

Alfred Kurella on "The Influence of Decadence" (July 1957)

Abstract

In 1957, the writer and SED cultural functionary Alfred Kurella criticized the fact that Socialist artists had still not made a sufficient break with the theories and forms of the modern visual arts, which he characterized as decadent and marked by decay. As a result, they were failing in their task of creating new, truly Socialist works of art for the culturally interested masses in the GDR.

Source

The Influence of Decadence

[Discussion by Alfred Kurella at the debate evening of the Culture Association in Leipzig, July 1957. Text from the excerpt published in Sonntag.]

It has become fashionable in certain circles of art theorists and artists of the German Democratic Republic to deny decadence outright, or at least dispute that it is a negative, culture-destroying trend. There are already entire chains of arguments that constitute an apologia, a fundamental justification of decadence and of the artistic and cultural phenomena it has produced. These arguments often sound plausible. It is in fact true that at least into the 1920s, great talents of late-bourgeois society, if they found themselves in some kind of opposition to bourgeois society, resorted to the expressive forms furnished by contemporary decadence. In this way, the impression could arise that we were dealing here with a necessary development, that the "new" of our time was to be looked for here. Such attempts to use artistic accomplishments in which a genuine effort at something new employed decadent expressive forms to justify decadence as a whole can only be countered if one makes clear once again what decadence really is. Needless to say, that can only be hinted at here.

The lost 'meaning of life'

Decadence is for us a phenomenon of late-bourgeois development. It describes a spontaneous, anarchic dissolution of the cultural values previously achieved, a dissolution that takes hold of all cultural life as capitalism enters into its imperialist phase. The ruling class of the large capitalist countries is becoming more and more parasitic, whereby a great many of the persons who work merely to serve it are also being seized by this parasitic way of life. The working class sees the onset of a process of intellectual and moral immiseration, in which the dehumanizing effects of capitalist wage labor noted by Marx take on new forms. Both processes are increasingly darkening the human content of life, allowing the animalistic elements of human existence to come to the fore. Everything taken together makes life seem more and more meaningless. The lost "meaning of life" cannot be recovered by way of the old, classical humanism. Only the twist that Marx gave to humanism, the full depth of which is unfortunately not fully understood even by us, allows for a new, forward-pointing perspective on all areas of culture and art.

The impoverishment and emptying of practical life in the imperialistic development is accompanied by a dissolution of forms not only in all the arts, but also in the relationships of people to each other. To justify this entire process of decay, a whole army of theorists is striving to dissolve the classic image of

man, to move the “nocturnal sides,” the animalistic in human nature into focus, to glorify degeneracy and sickness, indeed, to declare them the source of all great achievements, especially in art. Experiments with new forms of art that were originally a protest against the flattening of the art of the satiated bourgeoisie and analytical efforts to recover great forms of art that had been lost became increasingly the expressive forms for a decadent, depressing notion of man as a degenerate, fear-driven creature doomed to failure.

This, in broad strokes, is the phenomenon of late-bourgeois decadence in its expression in the realm of art. That in this very complicated process positive achievements also come about, that sometimes something truly new is created, something that belongs in the column of cultural progress and not decay, does not alter the fact that in decadence we are dealing on the whole with a destructive process hostile to culture, with decay. It is the task of Socialist culture to save the social, intellectual, and cultural life of the nation in question from this destruction, and to restore and carry on the national culture out of the great, unbroken tradition, in the interest of the new social order.

The strata of people who take this decadent art seriously is tiny, if we include all of those who, be they artists or connoisseurs, embrace it because it is “fashionable” and part of the right thing to do. Still, in the large capitalist countries a decisive strata of artists has been taken hold of by decadence, and this has quite dangerous repercussions.

Elfin Dance . . .

For at the same time another process is taking place: thanks to the workers’ movement, thanks to the emergence of Socialist existential relationships in those countries in which Socialism has been victorious politically, new, enormous masses of the working people are being brought into contact with culture, are developing cultural needs, and are being given the material possibilities for satisfying them. For generations, the life of the old ruling class was for them the embodiment of an unattainable happiness, a kind of model. Their ideas about what is beautiful, noble, and pleasant for now still carry the imprint of their previous way of life. Now they have the means and the desire for once to live a “cultivated” life, as well, to hang a nice painting on the wall, to listen to a lovely tune, to read a moving or thrilling book. But what, then, should they do with the works of art that were created under the banner of decadence, in a sphere of life alien to them, a sphere of morbid impulses and sickly needs? And so they end up with Courths-Mahler, with the “Elfin Dance,” with “Weißes Rößl” and “Rastelbinder” or their surrogates, which enterprising “art” producers today furnish them with.

In the studios and rooms of an entire army of young artists – where people often shrug at someone who paints a picture that really shows something – the painted pieces of canvas that nobody is interested in are now accumulating. Sometimes they are even talented pieces, but nearly always fragments, suggestions, somehow non-committal. You cannot fault anyone if he does not decide to buy something like that to hang in his living room for ten or fifteen years. But there are now many people who are making higher cultural demands and who have the money, too, to buy something. What do they do? They purchase one of the countless “Matterhorns” or go to auctions, where they are offered an original copy of “Elfin Dance.”

. . . or Kokoschka

Let us recall a minor scandal that took place back at the five-year anniversary of the Herbert Roth ensemble. There was a student demonstration against the “Rennsteig Song,” a counterdemonstration by workers, and suddenly it seemed like there was only one choice: either Nolde and Kokoschka or Elfin Dance, either Stravinsky or the Rennsteig Song. And that choice occurs every day. Why? Because a large part of our older (but also younger) artists have retained ideas about the arts that block their path to a

solution to the real artistic problems of our times. In the different variations of decadent art they see almost necessary phases of a “modern” development, whereby “modern” is an abstract, purely chronological term. They imagine the artistic process as an uninterrupted flow, where whatever is the latest is also truly the “newest,” the progressive to be affirmed.

Our theorists have not been able to reveal the decaying nature of modern bourgeois art, and to make clear that certain forms of modern art arise as the expressive means of very specific, decaying ideas of man and his future, and cannot be used randomly, disconnected from these ideas, for other feelings, ideas, and thoughts. It is difficult to swim against the “modern” stream in the arts today and to recover the great tradition. It is especially difficult in Germany, in the greater part of which a political restoration is accompanied by an imitative renaissance of earlier phases of decadent art.

The aesthetic of the ugly

The solution to the difficult problems is made completely difficult by the fact that we do too little to counter an attitude that regards realistic art as old hat, looks down disdainfully upon the “crummy taste” of the masses, shrugs at the notion of “traditions,” and in the end becomes demagogically rude if someone speaks of *German* traditions. I think we can speak of growing discrimination against cultural values. Restoring them and developing them further at a higher level is something we as Socialists, as the representatives of the working class and its culture, are called upon and obligated to do, after the bourgeois practically trampled underfoot and theoretically dissolved and “refuted” them. Among the educated, in certain strata of our public opinion, a whole series of snobby things are taken for granted: a painting on which there is something is not a painting. Anyone who considers that a painting knows nothing about art. Melody? Harmony? Fixed compositional forms? – that was back then, modern music has conquered other means. The beautiful as the guiding idea of art? – old hat. The aesthetics of the ugly trumps all.

No concessions!

We have demonstrated that we are by no means the destroyers of traditional order that our opponents have made us out to be. We can lay claim to the old saying: “I have not come to overthrow the law, but to fulfill it,” and we are the ones who, as Thomas Mann says, are “contributing something” that among humanity there be established the kind of order that would once again prepare a ground on which beautiful work can live and have a proper place to fit in. But instead of emphasizing this positive core of our Socialist cultural policy and boldly putting it forward, we have recently been showing far too much willingness to make concessions to the troublesome disciples of decadence among us, and have been granting them positions. Our society contains nothing (except for a few manifestations of decay in genuinely déclassé strata) that would urge our youth in this direction. It has very different needs. Only we are unable to combine the readiness that exists here with our ideal, with the great, strong content of our new life. However, the cause behind this inability lies in part in the fact that all too many who, as artists or as propagandists, could fulfill that mission are infected with snobbishness, are fearful of being seen as conservative, old-fashioned, and unmodern, and who, above all, also have too little confidence in our own strength and know too little about the real, new forces of our reality. It is imperative to point to the danger of growing, decadent influences.

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Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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