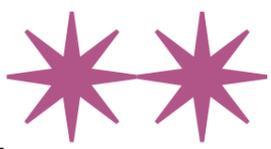




UKRAINE
(IM)MORALITY OF IMPRESSIONS
ADRENALINE
SKELETONS
SONTAG
BAUDRILLARD



DEAR FRIEND,

Did you receive my postcard from Lviv? Sure, we must talk one of these days; sorry to have missed your Messenger call!

My postcard from Ukraine contained only some sardonic joking about how I didn't get killed; I sent it on the last day of my trip. When I think of the postcards you've sent me, the text on them is often very impressionistic: you describe the light, the colours and smells, tastes and sounds around you. Now, if I had to tell you about my journey in terms of sense perceptions and impressions, I would have to use a rather bright palette and, strange as it might seem, words that refer to pleasant sensations. The colour that I associate with my journey the most is bright green: quite obviously, as it was the end of April and the beginning of May, the time of golden light and bright green nature. Chestnuts were not in blossom yet.

As I crossed the Medyka-Shehyni border, my car trunk filled with boxes of tourniquets, elastic bandages and Israeli bandages for the Lviv volunteers, the sky was briefly overcast. Shehyni looked rather melancholy and shabby, although the golden church domes were shining as the sun came out again. But, hey, I was in Ukraine now! In the middle of wide-open green landscapes, driving on a road with strange deep holes in it, stopping occasionally to take photos of road signs wrapped in plastic (to mislead the enemy). It was 60 km to Lviv. Didn't I feel thrilled!

Sensations, perceptions, emotional responses, moods. It wouldn't make much sense to say that they are morally right or wrong. They just occur in our bodies and brains; who could claim that it's not correct to have adrenaline in your blood? No doubt, the thought patterns and ideological frameworks that shape our feelings can be held responsible, they can be interpreted as ethically sensitive or callous. And the way we express or withhold our responses can be judged. Ah, but this excitement! Thinking back to the day when I arrived in Ukraine at war, it appears to me as a cherished memory of spring light, greenness and warmth, and of the (yeah, dopaminergic!) expectation of experiences to come. There was the feeling of doing "the right thing" that writers don't get that often, do they? Just kidding.

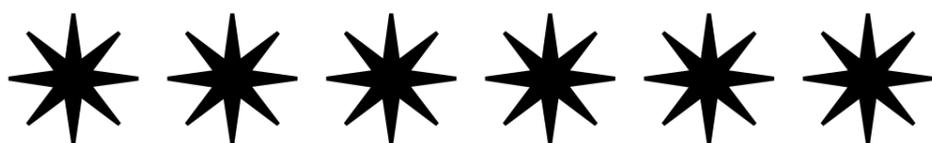
I visited a couple of exhibitions in Lviv. One of them was in the Dzyga Art Centre, titled "The War Hour. Reflections..." which included 200 different works of art on the topic of war. It was an eclectic selection of caricatures and expressionist depictions of trauma. Spontaneously, I preferred the ones that were making harsh jokes about the Russian army and state, cheering people up for the fight. Yes, these absolutely unambiguous images made me happy: the Russian double-headed eagle being pushed into a meat mincer, or the statue of Diana from Lviv's Market Square carrying a FMG-148 Javelin, with the words, "The hunt on the orcs has begun." It wasn't as easy with the pictures that presented Ukraine as a victim. A Russian missile shattering pottery with Ukrainian patterns, for example. No, really, the belligerent images seemed to serve their purpose more. *The purpose*, indeed, while art cannot serve any other ultimate purpose than itself to function as art! Here we are again, back in what Jacques Rancière called the ethical regime of art: in this regime,

art will provide images to bind together the ethos, and images are valued according to their utility. Don't you have the feeling that pure art, the ambivalence of meaning and openness to interpretations have somewhat eroded with the war? As well as the mode of being cool or épatant. It seems that these things can be fully restored only with the victory of Ukraine. Then, there is another phenomenon that has certainly increased during wartime, and that is the aura. Some of these works would have value just because they are *originally Ukrainian*.

One night, while I was comfortably in my hotel bed near the Opera, the photographer Dmitry Kotyuh sent me some photos. One was of a burnt human skeleton with its arms torn off in Makariv, near Kyiv. Who was this guy? Or was it a woman? I don't think I'm very good at discerning the sex of skeletons. If it was someone who defined their sex as "other", no medical expert would ever be able to detect it. It may have been a Russian soldier whose death will never be reported. Susan Sontag says that while narratives explain, photographs haunt. They do indeed. The skeletal guy keeps coming back to me. Touching the skin and flesh of my boyfriend, I find myself thinking about how that guy had his bare ribs spread out like a fan. All the soft tissue that had so much information stored in it, all the tissue that had once experienced the "thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" (sorry for this Shakespeare)—all this was irrevocably gone. Sontag also says that a photograph (of war) gives mixed signals. "Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!" Was this one a spectacle? A remarkable horror show? If it has its ghastly attraction, it's only because we will have to learn. That's the realm of destruction where some people's decisions and others' indecision will take us. It is here. You, yes, you too will have to do something if you don't want to end up like this.

Do you remember how, after the Gulf War, Baudrillard extravagantly said that the war didn't exist but was conjured up by the media? Later on, he talked about "war porn", as if the explicit images of atrocities in Iraq followed the aesthetics of porn. "Due to the prevailing rule of the world of making everything visible, the images, our present-day images, have become substantially pornographic." No such claim has been made about the images of the war in Ukraine. It's too close. Too real to speak of simulacra. The times have changed and Baudrillard is dead.

Well, now, I think we must talk to each other, or I'll get too serious.



HUGS, MAARJA
KANGRO