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Eric Lusito « After The Wall »

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The photographic discourse that underlies this book is a fundamental one. Its context is illuminated by the words of the French poet Paul Valéry: '*We, civilizations, know today that we are mortal*'. Human worlds and their history are finite.

This was, however, a view that had always been challenged by the Communist Party leaders of the Soviet Union. As a consequence of Marx and Engels, they believed that they were the only ones capable of discovering the secrets of the world's evolution and of its future. Armed with this fundamental conviction they never doubted that they would win the final victory – they were marching with the angels.

This is what Eric Lusito is concerned with when he unearths the triumphal frescos, the mosaics, paintings, posters or sculptures of former military bases. He shows us strong images and powerful slogans. He also enables us to understand the strength and motivational power of these constructs, developed and implemented by Soviet ideologues who had learned from their 'founding fathers' how, through an efficient process of persuasion, to convince the masses to believe in their Utopia.

And so the USSR constructed its own self image and imposed it on itself. It was an image of struggle and of exaltation, one that both celebrated and denounced and in which the leader and his followers were placed in almost theatrical settings. When they appear in the photographs in this book, these settings are within their own enclosed 'stages' – the barracks, military bases and rocket shelters which the photographs reveal to us, and which remained top secret until after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the collapse of the USSR in December 1991.

Lusito approaches his work with the talent of an artist whose way of seeing could be called 'sustained'. In French, the word is quite specific. A dictionary definition would describe it as 'the opposite to something relaxed, irregular or weak; indicating a style that has a certain level of purity and elegance; evoking a language which avoids familiarity; or a colour which is deeper, more saturated; or an effort which speaks of the sustained regularity and constancy of work which is satisfactorily completed.' (*Dictionnaire culturel en langue française*, Robert).



Eric Lusito's work is layered with semiotic richness. There is the aesthetic level, his discovery of tone, light and composition, but one is also struck by his perseverance, and by the compelling nature of his choice of subjects. *'Traces of the Soviet Empire'* – damaged and soiled frescoes, paintings and mosaics – so many abandoned stage sets, tarnished and unused; the remnants of life – sculptures, flags and posters from another time, another space, and another world, now destroyed – faded emblems of an 'ideocracy' whose prophet was Lenin.

Lusito has chosen to take his analysis further, to understand the system and its evolution – the USSR as paradise, hell, purgatory, successively or simultaneously. There is a sensitivity in the work, recording the places and the feeling that they retain; it is a discrete exploration, not something forced on us, and it gets our attention; the interest in symbols, the attraction to emptiness, to things which surprise and provoke and leave a trace which stands out. A trace which must be understood as a sign – a compelling sign. In this collection of photographs Lusito shows two interests which are deeply interwoven: firstly both art as propaganda and propaganda as art in the former Soviet Union; and secondly the ruins and the aesthetic attraction that the act of looking at these ruins provokes in the viewer.

Immediately after the October Revolution, the Soviet regime sought to create its own heroic universe. It was a way to control and shape visions of the world and to establish exemplary models of conduct – ones that would inspire Russian and non-Russian peoples of the former Tsarist Empire. It was to be achieved through writers, musicians, painters and sculptors – 'engineers of souls' – who were to offer their talent to an insatiable power which understood that their inventiveness would magnify the impact of propaganda. And this was to be a symphony of works of all forms, using every type of material – stone, granite, iron, steel, bronze, porcelain or glass; and covering every type of object – from monumental statues dedicated to major revolutionaries and exceptional events down to more humble, everyday items such as the cigarette case.

It was vital to awaken this new society and imbue its members with values and ambitions for which there were no precedents. A strong revolutionary power had to be created and maintained – a *'Brave New World'*. At the core of the system stood *'new man'*, creator and defender of a new universe which would become a model for the entire world. Everything began with the example of the October Revolution and the Civil War, and in turn these had to be given mythical quality. Heroes fabricated in this mould were to serve as exemplary role models in a truly 'Soviet' culture built through the means of absolute will. And so, the persuasive discourse of Bolshevism was based upon a culture of beliefs.

It meant that, in Russia more than anywhere else, the sense of 'reality' would be built on the basis of ideological representations which would be used to organise perceptions, behaviours and conducts. This is why, as the American diplomat and historian George Kennan aptly remarked, the USSR was to be *'more a cause than a country'*.

In this context, propaganda would be treated as being just as intentional and functional as an advertising poster. The Bolshevik's dichotomic and brutal vision was to divide the world into two opposing sides – *'those who are with us; and those who are against us'*. Its aim was to push the masses into action, by instilling a moral belief which would be able to counteract any form of resentment. Here come the heroes, real or manufactured. And so, in one photograph, we see the head of a rather young Lenin, at the back of a vast room, standing out in profile against the red background. In the foreground of the same room a helmeted soldier

appears, painted black. Behind him and dominating him is the red shadow of an ‘exemplary’ soldier, one who is wearing the *boudionovka* – the felt hat of the Civil War – something which would have been recognisable at first glance.

The hero comes face to face with an anti-hero, generally a hero who has been rejected, a deposed demi-god, like those in mythical stories of the origins of the world. The anti-hero will reveal his nature, a negative one, and, because the heroes themselves can be defined in opposition to this, they will become even more elevated. This is why whenever the denunciation of the anti-hero is represented, in a poster or a caricature, it has to be done with strength and clarity. To follow the advice of Vladimir Maiakovski in his poem *The Fourth International* it has to ‘whistle like a whip’.

Paradoxically, following the collapse of the USSR, what we find in the former Soviet Republics is that the quasi-religious representations of Lenin and his followers – those of ‘*God the father*’ and the ‘*saints*’ – have become forsaken, tarnished, and soiled. They now take the place of the former anti-heroes. As for the temples of war, built and worshipped by the regime, they are now abandoned, plundered and doomed. Captured by the camera of Eric Lusito, the rubble that remains has become transformed into ruins – the traces left behind. From that moment the anti-hero phase has unwillingly begun.

For those artists who were permeated by Soviet ideology, the words of the French philosopher, art critic and writer Denis Diderot, are very apt: ‘*What does it mean to create beauty if there is no idea behind it?*’. Diderot was one of the great ideologists who inspired the French Revolution of 1789; but he didn’t act or think simply on the basis of a rigorous utopia. For thinkers of the Enlightenment, all artists had to work out their own vision of the universe, free of any theoretical obligation. The notion of ‘Beauty’ was first of all related to that of individuality and diversity. Marxist theoreticians were to take a stand against these themes ‘of the past’, to impose an art which was to function for the exclusive benefit of the political system. This was also the case in fascist Italy after 1922 and in Nazi Germany from 1933, when these authoritarian one-dimensional regimes strove to tame and enslave art.

In the USSR, the wheel of fortune turned very quickly. In the 1920s, the works of the avant-garde artists ousted those of the ‘bourgeois’ artists. Yet by the mid-1930s both had themselves been discarded and replaced by official works that adopted a stance of ‘*Socialist Realism*’. When the time came for the disappearance of the USSR in 1991, these works were in turn discarded, probably to exorcise the past and to differentiate it from what was to be a radiant future. Both avant-garde and bourgeois artists reappeared.

Yet once again the wheel of fortune was to turn: Putin’s era rehabilitated quite a number of Soviet values and their representations. This is how ‘*Socialist Realism*’ came back into favour, and many works can once again be seen in post-Soviet museums, in Moscow or St Petersburg, in Kiev or in Minsk.

This ‘retrospective irony’ can be found at different levels in the photographs that make up this book. When we are shown the former naval base of Liepaja (Latvia), we see leprous walls, crates and uniforms strewn on the ground, though the immortal motto: ‘*To our fatherland*’ is still visible. The military base of Skrunda (Latvia) is also completely derelict but one of the walls is still decorated with the Soviet slogan: ‘*Victory starts here!*’. The contrast is cruel, if one considers the surrounding reality. One could smile, but for a former soldier or for an old

member of the political elite, it would be a bitter smile. Aren't they the same people we see on the posters or on the negatives scattered on the ground?

And, of course, irony can be unintentional: in the frontispiece photograph we see a much damaged fresco. A soldier seems to emerge from the wall; his hands are pushing forward; he is wearing black gloves; he is like a blind man searching for his way. He could equally be a ghost born out of representations of Russian popular culture, pressing his palms on the invisible wall of glass which separates the two worlds – the world of the past from which he seems to come from, and our inaccessible world.

In the museums of Western Europe, particularly in Germany, works of art of the totalitarian period – German, Italian or Soviet – are now exhibited together. Such exhibitions invite us to reconsider these works and to sharpen our critical mind. But Lusito goes further: he shows us the unknown context – the hidden parts of the former Soviet Union and the power of propaganda.

This is why these photographs are rare – both in themselves and because of what they imply; rare also because the photographer's gaze transforms traces into signs and vestiges into ruins. Eric Lusito's vision then becomes an aesthetic one. He helps us to understand that, in Russia as elsewhere, ruins are the expression of profound changes in time and in history. This attraction, this taste for ruins has a long history. Born with the Renaissance, it emerged again at the end of the 18th century and flourished with the rise of Romanticism. It is now an essential part of our historical consciousness. We find it again here, all the better because we are made aware that ruins and their beauty are the result of a rupture – a break between a theological and allegorical approach to history (that of the Bolsheviks) and a secular perspective which conforms to the biological model of nature's cycle – that of growth and decay.

This is what ruins have to tell us; this is the unifying theme and the strength of this book.

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