INTERVIEW WITH BORIS GROYS

Arvind Rajagopal

Arvind Rajagopal (AR): ‘Material machinery’ and ‘words as weapons’ (Kandinsky), Heidegger’s *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung*, all refer to what is in between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ realms, and they move between ideas of technology and art/religion, which are often distinct - including perhaps in Heidegger’s Question Concerning Technology. Is it possible to say more about the latter work in this context? Ideas of the whole and of purpose are at best latent in discussions of technology, but they emerge more clearly in arguments about art and spirituality.

Boris Groys (BG): Yes, sure, in our time the technological progress is mostly seen as non-teleological – as a process having no beginning and no end. The Communist movement wanted to put this process under control and orient it towards a certain end – the emergence of the Communist society. This society was thought as being a happy society, as a society in which the human beings are materially and spiritually satisfied. So here a certain link becomes established between the technology and human subjectivity: this subjectivity is suffering under Capitalism but satisfied under Communism. Now in his text on technology Heidegger speaks precisely about this link. He does not dare any prediction or prescribes any new teleology. Instead he proposes to see technology in its totality as art. What does it mean? It means precisely that technology becomes to be seen not in terms in its utility but, rather, as indicator of the place of the human subject in the world. If we look at technology as art we can see it as a symptom of a certain human mood, of human *Befindlichkeit*. But Heidegger was, of course, not optimistic. He believed that the progress of technology alienates us from the world, creates the artificial apparatuses of power that produce the illusion of control and prevent us from an access to Being, to danger and mortality.

AR: The question of historical time is raised by Kandinsky in the opening of his essay (art is the child of its time etc) - and hence the shifts from pre WW1 to the interwar to the Cold War, there travel ideas that get inflected by historical circumstance (Kandinsky to Rodtchenko, interwar humanism, to Cold War bipolarity). There is also of course the historical time of your own essay, which is I suppose one of confused post-Communism and more jejune binaries.

BG: Our time remains basically post-Communist one because we still see no new universal project that could substitute the Communist project. We see only competition among particular interests and claims. In the text I wanted to remind the reader of the fact the Communism was only one of the universalist projects of its time. The radical avant-garde art was another example because it wanted to break with all the particular national-cultural identities and create a new art that would be based on what is common to these tradition – the use of line and color. That is why there was always a certain affinity between
Communism and avant-garde – even if the history of relationship between them was tragic. Actually, one can argue that it is precisely this affinity that lead to the tragedy: the relationship between two universalist programs is always much more conflictual than the relationship among different particular interests.

AR: You mention the importance of interwar humanism, and its growth in response to perceptions of technology. In your opinion, how does this fare in the Cold War context? One possible argument is that the west embraces humanism ideologically as a negation of what it thinks Communism stands for, which is an automatization of the spirit.

BG: Well, Humanism is a post-Christian ideology that proclaimed the self-empowerment of man. Man was proclaimed to be the master of his fate who defines the goals and the course of history – and ultimately has to become the Master of the Universe and replace the ‘old God’. In this sense it is Communism that is Humanism because the communists believe in the possibility to put the economic and technological development under the human control. In the West, on the contrary, the old faith into the blind fate reemerged – in the tradition of Greek and Roman antiquity. Man was understood as somebody who has to accommodate to the technological development and economic dynamics – and accept the failure to do so as fateful. The ideology of the West is Nietzschean amor fati.