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FROM THE GREEK WORLD OF IDEAS TO “NON-FIGURATIVE” THINKING IN THE GRAPHIC ARTS

SUMMARY. This paper makes an attempt to review the genesis of non-figurative art in respect to aesthetic anthropology. Analysis of “non-figurative features” as an artistic method is viewed in dynamics of development from the “solid” Greek world of ideas to the current non-figurative manifestations of the graphic activity. Aesthetic-anthropological approach makes it possible to analyse particular tones of non-figurative art as a dialogue of “visible” and “invisible”, “audible” and “inaudible”, to explicate diversified relation to all complexes of a piece of art in a flexible manner.

The notion of “non-figurative art” is usually identified with the abstract or non-objective art. This identity has to be explained. A figure is a random set of points on the plane. A point, line, segment, triangle, circle, square, and so on are examples of plane geometric figures. All abstract pictures, created since the beginning of the 20th century consist of geometric figures. It is a paradox, but geometrical abstraction appears to be non-figurative “figurative” art. Extensional geometric shapes situated in the space used to be called not figures but “geometrical solids”. In this sense the Realist style of painting, sculpture, and architecture should be called “solid”. Postulates of Euclidean geometry are called theorems, because to attain their truth it is necessary to perceive an image not with mere sensuous eyesight, but with the “eyes of reason”. Any image to a theorem presents an idea embodied by the Greeks: we can see a figure, but we reason and make conclusions about all the figures of the same type. These conclusions have a practical sense. An artist working in “the objectless trend”, from the practical point of view is absolutely useless. Having this in mind, the artist tries to rehabilitate “higher” destination of art and proclaims the right for updated spirituality, which is implemented into the programme of “non-figurative art”. When the photography was introduced, a monopoly of painting over realistic portrayal was gone, liberal-minded artists and spectators understood meaninglessness of that competitive racing. Painting, getting rid of camera obscure, i.e. an illusion of the “solid”, keeps going to the “thought”.

KEY WORDS. Aesthetic anthropology, non-figurative art, idea, embodiment, meaning, image in the art.

The English mathematician and philosopher A. Whitehead believed, not without reason, that the whole philosophy is a detailed commentary to Plato’s ideas. The idea that “modern art derives from the art of the past, without any interruption or jump, and whatever it would come to, it will always be a link in the chain of consistent art development” is not new [1; 10]. “The non-figurative art” of Art-Nouveau

and Postmodernism of the 20th -21st centuries presupposes not so much the well-known art review, but the categories of aesthetic anthropology, proposed by Professor M.N. Shcherbinin. Only in this case we can touch upon the problems of sacredness and regard other concepts of art as some “sacred rite” or “mystery” that include a creative act itself, as well as the future interpretation of the work. Aesthetic-anthropological approach makes it possible to analyse particular tones of non-figurative art as a dialogue of “visible” and “invisible”, “audible” and “inaudible”. It expresses diversified relation to all complexes of a piece of art in a flexible manner. Methods of aesthetic anthropology allow us to regard authorial contexts of artists, or, speaking metaphorically, to enter into a sacred “cave of symbols”. Once again, we can anthropologically and aesthetically follow the creative paths, styles, trends and “schools” that gave the cue and formed the basis of a seemingly distinctive outlook of an artist, becoming his personal “philosophy”. In social terms, art is far more anthropological, “because it is written by a man, for a man, about a man, and from the perspective of a man” [2; 100].

The immanent concept of “non-figurative art” is identified with abstract or non-objective art. In our opinion this is not entirely true. Figure (flatness, form, and shape of an object) is a random set of points on the plane. A point, line, segment, ray, triangle, circle, square and so on — all are the examples of plane geometric figures, and all abstract pictures created since the beginning of the 20th century just consist of them or of shapes similar to them. It turns out that geometric abstraction is non-figurative “figurative” art. As for extensional geometric shapes situated in the space, they are called not figures, but “geometrical solids”.

In the semantic perspective, realistic painting, sculpture and architecture should be more correctly called “physical”. Apparently, the concepts of “figurative” and “non-figurative” entail a different meaning. Indeed, postulates of Euclidean geometry are called theorems because to attain their truth it is necessary to perceive an image not with mere sensuous eyesight, but with the “eyes of reason” [3; 7]. Any image to a theorem presents a great idea embodied by the Greeks, as we can see this or that figure, but at the same time we reason and make thoughtful conclusions about all the figures of the same type.

Creativity of an artist working in “the objectless trend” is absolutely useless from the practical point of view, and therefore “meaningless”. In these circumstances, willingly or unwillingly, the artist believes that one of his objectives is to rehabilitate “higher” mission of art. It is the essence of an integrated system, “the law of the Universe — the hidden foundation of the “visible” and “invisible” reality.” It is manifested as a system of geometrically signed architectonic codes that define the interaction of space and shape, of surface and texture, of colour and light.

At the “non-figurative” level the ideograms of regular geometric figures or vague formless shapes become inseparable with interior meanings, as the Spirit and the Cosmos. The form is incomplete, but there is a preperception of the image, of the archetype, hiding in the darkness of the unconscious until a certain time. However, a well-prepared recipient, on reaching depths of the unconscious, “carries out recogni-

tion” and manifestation of meanings, “structuring” the iconic “ritual” of the artist from the inside. The basis of each of these aesthetic manifestations is a search of concurrence between the sense of desired preperception and the definiteness of the found sense. This recognition, in other words, “exfoliation”, is similar to “archaeological excavation” of other artistic images, buried under the “lava of materialism”. These “excavations” are particularly difficult in the mentality of Russian Christianity: even God incarnated into human forever. In a sense, Christianity can be called a religion of sacred corporeal materialism. As for the artists of non-figurative art, you first need to find “their” abstract non-objective combinations and outlines of figures embodied on the plane, and then render them into the extensional “body” of sense. Recognition of meaning is a sign of completeness of works of non-figurative art, a sign of its quality. If there is no recognition of a meaning embedded deep in the shape, then the worst possible criteria of the art review are chosen, the one proposed by the ancient Greeks: “beautiful — ugly”. Indeed, engraved in marble and not carrying any traits of personality, beautiful bodies of ephebes and hetaeras have become the standard of the divine perfect body in sculpture, painting, music and literature. V.A. Podoroga wrote about the appearance of “images of ideal body canons” in the ancient world [4; 58]. The sculpture “Doryphoros” by Polykleitos is considered to be its standard, as its rhythmic composition is based on the principle of contraposto. Forms of statues are repeated in most works of European sculptors and painters of realistic (“corporeal”) execution until the present day.

“Procrustean bed” is the principle of “embodiment” for those who experiment with non-figurative plastic shape-forming. Hypothetically, the emergence of Lobachevsky’s “non-Euclidean geometry” also played a role in the formation of non-figurative art. N.I. Lobachevsky called it “imaginary geometry”; it was he who first proposed it not as a “game of mind”, but as a possible theory of spatial relationship in the depiction of the world around.

Plastic language of the artist working in “the objectless trend” is often similar to pre-antique, primitive, especially in brevity and linear patterns.

This superficial resemblance definitely misleads some people, but it is a guide in art for others. In rendering constantly changing, unpredictable spiritual and material nature of man there is a growing discrepancy between the qualities of “solid body” and “plane figure”. Art is perceived as a way of dealing with “the cherished hearth of prototypes, with the boiling power of protolinguistic origin” [5; 30]. We deliberately do not use the term “abstract art”, since the latter is the part of what is called “non-figurative”. World of points, planes and lines is certainly abstracted from mimesis, as an artist working in this direction is also abstracted from the problem of dual exposition of the phenomenal world (“dual” here means a shift from the projection of a solid body to a plane figure, and from the plane figure — to the illusion of a solid body). More information about “duality” will be given below. The artist “designs a sign-born image of the world by constructing a symbologram in which crossing of all with everything is hidden” [5; 30]. This is not a completely “non-objective” art, as an “idea” is the main “subject” of creativity. According to Plato, the essence of

things is enclosed in “eidos”, the disembodied, non-sensuous forms, which are comprehensible only by mind and consciousness.

As noted above, sometimes non-figurative art can be “figurative”, as silhouettes of “non-figurative” figures can be presented on the canvas as sharp or blurred, perfectly plane or textured, fixed or dynamic. They ideally exist in non-Euclidean world overcoming gravity and bodyweight. Thus, the artist creates a space-time structure, existential space of composite design, the “mirror-world” of nonlinear logic.

Greek “corporeal” art had two objectives: to eternalize the ideal image (of an Olympian) while alive, so that poleis could be proud of the glorious citizen, and to perpetuate the cosmopolitan sculptor. In both cases, the goal pursued was the material one, as it was measured in a certain amount of drachmas. This situation has not changed up to our days. Anticipating cognitive dissonance, we assume that lots of European artists of the 14th -15th centuries were driven by the material goal, in their works they used camera obscura, first with a concave mirror (known in ancient Greece), and later on — camera lucida. Optical illusion allowed putting on the paper plane mechanically precise proportions of real bodies, outlining their shaped silhouette, and then, using colours and tones, rendering the illusion of volume, but this time in the plane of a picture. There was no usage of camera obscura as an idea in Aristotle’s time (the Greeks did not have the notion of lens), but in the time of Caravaggio it was used brilliantly. With the invention of photography, monopoly of painting on realism of depicted images faded away, as the progressive part of artists and viewers realized the futility of “Olympic” race. Painting, free from the lens of camera obscura, that is, from the illusion of a “body” continued its way to a “thought”. Painting has lost its utilitarian functions of the visible world fixation. Photography has assumed this function, and art has received the only way left — an idiosyncratic way, with a wide range of styles, with the way to search for internal meanings.

In subsequent civilizations, unlike the Greek poleis, the artist felt and still feels increasingly unfree. Among the cultural changes connected with the advent of Christianity, one of the most significant of them was associated with the “embodiment”. “A radically new look at human understanding has led to the appearance of the concept of a carnal sin and as a result, to the suppression of human flesh ...” [6; 3]. Ideas of humans who think, and most importantly, who feel, begin to appear during the periods of the New Age and the Enlightenment.

At the same time, social space is penetrated with involution and prohibitions: religious, moral, puritan, ethical, material, ideological. Paul Gauguin once escaped from captivity to “his” Polynesia. An artist of “non-figurative art” is also subjected to the temptation of inner emigration to other existence, as overcoming of boundaries always causes a qualitative and eventual shift, a sense of novelty, combined with overcoming the limits of knowledge. It reminds the romantics’ desire to get away to the world of the unattainable, perfect, transcendental. The only significant difference is that they escaped from the corporeal world to the “dreamland” woven from the “corporeal” material. The downfall of Romanticism showed that there was nowhere else to escape, and maybe for this reason Suprematism, the radical form of abstrac-

tion, the extremely abstracted non-figurative “figurativeness”, appeared in the art. Geometric shapes form asymmetrical compositions, penetrated with internal movement (attraction-repulsion), balanced, creating special energy of a subject, colours, shapes, based on the extreme “economy”, which is a special measure of art, optically helping the figures to overcome gravity and, moreover, to move into special cosmic and mental dimensions. Square is the main and most “economical” primary element of Suprematism. It was the square that revealed signs of human existence: “a black square — “a sign of economy”, red — “a signal of revolution”, white — “a pure action”, “a sign of purity of human creative life” [7; 187].

Nothingness is something beyond understanding and explanation, but simple in perception. According to the author, “the black square is “the last supremacist plane in art, painting, colour, aesthetics that exceeded the boundaries of art” [7; 90]. Reducing materiality, embodiment, image in art to zero, Suprematism leaves only an empty element — a void, a “black hole” as a symbol of infinity. Theoreticians of Suprematism were definitely impressed by the general theory of relativity, the geometric theory of gravitation published by Albert Einstein in the early 20th century. Nevertheless, despite all the complexity of the gravitation theory, “the same primitive components of physical, chemical, biological and social forms of motion” remain expressive means in art [8; 8]. Moreover, Einstein did not overlook one of the most mysterious predictions of the general theory of relativity — the supra-empirical existence of “black holes”. It is appropriate to recall the mystical significance of the “black hole” (cave) for the Greeks. Everything appeared out of the blackness of a cave, all disappeared in the “nether world”. The particular sacred significance was attributed to caves as they were somehow connected with the life of Greek gods. Suprematism can be conventionally regarded as a legacy of this mythological idea.

Art ontologically moves, trudges, sometimes crushes forward to the forms that can be termed as “revelation of the unknown”. Art gradually refuses to depict either extensional forms, or any fundamentals in the field of dual exposition of reality. At the same time, without corporeal forms, these points, lines and shapes of abstract images do not lose features of active “animate” matter. Mondrian’s grid-based symbols appear soon after the evolvement of the “black square”. “There are two ways in which the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art. One is spatial; the other is temporal. In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature” [1; 19]. According to R. Krauss, a flat, two-dimensional grid is a symbol by which art is released from the real three-dimensional measurement. Metricity or rhythmicity of its structure exists within the economical aesthetic concept. Its order is entirely built on aspect ratio, probably according to the rules of the ancient “golden ratio”. “The grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order inherent in them; the relationships in the aesthetic field are shown by the grid to be in a world apart and, with respect to natural objects, to be both prior and final” [1; 20]. Subsequently, the colour leaks all over, squeezes through achromatically graphic obstacle (a grid), becoming “the simple

expression of a complex thought,” transforming into fine art paintings, for example, as in the paintings of M. Rothko. Not even figures, but these spots soar as thought forms, restrained by nothing, into the space of ideal “colour field”.

“Anthropometry” is a separate and very interesting style of non-figurative art. In such a way Yves Klein called his “paintings” created with imprints of women’s bodies on the paper or canvas. The imprinting process itself was assigned an aura of a “mystery”, similar to performances in ancient theaters. According to Y. Klein, these performances symbolized “universal zero-gravity”: imprints from the solid, material bodies were becoming not the mimetic repetitions, but flat images with a completely different intellectual and semantic load. On the one hand, prints of a human body are “picturesque” because of their randomness, and on the other hand, they are documentary by virtue of their origin. Besides, one can observe mental relationship between anthropometry and plaster models of antiquities, which were made in larger numbers than the originals themselves. Despite the triviality of their origin, they both are the semblance of something invisible, but more meaningful. Thus, imprints of anthropometry have a certain ironic allusion to the vast historical area of antiquity, and at the same time, they are artefacts from the category of mass copies, surrogates, reproductions, thus being quite authentic to modernity. “Not the previous values” are subjected to irony “but the very Postmodernism with its ideas of the “death of the author”, “the end of history”, the inherent value of immediate life events” [9; 42]. This duality defines the ambiguity of interpretation and suggests the possibility of a broad discourse within both historical and modern time.

Being transcendent, non-figurative images carry some “physiology”, revealing the “internal” through the “external”. This is the state of space inside existence, transformed into a sense, a “face-to-face” deisis with the mystery of plane-figured silhouette of a spiritual “body”. They are the standard in art for those who set up their mind and senses to a certain “wave”, the reflexion of freedom and responsibility, power and violence, humiliation and suffering. Ideas in the form of abstracted shapes are endowed with vitality of beings and indestructibility of life, they protect the secret from the uninitiated, from the materialists’ corporeal and rational curiosity.

Thus, the unique ancient Greek situation “is not so much connected with appearance of philosophical understanding of the world, but with its continuous further development” [10; 88]. Antiquity appears to be constantly involved in the modern search of world perception, the meaning of life and the meaning of art as an integral and harmonious existence, including the transition from “figurativeness” to “non-figurativeness” of the depicted being. Non-figurative art is an aesthetic phenomenon with deterministic structure. It is not possible to make a comprehensive structural analysis of this phenomenon of graphic art in one article. Problems of transition from “non-figurative” Modernism to “figurative” Postmodernism require separate consideration, as well as the conditions that have made this transition possible.

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