reversing in order of existing things.

*Socialist realism*, the predominant movement in the USSR and of which we have already pointed out certain characteristics before; it is a leap with respect to the previous type of realism. This new movement is no longer satisfied with describing reality under a certain air of pessimism and discontent; far from this, *socialist realism* has an eminently revolutionary and transformative character, positioning itself under the designs of the state in its struggle for progress and the emancipation of the working class. This nonconformist character derives from the application of Marxist presuppositions to artistic criticism, postulating itself as a valuable tool to propagate class consciousness and convince society of the need for socialism as a continuation of human progress. It is necessary to emphasize the fact that the conception of art in the countries we are dealing with, is recognized and defended in an open way as what we have been saying it is: an enhancer of revolutionary impetus, essential to give meaning to the dialectic and the confrontation against the cracks of bourgeois ideas that were still latent in Russian society, art being the main weapon to win in this struggle, framed within the *ideological struggle* (cf. Piemonte, 2012). In these words of Zhdanov, who is primarily responsible for the control and repression of artists, it can be seen how the Soviets considered art as a central issue and linked to politics:

Thus, the veracity and historical concreteness of artistic representation must be combined with the ideological duty to reform and educate workers in the spirit of socialism. This method





applied to literature and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism. Our Soviet literature is not afraid of accusations of tendentiousness. Yes, Soviet literature is biased, since there is not and cannot be in an age of class struggle a literature other than class literature, biased or falsely apolitical. And I believe that each of our Soviet writers can say to any foolish bourgeois, to any Pharisee, to any bourgeois writer who speaks of the tendentiousness of our literature: Yes, our Soviet literature is biased and we are proud of it, because the object of our tendency is to liberate the workers, all of humanity, of the yoke of capitalist slavery.

[...] Comrades, the proletariat, as in other spheres of material and spiritual culture, is the sole heir to the best of the world's literary heritage. The bourgeoisie squandered its literary heritage, we are obliged to collect it carefully, study it and, once we have critically assimilated it, move further. (cf. Zhadnov, 1934).

Artists who bowed to the demands of the revolution were praised and subsidized (as in the case of Maximo Gorky, who is mentioned in this same speech); but those who opposed them were regarded as enemies of the revolution, with all that this entails.

In conclusion, we could say that, in its theoretical aspect, socialist or *Soviet realism* sought to complete in a certain way a part of thought and philosophy that the fruitful production of Marx and Engels did not come to deal with with sufficient depth – or at least with the rigor they devoted to other subjects – namely, aesthetics and thought on artistic production; but as we have seen, this thought was fundamentally oriented to praxis, to the application of these precepts in the creation of a characteristic type of art, which would serve to strengthen national pride and propagate class consciousness. The critique that many authors opposed to Marxism carry out, is based on characterizing this as a coercive and simplistic art, giving account of this, the need on the part of the artist to abide by parameters set by the political power, which would grant him a limited and not totally free margin of action; added to the costumbrista character that can be seen in some compositions that must be faithful to the real (or rather to the possible, since if they were simply faithful to the real and described the world aseptically, we would fall into a simple *realism*) orienting



themselves in works of easy understanding for the bulk of the people and abandoning that convoluted character, based on the psychologism of "bourgeois art", sometimes indecipherable even for its creator. To distance themselves from these accusations, the defenders of *socialist realism* argue that, precisely, proletarian art can be considered as coercive and simple, but not in the pejorative sense that its adversaries want to grant it, far from it; *socialist realism* fulfills the function for which it is designed, and if at some point it abandons the designs of politics – which is difficult, since, as we are seeing, to a greater or lesser extent all art has ideological loopholes, it would also inevitably abandon its revolutionary essence and function.

Art in the Soviet Union represented a genuine proposal, heir to the Marxian postulates, through which it was intended to break with the previous conceptions of art, mostly of a "bourgeois" character; giving rise to a large number of works created *by* and *for* the people. Worthy of criticism is, of course, the repression against authors who sought to depart from the canons established by the great Soviet state; but this sad fact is perhaps, as we have seen, an inseparable characteristic of those theories that do not covertly conceive art as *a pure* ideological tool and not as *a pure* recreation of the senses.

### **Art and fascism.**

The fact that the title of this third and final section, *art and fascism*, is in the plural, is no coincidence. Saving the distances that, without a doubt, are several, we can encompass the different movements of the extreme right that hit the Europe of the twentieth century under the label of *fascisms*, each of them having differentiating peculiarities in the territories in which they settled: Mussolini's Italy, Nazi Germany, Francoist Spain or Szálasi's Hungary.

It would be interesting to compare the differences and similarities between one country and the other, but this would transcend the pretension of this article, so we will focus on the two most powerful fascisms, namely the Italian and the German.



As we mentioned at the beginning, the best way to defend the union between art and politics is to raise the similarities that connect the two main ideological antagonists of the twentieth century, fascism and socialism.

If socialist aesthetics were fundamentally based on Marx's theoretical approaches, fascism will use the *avant-garde* to build its base; thus, Marinetti's *futurism* will arouse enormous interest in Italy at the beginning of the century, together with the proletarianization of the masses and a sensationalist discourse (cf. Benjamin, 2008, p. 44). We see how, despite the fact that the avant-garde was postulated as a rupture against the previous formalisms, presenting a turning point with respect to the previous one, these could be deeply reactionary. Today it may be strange to us the triumph of an art based on violence and destruction, but if we contemplate the context in which this movement develops, we will realize that an aesthetic that is born in such a convulsive time, could not have very different characteristics from those of Futurism. The exit of a century as changing as the nineteenth century, added to the continuous war conflicts that shook Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century, led to an environment of insecurity and continuous violence, a perfect breeding ground – as we well know – for the explosion of the most fervent chauvinism and the most reactionary right; to which we must add the development, never before achieved by technology and science, debtors even of the Second Industrial Revolution. Therefore, the framework conducive to full confidence in the manufacture and reproduction of reality was established, having man as owner and lord of it, without nature keeping any hidden fold (which, curiously, the most iconic of the philosophers sympathetic to Nazism will point out, Martin Heidegger). Here begins a victorious era of *scientism*, the ascent of man to heaven (or rather his proclamation as God on earth) through technology and domination; whose artistic crystallization will be seen in the aesthetics of fascisms, with terrible consequences that make us doubt any hint of humanity in man himself, and that is that when we think of the regimes of the extreme right during the twentieth century, it is impossible that the famous Adornian idea that making poetry after Auschwitz is impossible (or at the very least, constitutes an act of barbarism) does not come to mind.



The artistic essence of these movements is provocative, something that can be seen, to begin with, in the eccentric personality of their representatives, added to the transience of the different tendencies, which at most lasted a few years. Another characteristic of these cutting-edge ideas is expressed in the very etymology of the term, namely *avant-garde*, basically referring to the first groups of soldiers who faced their adversaries in a battle: the *vanguard*. The origin of the term is not accidental either, and in it we can see the war burden that these movements will have, especially futurism, characterized by the apology of violence as a letter of introduction (Matthew, 2019). Perhaps, one of the peculiarities of *Futurism* with respect to the rest of the *isms*, was precisely its marked chauvinist character, which can be seen in the founding pamphlet of this, in which Marinetti, after outlining his eleven central points, affirms:

We launched in Italy this manifesto of heroic violence and incendiary incentives, because we want to free it from its gangrene of teachers, archaeologists and cicerons. Italy has long been the market for chalanés. We want to rid her of the countless museums that cover her from countless cemeteries. Museums, cemeteries! So identical in their sinister bending of bodies that they are indistinguishable! Public dormitories where you always sleep next to hated or unknown beings. Reciprocal ferocity of painters and sculptors killing each other with strokes of line and color in the same museum. That they are visited every year as one who goes to visit their dead we will come to justify it!... That flowers are laid once a year at the foot of the Mona Lisa we also conceive it!... But going for a daily walk to the museums, our sorrows, our fragile disappointments, our anger or our restlessness, we do not admit it! (Marinetti, 1909).

Attention is drawn to the incendiary language that is used, full of exclamations and violent rhetoric, which undoubtedly fits perfectly with Mussolini's professed idea of art. Thus, we will see a virile art, based on strength, speed and technology; Key points of fascism, hence this ideology had the recognition of many Italian artists, who saw in Mussolini the materialization of his concept of force. The impetus of fascism was thus reinforced by an art of these characteristics, whose main aim was to break with the established conventions, with the proportion and rigidity of the previous society, to



build something new. Undoubtedly, to build you must first destroy, annihilate; and in that it was based on fascism, which, in its Italian side, appropriated the image of the machine as a fetish symbol. In this way the unstoppable industrial and mechanical progress became the bulwark of an ideology that exalted the virtues of the Italian people, going back to the glorious Rome; and trying to recover this past glory at all costs (as was indeed proven later). The importance that *Italian fascism* gave to social life was very important, and one can even speak of a "*conservative revolution as fascism*" (cf. Farías, 2010, pp. 203 et seq.). In this way, ideological propaganda was used by other mechanisms for its dissemination in addition to those of art itself. An attempt was made to unite Italians around a common feeling, a difficult task considering that it was in this same territory, in which only a few decades before Massimo d'Azeglio pronounced the famous words that account for this problem: "We have made Italy; now we must make Italians." There is a glimpse again of the fact that art is a means to facilitate a greater end, and not an end in itself; in this case art serves as cement, in a certain way as a agglutinator of a series of common values that penetrate the collective imagination and produce the union between the different peoples that in this case make up Italy. Within the painting of Fascist Italy, the author Carlo Carrá stands out, and in terms of literary production we could mention Marinetti himself. The works of both authors are characterized by the strength and liveliness that we mentioned before, being oriented towards the exaltation of the homeland and the idea of the superiority of Italy over the rest of the nations.

Turning now to analyze the interesting aesthetics in Nazi Germany, we must point out something that sometimes passes for anecdotal, and perhaps not: the frustrated attempts of the young Hitler to be a painter. As is known, Hitler tried to enter the Academy of Fine Arts in his native Vienna repeatedly, always receiving a refusal for an answer; which made him a frustrated painter (although we must recognize the beauty of his paintings, in which landscapes and representations of cities, buildings and streets abound); a predilection for the plastic arts that added to the transformative power of art in minds; explains his deference to them and the importance they had in the social life of Germany during its National Socialist period.



It is paradoxical the union that some critics establish between National Socialist art and *kitsch*, as we read:

Kitsch is thus the link between Nazism and the other Western political solutions that have also been generated by the capitalist order. [...] Just as Nazi aesthetics are encompassed within Western kitsch, Nazism is part of the arc of ideological possibilities inherent in modern capitalism. (Rusiñol, 1978, p. 26).

Nazi art, similar in this point to Italian, aims to exalt national values; these works <sup>4</sup>are therefore examples of patriotism, and not of goodness" (González, 2008, p. 158) creating the fiction of racial superiority, the prevalence of the Aryan race over the rest of the races; so it ultimately represents a destructive and hateful message. The connection with Soviet art is presented through the voracious criticism of contemporary aesthetics, even cataloging it as *degenerate art* (*Entartete Kunst*), and choosing as favorite themes the traditional situations always peppered with a strong chauvinist character; thus we can find ourselves in the field of painting, works in which heroic soldiers are observed giving their lives for the homeland (*Comrades in Arms*, R. Rudolph), muscular feverish workers (*In the Laminar*, A. Kamf), numerous compositions dedicated to the high officials of the party (*Portrait of the Führer*, F. Erler); or formal women (*Future Mother*, A. Ressel); being another of the characteristics of Nazi art the role of women, portrayed as an exemplary, demure and serene mother, different from the image of this in Soviet *realism*, where the proletarian presented herself as a companion of the man who worked side by side with him to continue the revolutionary struggle, whether in the domestic sphere, in productive work or on the front lines itself. To the main characteristics of this *heroic realism* mentioned above, we can therefore add the subordination of women to men, with a marked macho character that would present them simply as a housewife, limited to the good education of future generations. The bellicose accent is again demonstrated in the other great motto of National Socialist art, namely the defense of the values of blood and soil (*Blut und Boden*) by which hatred is promulgated towards basically all races other than the Aryan: blacks,

<sup>4</sup> Usually referred to as *heroic realism*.



Slavs, and as is well known, especially Jews; and the need to dig with them for a matter of "purity" (cf. Farias, 2010, pp. 81-117). Art undoubtedly, because of how artists related to the regime knew how to introduce these ideas into their works, was able to sow in the minds of the cultured German society the germ of the deepest and most atrocious intolerance.

As for other artistic forms such as cinema or music, they focused on similar ends of what painting professed, to propagate the message of German superiority and hatred towards the "impure races", while in the field of architecture a sober and proportionate construction was encouraged, proof of this is, for example, the *Nuremberg Congress Hall*.

The repression against artists who did not conform to the Third Reich was more powerful than that which took place in the USSR, since, to the repression itself for ideological reasons, racial pressures were added, in such a way that anyone who was opposed to Nazism or who belonged to one of these inferior races, he saw himself fleeing the Bavarian country to preserve his life; counting the departure of artists, thinkers and intellectuals of great renown by the dozens.

Within Nazi art, there are authors who point out the alienation and deception that through it was done to the masses, such is the case of Hinz, who maintains the following:

National Socialist art, which is addressed with a passionate appeal to the people, demonstrates once again how much it despises them and how they laugh at them. In fact, if modern art had been accused of dispensing with the masses in favor of a refined dilettantism of "uprooted" individuals, for its part, the Nazi allegorical and historical-mythological configuration, in the last extreme, only finds its insertion in the limited cultural environment of the dominant group. The ambitious large-format staging of an impenetrable and inaccessible theme, do not allow to reveal another "call" addressed to the people other than to make sure of their own "stupidity" and feel intimidated. (Hinz, 1978, p. 265).

These lines are clearly positioned against the idea of *art for art's sake*, holding a thesis close to that of *ideological art* while this art alienates, "dumbs down" the masses by introducing ideas as radical





and erroneous as the defense of the superiority of one race over others, based on a non-existent mythical story, whereas it is still one more way of justifying, on the one hand, the hatred and anti-Semitic barbarism of a group, which through means of dissemination such as propaganda or art made this series of ideas accept as their own to the German society of the time; and on the other the expansionist interests of the German empire, the Third Reich that sought to dominate all of Europe, justifying this Pan-Germanism through, as we see, xenophobia, among other things not much better.

## Conclusion

Already reaching the conclusion of this work, we can say that art is profoundly influenced by elements referring to the framework in which it develops, such as the historical context, the politics of the state in which it is generated, as we emphasized in the first section referring to the Marxist conception of art; for the economy and its future.

It is undeniable, then, that the conception of art as something detached from everything mentioned above, does not have the explanatory capacity to account for the processes that have caused throughout history the transformations in aesthetic paradigms, these causes being knowable by man and that lend themselves to a rational explanation, as long as the influential elements in this production are contemplated correctly.

In addition, we have observed the importance and capacity of works when it comes to transmitting a message, being able even to progressively transform the thinking of the people who receive it. All art is therefore ideological, having either a revolutionary character, in that it contributes to changing society and making it advance in its progress; or under the parameters of reaction and conservation, which seek as in the case of bourgeois artistic production, to propose an art not subject to any other purpose, as a pure delight of the senses and expression of the sensations and ideas of an individualistic creative genius; or, as in the case of art in *fascisms*; although this is conceived as something inseparable from politics and used as a weapon to harangue the masses and expand the message that power seeks to establish having changed before what preceded it, it would also be considered as reactionary art for the simple reason that it is based on hatred and reaction to the



different; it is based on ideals. of justice and equality, and focusing only on obtaining a series of privileges for certain groups at the cost of literally destroying others. Thus, from the thesis that we proposed as nuclear at the beginning of this work, we can get two things clear. The first of these is the affirmation of the very presupposition from which we started, namely, *there is no art detached from the context in which it develops*. And the second would be the distinction between *revolutionary art* and *reactionary art*, although it is true that many critical voices have raised as "part of the same essence" the art developed with totalitarian countries (cf. Horkheimer & Adorno, 2018, p. 161).

The *revolutionary*, in addition to trying to transform the existing order of things, carries out his work in reference to a series of ideals, such as justice, equity, the emancipation of the exploited, etc., thus focusing his actions on the basis of the progress of the human being.

Finally, *reactionary art* has two aspects, being the art that raises the imposture that we have criticized throughout the writing, namely, art does not have to be accountable to anything other than art itself, which as we say, produces a conformism that helps to maintain reality as it is; and finally the art of fascist regimes, that it has an internal contradiction that is expressed in the works themselves, since it seeks to transform to a certain extent (we could say destroy rather than transform) the framework in which it is involved; but at the same time it is articulated around the achievement of totally aberrant and unjust ideals, so that in the end it is also reactionary, in that it does not contribute to human progress.

We will end this writing with a fragment by Walter Benjamin, which perfectly illustrates the tension that we have been pointing out:

Fiuturs, pereat mundus, tells us fascism, and, as Marinetti confesses, expects directly from war the artistic satisfaction that emanates from a renewed sensory perception that is transformed by technique. Such is the end without a doubt the total perfection of l'art pour l'art. Humanity, which once with Homer, was the object of spectacle for the Olympian gods, now and is for itself. Their self-induced alienation thus reaches that degree in which the aestheticization of the politics advocated by fascism lives. And communism responds to him through the politicization of art. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 47) .



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