

Corruption of the Russian intelligentsia

Face-to-face encounter with artist Maxim Kantor, author of a feverish novel about the madness of the 20th century.

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Right at the start, his father is lying on his death-bed in Moscow, while outside in the not too distant world, war rages across the Donbass. Approaching death clears "all unnecessary excess from his face" and he recalls his own "century of extremes". This expression as used by Eric Hobsbawm is fitting as Maxim Kantor, the son in this case, has frequently discussed the most fundamental issues of the day with the noted British historian. In doing so, he has felt how Hobsbawm's dark-humoured prognoses reminded him of his father, who died not in 2014 as in the novel but in 2007.

It is about the rise and fall of communism, Stalin's Great Terror, Hitler, the Second World War, *Perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rule of Oligarchs and the entrance of Putin onto the stage. The reader is similarly guided through the tragedy which befell the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War where his father lost his brothers, as well as the farce of the pro-Russian international volunteer organizations in eastern Ukraine.

The spectre of Mephisto is back

As with his use of colour, Kantor likes to coat history with opulence whereby he occasionally straddles if not exceeds the boundaries to the point of overworking. This is especially so given the fact that his substantial novel - complete with Mephisto figure - also transforms into an extravaganza, leaving the door open to historico-philosophical speculation. The latter is in keeping with the Russian tradition of the essayistic narrative, somewhat evident in Wassili Grossman's novel *Forever Flowing*.

At the invitation of Maxim Kantor and joined by philosopher Vittorio Hösle, I find myself standing before two large-scale paintings; the *Library* and the *Storm* which hang in the Berlin Foreign Affairs Office. The spiraling *Library*, reminiscent of both the Biblical Tower of Babel and the library of Jorge Luis Borges, is brought to life with historical figures such as Plato, Socrates and Kant, but also with literary figures like Don Quixote. In the foreground, Kantor's father studies Goethe's *Faust*. The *Library* appears as both a home and a utopia, but also as a place of hubris.

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In the second painting, *Storm*, where his father again makes an appearance, the ship *Europa* crosses the storm of time. A striking feature is the occasional relief-like, centimeter-thick paint application. The paintings possess a strength that must be absorbed spiritually. In Hösle's view, after numerous breaks in Russian history, it is no coincidence that an artist from Moscow emerges so staunchly in the fight against increasingly vacuous art. The philosopher and the artist have been friends since 1990, when Vittorio Hösle became acquainted with the Soviet intelligentsia shortly before its disappearance. As son of the philosopher Karl Kantor, young Maxim moved within their circle. The philosopher Merab Mamardashvili and the writer Alexander Zinoviev were close friends of his father. They were all outsiders, far away from party and state. Kantor's memories of



Painting and narrative, realism and fantasy, normality and insanity – Maxim Kantor.

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the past have been shaped more by family than by the Soviet, for he was never at the forefront or Komsomol member of the KP youth organization.

His parents had neither newspapers, nor did they own a TV. Maxim grew up with Plato and Shakespeare, Beethoven and Bach. Alongside classical music, there was at most the odd addition of singer-songwriters such as Vladimir Wyssotzki or Alexander Galitsch. "My father imposed media abstinence on me and as revenge on the system. I grew up in a library - that's my home. When my father and his friends talked, it was intellectual fireworks".

But Maxim Kantor also knows about the downsides of this niche intellectual existence. He does not believe that any of the works of the members of this group will survive, not least because no ideas were developed which brought any change to society. Nonetheless, he is grateful to have grown up among individuals who gave him a moral compass, set an example of consistent ethics and as a consequence, aroused and strengthened his resilience. The fact such circles even existed shows that the Soviet Union was no longer a totalitarian state.

How though does Maxim Kantor view today's Russian intellectuals? What connects and what separates them from the old intelligentsia? "The younger generation has rejected the moralism of the Soviet intelligentsia, they wanted to build a new, capitalist-oriented society. If this meant getting your hands dirty, they were more or less indifferent". From the beginning,

he followed this development with a critical eye. "In the nineties a new feudalism was born in Russia. Naturally this was not done in a transparent way but dressed up by saying: *We are building a democracy, an open society*. A small group, no more than a hundred super-rich in number, who knew how to seize hold of the country's wealth, divided up the land among themselves. Life was freer than in the communist barracks, but it sowed the seeds of future fascism."

Kantor's Owl of Minerva does not wait until dusk to fly, but does so in daylight with intuitive perception. In an essay in 1991, in the light of Gorbachev's failure, he already warned that what was growing in Russia was "driven by the call of blood, and it demands blood. It has been lying dormant under the ideologised consciousness and is now coming out into the light. It is similar to what happened in Germany in the thirties."

Double game of the Oligarchs

But why did only so few take this on board? "The intellectuals work for oligarchs who all compete with each other. They earned way more than they did in communist times. Their job was to prevent communism from returning. It was the oligarchs who financed the critique of the past, of Marxism, of Stalin, of the Gulag. A large number of intellectuals had been working on it anyway; after all, it had just been banned. And many did it well". At the same time, new injustices were taking place in Russia,

his compatriots on the Thames, because he believes the most notorious thieves and crooks are among them. He has relatives in Argentina, where his father was born before going to the Soviet Union as a child with his parents.

Nowadays, he lives mainly in Oxford and on the Ile de Ré, partly in Berlin but no longer in Moscow. Nonetheless his new novel appeared there in 2017, a utopia of our time.

But did not Putin's taking office after the turmoil of the nineties, bring a sense of a relief? "Today Russia is used to demonizing the nineties, but the real power poker began only after 2000. Oligarchs like Berezovsky protected Putin and his KGB troupe.

"Putin wanted his slice of cake and the slice grew bigger and bigger"

It was a cynical act, in contempt of the enlightening achievements of Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov and Zinoviev, that they invited a KGB officer to rule Russia."

Already at the beginning of his first term, Maxim Kantor described Putin as a great danger. In his first novel, *Drawing Textbook* he depicted him as a future dictator. In his exhibition catalogues *New Empire* and *The New Bestiary*, designed and arranged in the tradition of political art from Goya to Beckmann, Putin appears as a greenish, skeletal monster, striking terror into folk's hearts.

At first, many liberals, believed they had found a new Augustus in Putin, that is to say, the Roman emperor who took on and expanded Caesar's legacy. "Putin wanted his slice of cake and the slice grew bigger and bigger. Sooner or later, like every Russian tyrant, he drew the card of patriotism. It created a new fascism. Fascism is not limited to the 20th century but is like a virus which under certain conditions, can break out anywhere. It is accompanied by a retro-empire, so not a real and proper one, but a nostalgic one. People are united in the name of the nation, of blood and of nostalgia. Humiliated masses pose a danger."

Fiction turns into reality

And so he chose to begin the novel *Red Light* with a fictitious war. When the real war broke out in Ukraine, he incorporated this backdrop into several scenes. Kantor in no way sees the annexation of the Crimea as a so-called "crime of passion". "Putin and his KGB friends acted cynically and soberly. They recognized and seized the opportunity to secure long-term power in the Kremlin with the return of the peninsula. In this way, Putin became the supposed strong father of the Russian nation."

Red Light can stand alone as a sparkling novel about three generations filled with episodes of the absurd and as a dark panorama of a morally broken century. But the work of Maxim Kantor unfolds in its entirety only when one considers the interaction of image, narrative and essay. In addition, there are plays, puppetry as well as cross-genre picture - music projects, such as that with violinist Gidon Kremer. This amalgamation of painting and narrative, realism and fantasy, normality and madness, render Kantor's work unique. His goal is to influence society in a morally-enlightening manner. In Russia too, the dream of critical humanist intelligence is certainly far from over.

Maxim Kantor: *Red Light*, Novel.

