From the «Black Square» to the «Black Mirror»: Contemporary Art in Search of Light

Elena E. Drobysheva*
Vaganova Ballet Academy
St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

Abstract. A hundred years of history of contemporary art, notionally from the picturesque «Black Square» artwork by Malevich (1915) to the British TV series «Black Mirror» by Brooker (2011) and Ruben Östlund's film «The Square» (2017) is in the focus of this study. The aim is to analyze the axiological foundations of modern art. Relevance of the chosen discourse is due, firstly, it's enduring importance, and, secondly, major advances in the Architectonics of Culture – from the latest technologies as a factor of cultural development to mental perversions generated by those technologies. Formal, existential and institutional values are highlighted, basing on analysis of the proposed artworks as main axiological tags in current art practices. The formal ones serve to carry the value of novelty, conformity to modern technological platforms, the second – existential – a hardly compliable mix of tolerance and individuality (in terms of compliance with privacy), the third – values of authentication and multiplicativity. As the result of the study, the conclusion has been made that, despite the ironic pathos of postmodernism, art still remains a search space for new value configurations that represent the actual cultural architectonics.

Keywords: architectonics of culture, axiosphere of culture, irony, post-irony, modern art, contemporary art axiology, «Black Square» by Malevich, Charlie Brooker's «Black Mirror», Ruben Östlund's «The Square».

Research area: theory and history of culture, art.

* Corresponding author E-mail address: lmensch@mail.ru

От «Черного квадрата» до «Черного зеркала»: современное искусство в поисках света

Е.Э. Дробышева

Академия Русского балета имени А.Я. Вагановой
Российская Федерация, Санкт-Петербург

Аннотация. В фокусе исследовательского внимания – сто лет истории современного искусства, условно – от живописной работы «Черный квадрат» Малевича (1915) до британского сериала «Черное зеркало» Брукера (2011) и фильма «Квадрат» Эстлунда (2017). Целью является анализ аксиологических оснований современного искусства. Актуальность избранного дискурса обусловлена, во-первых, его непреходящей значимостью, во-вторых, серьезными подвижками в архитектонике культуры – от новейших технологий как фактора культурного развития до порождаемых ими ментальных перверсий. На основании анализа предложенных произведений в качестве основных аксиомаркеров в области актуальных художественных практик выделены формальные, экзистенциальные и институциональные ценности. К первым предлагается отнести ценности новизны, соответствия современным технологическим платформам, ко вторым – сложно соблюдаемый микст толерантности и индивидуальности (в части соблюдения privacy), к третьим – ценности подлинности и мультипликативности. Делается вывод о том, что, несмотря на иронический пафос постмодерна, искусство все равно остается пространством поисков новых ценностных конфигураций, репрезентирующих актуальную культурную архитектонику.

Ключевые слова: архитектоника культуры, аксиосфера культуры, ирония, постирония, современное искусство, аксиология современного искусства, «Черный квадрат» Малевича, «Черное зеркало» Брукера, «Квадрат» Эстлунда.

Научная специальность: 5.10.1 – теория и история культуры, искусства.

A hundred years of history of contemporary art, which starting point for transcoding in 1915 was a landmark work «Black Square» by Kazimir Malevich, are in focus of our attention in this study. Today, we can talk about new artistic *fin de siecle*, which is most conceptually clearly represent in the British TV series «The Black Mirror» (international premiere took place in 2011) and the Swedish film «The Square» (winner of the Cannes film festival of 2017).

The aim of the study is to analyze the axiological foundations of modern art at the appointed time. Relevance of the chosen discourse is due, firstly, its enduring importance and, secondly, major advances in the architectonics of culture – from the latest technologies as a factor of cultural development to mental perversions generated by those technologies. The main research methods are analytical, comparative and hermeneutical.

If the twentieth century began[1] with *denying, deconstruction* of the values of conditionally «classical» picture of the world, then it ended

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[1] It is believed that the mental beginning of the twentieth century did not coincide with the historical, it is accepted to count from the middle of the second decade of the last century. "It has

in a mood of total ironism that is not trying to approve any of the Constants. Avant-garde art, «subjectively built on the denial» (Herman, 2008: 10), created a system of new artistic codes that open space of permanent (re)interpretations. It is literally required by the viewer/listener/reader to commit to everything going on with the utmost seriousness, ensuring the realization of the avant-garde art futurological message. The «Black Square» by Kazimir Malevich, with which begins a new era begins, is extremely imperative gesture of art. By the Law of Swinging Pendulum, that seriousness on the other end of the path of pendulum's movement transformed into irony as the dominant picture of the postmodern world[2].

The beginning of the present century is the «end of irony». Similarly with the «End of History and the Last Man» by Francis Fukuyama, we should not take this «finitude» literally, we are talking about such a filigree shift of meanings that requires a lot of cultural background to be fully comprehended, which is just what postmodernism possesses, it is the «flesh and blood» of the era itself, functioning as a huge system of hyperlinks, Rhizome transcultural monster. Irony itself, as the most important element of postmodern's axiosphere, is a subject of multiple attempts to be «buried». Alternately, either the «New Seriousness» (Parshikov, 2011), or «New Sincerity» (Prigov, Lipovetsky, 2017), or even the «New Academicism» (Ippolitov, 2011) are proclaimed. But all these attempts are codifying themselves as an ironic gesture of their creators – say, the true «sons» of the era. Sincerity, like authenticity, can be called an axiological tag of any era, and the artist is always responsible for its condition. Speaking of «New Sincerity», the author of the concept, poet Dmitry Prigov «not only the first to infringe on the sanctity of this concept by placing a "sincere" statement of "Dima the Poet" in ironic quotation marks and thus exposing the conventionality of "sincerity" as a special, imitational, rhetorical position. In later texts he considers faith in the "sincerity" as a manifestation of the deep cultural insanity: "Still, in the conversation and ostentatious

statements sincerity of actions is an indulgence to all that experienced and endured. And just as quietly it serves the denial or disregard to all related and unpleasant to remembrance"» (Lipovetsky, 2017).

And, nevertheless, we can say that – even in a post-modern «packaging» – that the desire to overcome the ironic decline of metaphysics bears fruit. «New Sincerity appears when postmodernism seems to be in an exhausted state, – unalienated actuality overcomes the jugglery of citations and styles. On the turn of XX and XXI centuries artists again face with the need to rethink, in the current perspective, the very essence of Man and his place in the world: a game is done, but players remain. One of the consequences new sincerity can be, among others, actualization of traditionalistic topics, aesthetic topics at the first place, following by political, driven by forces of new sincere passionaries» (Desyaterik, 2005). Today we can spot the attempts to introduce the concept of «Meta-Irony» as «an Irony on Post-Irony». But it is important to note that the concept «Meta-Modern» itself, in which new incarnations of irony are possible, yet is only a marginal notes of contemporary socio-cultural architectonics.

Appeal to the topic of the boundaries of personal and social is impossible without reflection on the relationship of the sincerity and the game, authenticity and simulativeness that play an important value-regulatory role in culture in general and in the process of art in particular. These issues among others are formulated and solved by means of art in one of the last decade's controversial series – «Black Mirror» (directed by Charles Brooker, the first series came out in 2011, consists of four seasons and one full-length feature film – the first interactive streaming movie in history). Name (which conceptually rhymes so well with Malevich's painting title) refers to «the effect of black specular reflection of TV and computers shut off – these monsters that subdue the will, time and emotions of their "users". «If technology is a drug – and it does feel like a drug – then what, precisely, are the side-effects? This area – between delight and discomfort – is where Black Mirror, my new drama series, is set. The «Black Mirror» of the title is the one

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long been seen: the century did not begin according to calendar" (Herman 2008: 24).

[2] Read more on this issue: Drobysheva E., 2008.

you'll find on every wall, on every desk, in the palm of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, a smartphone», – says Charles Brooker (Brooker, 2011).

Brooker was "among the first to speak about the need for Digital-detox and informational hygiene" (Furfur, 2011). Dispassionately dissecting modernity from the perspective of its technological component, he, nevertheless, reflects on the fact of his own dependency on gadgets and predicts its scope. «Siri is a creep – a servile arselick with zero self-respect – but he works annoyingly well. Which is why, last week, I experienced that watershed moment: for the first time, I spoke to a handheld device unironically. Not for a laugh, or an experiment, but because I wanted it to help me. So that's that. I can now expect to be talking to machines for the rest of my life. Today it's Siri. Tomorrow it'll be a talking car. The day after that I'll be trading banter with a wisecracking smoothie carton. By the time I'm 70 I'll be holding heartbreaking conversations with synthesized imitations of people I once knew who have subsequently died. Maybe I'll hear their voices in my head. Maybe that's how it'll be» (Brooker, 2011).

Axiological vectors of the project of the Enlightenment, such as values of innovation, progress and confidence in the superiority of Man he Creator over Nature, are subjected to major revision in terms of the ethical component in «Black Mirror» series. The plot of the most shocking series – the first of the first season – clearly built on the moral conflict, but implicitly – about the aesthetic, too. In the final it turns out that all this political and psychological blackmail is also an artistic perspective, as the ideologist of the crime that shocked the British public is Painter. Boundaries of Modern Art is so flexible, allowing incredible breadth of experimentation – both with the plot and the methods of representation, as well as series audience's subsequent hermeneutical procedures, «openness is expressed in the ability to absorb and borrow, and in a deliberate incompleteness» (Menshikov, 2015: 96).

Each part of the series – a separate novella, archetypal, mythological patterns can (and should) be found in the basement of each story.

In addition, in the feature film «Black Mirror: Bandersnatch» (2018), the audience is invited to independently influence the course of events by choosing one of the options. «The movie has five different endings and many story combinations. Creators filmed over three hundred twelve minutes of timing in total, and length of the movie in each case also varies: the passage of "Bandersnatch" takes from forty minutes to one and a half hours» (Voronkov, 2018). Also, to see all the options of the plot is impossible to any spectator: «Altogether, there are over a trillion unique permutations of the story» (Roettgers, 2018). The audience is provided with extreme experiences: «If bad things happen, you'll feel even more crestfallen, because you were responsible», – said Todd Yellin, Netflix's vice president for product. «If the character is victorious, you'll feel even more uplifted because you made that choice» (Streitfeld, 2018).

«The Square», directed by Swedish master Ruben Östlund, became a sensation of the Cannes Film Festival in 2017. It is also logically (and – which is conceptually important – linguistically) fits in the artistic paradigm and the corresponding mental-aesthetic configuration just perfect, the basis of which Malevich formulated a hundred years ago. One of the reviews on the movie says: «This is an ironic portrait of the 2010s, in which the former master of skiing managed to catch the tail of the very essence of the era. "Square" can be put on a par with such major cinema-milestones of 2010s as "The Great Beauty" Paolo Sorrentino or "Tony Erdmann" by Madder Ada» (MoonRiseRey, 2018).

It is significant that the film has evolved from an art project with the same name. In 2014, Östlund and his producer outlined a square that represented a «territory of trust» in one of the Swedish Museum: everyone who entered it thus were calling for help. The director refers, and not for the first time, to the «Genovese syndrome» topic, the so-called «bystander effect» – the emotions that prevent us to come to the aid to those in need, even more so – in public. Provocation, inherent in the story of a seemingly private event in the life of a particular person, extrapolates the problem of moral choice of the person to the axiosphere of modern European culture in general. The idea of

privacy, enhanced by mode of tolerance in the last decades, has firmly established itself as the value of the enlightened world. Ruben Östlund takes this idea to the absurd level, raising a negligible plot from the life of our contemporaries to the level of the parable. After all, respecting the rules of the game in relation to the protection of our or another's privacy, we have (willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously) to turn to the archetypal structures of co-existence, each time to solve the mental code inherent in a particular socio-cultural configuration. Director brilliantly «provokes the stereotypical perception in us to only turn it inside out in the end» (Smolina, 2017: 96).

Contemporary art, in principle, is designed for sophisticated audience with relevant backgrounds – both in philosophical studies and in the field of art practices that represent those studies. Unlike a man in the street entering the space of contemporary art as a discomfort zone, modern intellectuals are not to be scared or shocked neither by form nor by the content of works of art – whether it be literature, painting, film or their synthetic variation. Positive cynicism becomes one of the central pillars of value of this stratum of society that allows to look phenomenologically aloof at the art object, succeeding to isolate the purely aesthetic or conceptual message of the author. But all these psychological and mental tricks are successful only when it does not apply to the recipient personally. The protagonist of «The Square» movie, masterfully getting around underwater stones of morality in his curatorial activities, loses his holism completely when Alien (which refers to both migrants and a beggar – any out-of-place in a glossy world) invades his privacy.

Highly tolerant European society, familiar with Nietzsche and Freud, Deleuze and Kristeva ideas, beautifully shown in the film as scandalous visitors of art event, is ready to detect metaphysical depth in gravel piles scattered over the gallery, but is not able to adequately respond to the aggression by Russian actionist (here we see a transparent reference to Oleg Kulik's performances), whose actions are aimed at dialogue with the chthonic, not with that of aesthetic in the audience. In an interview, Östlund himself ironically assesses the installation in the film as «art-crap» and realistically assess the revolutionary potential of contemporary art: «When Duchamp exhibited a urinal in the museum, he provoked the world. But you can not provoke the world using same techniques. There can be only one "Black Square"! At the time it caused a heated debate, but today there is nothing calling. Contemporary art repeats the same techniques over and over again, becoming quite meaningless» (Östlund, 2017: 143–144).

Cinema belongs to «technical arts» that are «the first to feel the impact of the technological civilization – a civilization in which scientific and technological progress has become the norm and stimulus for spiritual and social development. <…> This process started with a radical reshaping of all tools of expression in the vanguard of modernism and the first half – mid-twentieth century and reached its peak by the end of XX – beginning of XXI century in the ways of creation of fundamentally new ways of creativity» (Mankovskaya, Bychkov, 2011). In this study we focused only on two – the most conceptually close – examples from the field of cinema, and it is obvious that there can be a lot more of them. It must be borne in mind that, thanks to the ever-increasing arsenal of technical tools, cinema, television, video industry has a huge potential impact on the audience, including that on the formation of the actual value pattern.

Returning to the main purpose of our study, I would like to mention that, despite some skepticism in the philosophical community, axiological discourse does not lose its sharpness in the problem field of Socio-Humanism. Researchers are developing a variety of interpretations of the paradigm of value patterns that give an idea of the depth, diversity and intentionality of the processes taking place in society. At one time I proposed my own concept of value grounds of social and cultural architectonic (Drobysheva, 2010). The problem of values in the structure of cultural processes is actively and fruitfully developed by I. Dokuchaev (Dokuchaev, 2009). D. Funtova and C. Sinetskiy, for example, offer to speak of *«the space of cultural values, which the author defines as the social environment limited to a*

conditional frame of time and place defined by a certain set of values. This concept covers cultural mechanisms of transmission and actualization of values through the communication of various social and cultural actors» (Funtova; Sinetskiy, 2018).

It is obvious that the greatest difficulty for axiological discourse is the question of terminological unity. We are talking about different features and characteristics of axiosphere also using our own value paradigms, which is indeed a moment of subjection and what makes discussion much more complicated. When a theorist and an art historian has to interpret the value foundations of artistic activity, the problem is complicated by the emergence of the next levels of subjectivation – firstly Author's, then – Interpreter's (director, choreographer writer, curator), and then the Recipient's (the viewer, reader, listener). N. Goodman says «Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time. Newer or older or alien systems are accounted artificial or unskilled. For a Fifth-Dynasty Egyptian the straightforward way of representing something is not the same as for an eighteenth-century Japanese; and neither way is the same as for an early twentieth-century Englishman» (Goodman, 1968: 36).

Apart from the most general concepts and categories which we have to use (such as «classicism», «postmodern», «realism», «surrealism»), there are many nuances that must be considered in hermeneutic analysis of the art object. «Emphasis on the denotative (representative or descriptive), the exemplificatory ("formal" or "decorative"), and the expressive in the arts varies with art, artist, and work. Sometimes one aspect dominates to the virtual exclusion of the other two; compare Debussy's La Met, Bach's Goldberg Variations, and Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony, for instance; or a Dürer watercolor, a Jackson Pollock painting, and a Soulages lithograph» (Goodman, 1968: 86). In the case of axiological analysis of contemporary art pieces, the process is further complicated by the multiplicative nature of many of those art pieces. Today's art process has project-like nature that involves the development of a whole range of art objects, often created on the basis of dual encoding and requires appropriate interpretation procedures (Menshikov, 2006). For now we only cursorily refer to the mega-art-project «Dau» that requires a separate detailed analysis.

Thus, we can draw the following conclusions. Firstly, it is impossible to talk about axiosphere modern culture without an analysis of value base of current art process as the most efficient and effective representation way/space of architectonic socio-cultural progress. Secondly, as the main axio-tags in the field of artistic practices, we can distinguish the *formal* values of novelty, conformity to modern technology platforms, *existential* – complicated mixture of tolerance and individuality (in terms of respect for privacy), and *institutional* values of identity and is multiplicativity.

Speaking about the challenges faced by the researcher of art of the twentieth century, M. Hermann identifies «one the most serious problems: the simultaneity of the events determining it (*the history of art – E.D.*) the ambiguity of priorities, the vagueness of the dynamics» and offers a certain algorithm to analyze the history of art. According to the author, it is necessary to determine: first, the *direction*, the major motion vector of art process, and secondly – «*individuality of the greatest master*, who became the spokesman of the time and its main artistic qualities», the third – *certain works* that have become «milestones, turning points that open a new vision» (Herman, 2008: 13). For a starting point of the analyzed period, the figure of Kazimir Malevich and his most representative art statement in the form of «Black Square» are fully appropriate. Direction, the main intention of the artistic development of this period is also quite obvious and coincides with the formal novelty value vector. It is immeasurably more difficult to speak the same more or less clear about the main defining points in the art of today. Located directly in the flow of events, one can only point out conceptual coincidences that once will arise in the design of the formulated research puzzle.

Art has always co-temporarily to the era that it represents. «The modern artist is not so much a creator as a discoverer of unprecedent-

ed, in fact – he is the inventor of what had never existed, which penetrates through him into the reality of being» (Gadamer, 1991: 187). Artist is always a bit of an oracle and a victim of his perspicacity. «Abuse and praise» addressed to the art in its entirety – including authors, institutions, traditions – makes no sense by itself, in isolation from a comprehensive analysis of the Time that gave birth to a particular style, language, format of artistic expression. «From time immemorial, art performed the functions of a kind of emotional and intellectual shock absorbers between reality and human consciousness, and in modern times, their role had grown enormously. For example, the "positivist mirror" of the XIX century art was

replaced by "broken mirror" in the twentieth century, and, maybe, even by world-behind-the-looking-glass of Cubism, in which you can see at the same time from different angles, from different perspective and shifted scales a different, unknown reality, which is so difficult to percept» (Herman, 2008: 11). The beginning of the XXI century has not changed this trend and reflected in the «Black Mirror», which would have been impossible without the legendary «Black Square» that recoded artistic process a hundred years ago. In any case – it is the search for light, since, behind any mirror – curved, black or broken – there remains the space of real life of a Person, an immanently metaphysical being.

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