

Alexander Timofeev: The Art of a Balancing Act

Contemporary culture is replete with spatial and psychophysical paradoxes related to its non-linear equilibrium. Its relevant forms reflect a phenomenal harmony which derives from the situation of “hovering in the air” and pausing in between two points of the classical dynamic series within the traditional culture, always in a position “in-between”. This “in-between” state opens a slit for the uninterrupted flow of life to slip away into an exclusive space which is equivalent to clinical death in a metaphysical sense. Few European artists turn to the imagery of this transitional state and the processes occurring there, which cause anxiety and split personality reactions in humans, to the problem of man’s alienation in this world, to that threshold beyond which man “falls out” from this ruinous life.

The art of Alexander Timofeev possesses unique expressiveness as it addresses itself to this strange and elusive phase in the evolution of humanity. His art dissolves in it, as if abandoning its form, in all its visual spontaneity and fullness, one could even say in its total visual potential, while at the same time regaining its form by distancing from its surroundings, regarding the imminent reality from aside and reflecting on it. The artist maximally reveals the entire drama of this phase by resorting to traditional “mise-en-scenes”, employed in literature and the theater; by adjusting his optics he gets a closer look, he focuses and frames them as archetypical cinematic quotations from mystical thrillers. He scrutinizes the presence of this critical point in situations of its formal “absence”: in love scenes, games, banal dialogues between men and women with actual reality looming as a shadow over them.

Outwardly the subjects of Timofeev’s artistic compositions are simple and obvious, but their inner drama invariably implies a mystery. He pictures situations arising in unique intermediary spaces where something is occurring but not yet accomplished, where everything participates in some magic process and its resolution is yet to come, while reality exists in a state of “imminence”. It seems that in the next moment the “Little Prince” from the like-named composition is about to show us his actual intentions and his abilities in this city obviously tired of civilization. He would shed the clothes covering his sacral body and pluck up the courage to take an action, which is essential not only for him personally but also for the energy sustaining him. The moving light behind his back, which is concentrated in its physical density, will change the entire metropolis spread out in the photo-flash in all its evidence with its stone plates, solid buildings and the eternal billboards and banners. This evidence is the ultimately recognizable one, familiar to the last detail in its informational regularity and banality, bringing to mind the situation of Beckett’s characters from his “Waiting for Godot”. It arose in all its details and obviousness in order to disappear for good.

In fact, Timofeev takes on an unprecedented mission as he asks himself a question: what is death in relation to the visual possibilities of artistic culture when life still continues within these illusory limits. Moreover, in this system of coordinates the language of art comes maximally close to cinematic imagery with its immutable attention to detail and its veracity based on instant recognition of visual clichés, classical standards, and the overworked episodes of super-states and super-consciousness. Thanks to these technologies, recognition of the “ultimate event”, where the outline of the abrupt end coincides with the limits of its visual representation, is relieved of any tragic quality and transformed into ideal art, enabling the viewer to experience this limit virtually, as a simulacrum, and thus acquire a “new” experience. Timofeev’s visual philosophy within these optics is absolutely in keeping with the position of Freud, who recognized that “in the sphere of meaning we display that multiplicity of life, of which we have been dreaming. We die with the invented hero and yet we outlive him and find ourselves ready to die with the next hero in the same situation of complete security.”

The artist’s dreams live in the undisclosed silence of the white, in its inner folds, in the blurred human faces, in their unquenched gazes and desires. They surface as recurrent events alerting us to the inexorability of our duties and responsibilities, they signal with the traces of blood on the image and the transparent screen half-concealing the action. Their uncertain reality transpires in the cycle “Requiem” with its intentionally Hollywood-like duets and conflicting clothes – male white and female pink. The dramatic structure of “Requiem” is just as simple as Timofeev’s other “plots”: it belongs in the mass-media genre, but in this simplicity his meanings are revealed to the utmost. There is nothing the artist could add to his portrayal because further he encounters that “zero form” which was so insistently professed by Kazimir Malevich and supported by his disciples, the OBERIU members Daniel Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky: “Towards death, towards death direct your rudder, the poet and poor rider.” Together with this devalued reality seen “for the last time”, revealed and lamented in the “Requiem”, the very reality of our existence will cease – at the moment when the total human presence will emerge into the void.

Without a doubt, in his reflections the artist resorts to the basic mechanisms of Freudian interpretation of dreams, in particular, such processes as “condensation” and “repression” whereby the suppressed desires and anxieties of the dreamer are encoded in the apparent content of the dream. In his compositions, Timofeev has actually created a certain psycho-autobiography by blending elements of his own emotional experiences with iconographic details of a mystical thriller. At the same time, the Freudian motives in his art, and especially the theme of “horror”, are tinged with ironic intonations or Lacan-style reflections, thus restoring the theme of “exclusivity” and “unexpectedness” in everyday life.

However, by observing the limits of life enacted in this ideal world and reproducing them as an invented cinematic quotation, Timofeev affirms human immortality. The artist offers a spectacle to us, a radical show, which is a close approximation of reality. And yet he stays within the bounds of his art in its intellectual interpretation: he does not trespass its limits, thanks to his perfect, absolutely brilliant artistic technique. A personal cinematography is born in this space with the shadows of Rembrandt and Caravaggio, with reminiscences immersed in virtual tragedies which are occurring right before our eyes. This visual investigation of critical points in human psychology and behavior are closely linked to the classical cultural paradigms such as the fantastic theater in Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, the scenic realities of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the super-personal processes described in Gustav Meyrink's and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novels, as well as in Kafka's prose works.

Timofeev regards a work of art as a process as well as a stopped moment. In this phenomenon there is a certain duration which is "condensed and compressed to the point of a dot", to quote Osip Mandelstam. Timofeev's techniques have no intention of making a fetish out of the result of his work, or substantiating it and turning it into an object; on the contrary, he strives to bring out its inner dimensions while safeguarding the genuine meaning of the captured moment. In fact, here the artist's strategy follows Bergson's concept of the world as a "frozen explosion" developing the ideas of the philosophy of catastrophe and the formation of critical masses of the tragic as a premonition of complete transformation of the surrounding world. As we approach this dramatic point, Timofeev's creative method actualizes the already existing principle of avant-garde culture by intensifying its radical nature and accomplishing the effect of "deconstruction" with a perfectly materialized metaphor. The dolls and dummies in the visual theater of Alexander Timofeev, specifically in his famous series "The Story of a Life", based on the game constructions of Max Ernst and Oscar Schlemmer, are subjected to violence by the hero. Its transformed body is viewed as a mechanism and at the same time as a living body capable of reacting to pain, of suffering and feeling pleasure. The life of a doll in this figurative system becomes mysterious and inscrutable, it manifests an existential model for future revived Galateas and Frankensteins who will be able to radically change our civilization. The canonical scene of a sadistic action where a doll is confronted with man's aggression is to be followed by the next act of our Divine Comedy: the Apocalypse that will disclose the universal drama of human history.

Outwardly very composed, Timofeev's creations appear as "caught in the act" situations; they are, as it were, in the state of "imminence" and the drama of paradoxical transformations, they all seem to be on the verge of fulfillment and resolution and, therefore, they are full of mystery and offer variable finales. In their many layers the uniqueness of the works appears as a disruption and a gap between the evident and the notional, between revelation and wondering, where, to quote Theodor Adorno, "a rational critique of the irrational is realized."

In demonstrating an illusion of the obvious the artist undertakes, in fact, to deconstruct the “metaphysics of a presence” and to reveal the hidden mystery behind the development of reality, its constant pauses between events, its expectation of a final action and its very languor. At such moments the space of its visual “critical actions” becomes compressed, creating a sense of suffocation and anxiety while the dramatic focus moves to the forefront, reminiscent of “blow-ups” in Michelangelo Antonioni’s films. Within the context of the project “Letter to Nowhere”, the image of a message received from the “light spaces” of Vermeer becomes a sign of communication between the tragic and the demonic. It exists in its alienated life as a symbol of trauma and possible wounds inflicted on the bodily representations of the ideal and the beautiful.

Working on the formal representation of “totality” while questioning it at the same time with all the artistic means at his disposal, Alexander Timofeev in fact locks horns with the philosophy of totality in all its manifestations: from the ideology of authoritarian human behavior and man’s claims to power over the Other to the practices of aggressive show business. Consequently, artistic imagery obliterates the boundaries between the verbal and the visual, and the thematic aspects of the composition are absorbed by the absolute artistic reality, rejecting narrative components altogether, and thus become reduced to a sign. For all their evidence, the visual aspects in their turn become transformed into a “text”, a hieroglyph, a “message”, which is often interpreted in purely post-modern terms of conceptual strategies, when the viewer can “unpack” the meaning of the work as an endless series of individual comments.

Each composition within this system is based on a certain structure of an allegorical wish carrying specific relationships between allegory and psychoanalysis. Its dramatic energy is capable of transforming uncompromising realism into surrealist metaphysics without resorting to any interferences or shifts. This approach ensures the integrity of the overall artistic message where a purely artistic technique becomes immanent to one’s perception of the world.

Doing away with the romantic taboo on the allegory, the art of Alexander Timofeev thus returns to contemporary culture the notion of the symbol as the creative unconscious, dissolving it in the illusion of a concrete plot and the simulacrum of the described reality. Representing reality as a symbol, which is in turn being embodied in reality, these two strategies carry on a complex conceptual-visual dialogue in search of equilibrium. The artist consistently develops the theme of virtual cinema by realizing a “montage of attractions”, to quote Sergei Eisenstein, by guiding its creative vector towards the chasm that exists between the image and its inner concept, its depiction and the hidden “text”, its empirical and iconological conditions. This deeply personal and also universal gesture recurring in Timofeev’s art represents the unconscious which exists within the absence of form but which acquires it in a paradoxical artistic materialization overloaded with the density of life. Pavel Filonov’s principle of “utmost detailization” is also present in Timofeev’s poetics: it brings out that unconscious as a visible projection which we can see in all the details and parts,

and which we can scrutinize to discover new possible embodiments, combinations and versions. This projection creates a dramatic context and a peculiar rhyme to what has already been singled out and registered by culture, such as the image of a geographical map in the composition “Global Games” (2005), which acclaims the boundless energy of possible shifts, deformations and catastrophes. The five-year-old child against this background, precisely due to his simulated angelic appearance as if he came from a Roman Polanski film, indicates its kinship with “Rosemary’s Child”, as well as the onslaught of the dominance and rule of the destructive trend on earth. This childlike iconology of purity and innocence is crowded out and fully replaced with negative imagery conveyed in simple details such as over-bright lips, cynical poses, and Mephistopheles’ crown-like cap. This child with the mature consciousness of an adult permeated with the immorality of demoniac human post-history is sitting in a chair, not yet a throne, preparing for his imminent rule over the planet Earth. In his culturally significant projects the artist warns us about it, his message is fortunately confined to art, to the same space of “global games” where tragedy is present in virtual forms and can be prevented or lost within the virtual cultural model.

Within the screen projections of his canvases Timofeev’s vision creates very unusual topological constructions. He wants to lead the viewer into the inner layers of his images while adhering to the principle of an open picture. Consequently, the screen becomes a membrane of a kind or a transitory zone enclosing the viewer-participant in the imagery of unrealized dreams and virtual drama. This in-between position of the image with its inner plot makes it possible to combine into a single organism the phenomenon of the split subject described by Jacques Lacan, whereby you simultaneously observe and project yourself onto the Other so that your eye becomes as it were transported into the image. For Timofeev, the process of creating a work of art becomes a “new wave”, similar to that in the cinema, a process of ceaseless movement from within to without and then back inside again, pulsing and embracing the entire surface of the “projection” with its total visual power. His work belongs in the imagery of a proving ground for the latest artistic discoveries: it offers prophecy and warning but never forgets about its genuine artistic nature.

Art in this system of artistic coordinates evolves from the discreteness to the continuity of an event, stretching time inside a film frame as it were and prolonging the montage process of the artistic utterance within the cyclic movement of the project. Its parts are arranged into a dramatic structure telling its own story through a sequence of its inner independent components rather than following the rules of plot-making. Each composition in Timofeev’s current project “Time of Change” preserves its local interest and independence while fully rejecting any literary basis. It acquires an acute social thrust by viewing the world “taken unawares”, and it experiences any random results of this optics as a hidden regularity: thus the name “Time of Change” is consciously associated with the philosophy of the legendary Chinese “Book of

Change". The image of the boy in this picturesque series no longer bears any surrealistic overtones but completely corresponds to the reality of the modern-day teenager while the various concrete details display irrefutable convincingness. However, the documentary aspects of the painting and its apparent "not made by hands" quality informs us about the new state of the age, about the birth of a new world in principle, which is closely and organically connected with the principles of the approaching civilization of the kind asserted by the graffiti manifesto "I Love You". This phrase on the wall behind the boy's back, which is an essential and inseparable part of the overall composition, unites into a single whole our dubious present and concrete vitality of the future.

An artist in the loftiest sense of this word, Timofeev experiences the line, contour, a trace of life, an object or a figure as something that is higher than an outline reproduced in the artistic phenomenon of the composition. He experiences the reality of the visual as his own physical state and his own path towards an object or phenomenon, thus transforming his "curves" into a structure of his personal presence on an existential level, which becomes an action-inspiring visual axis of his life at a given moment. This structure is a venue of constant dying and resurrection where death meets birth. Boris Pasternak said, "Art is forever preoccupied with two things: it ceaselessly muses on death and ceaselessly creates new life. Genuinely great art is that which is called John's Revelation and also that which continues to write it."

These strange and striking stretches of time and culture conceal the secret of Timofeev's art with its inexplicable mission of resurrecting and restoring what has been lost, its reminder of generational continuity, the catastrophes accompanying life, and the absolute impossibility of its annihilation. It seems that the artist knows some secret, some kind of a key to seeing the situations which constitute the great theater of life, which disappear and reappear, forever expanding as if it strives to follow Shakespeare's maxim: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

This art lives in the transitory spaces between past and future, between dream and wakefulness, where reason discards its dubious rights and then comes the moment of revelation, of elusive concord and equilibrium when you become aware of possible unity with the entire being. However, the moment you attempt to concentrate on this glimmering reality it flows off like a wonderful dream, but in the act of disappearance its diaphanous shape will touch your senses, turning them into some mysterious matter, an experience of the impossible with its living vibrant essence, as if a butterfly had left its colorful pollen on your face.

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