

Art Histories, Cultural Studies and the Cold War / Cold War Cities

Conference and study day, Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, London, 24th-25th September 2010

Review by Andreas Puth

The conference *Art Histories, Cultural Studies and the Cold War*, organised by academics based at the Schools of Arts and English of the University of Kent at Canterbury and the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies (IGRS) and KATIA PIZZI within the School of Advanced Studies at the University of London, took place in the IGRS rooms in one of the wings of Senate House, the building towering over the University of London's colleges and institutions in Bloomsbury. Erected by Charles Holden in 1932-37, the building remains controversial for its alleged semblance with totalitarian architecture elsewhere in 1930s Europe, associations doubtlessly enhanced by its function as Britain's Ministry of Information during the Second World War and the inspiration it is said to have exerted upon George Orwell in conceiving his fictional Ministry of Truth in *1984* (which it embodied on screen). Appropriately, a tour of the building formed part of the 'Cold War Cities' study day held on the following day, a follow-on event initiated by the new Centre for Cultural Memory Studies at the IGRS and addressing similar issues, though with a decided emphasis on images, concepts and manifestations of urbanity in its various shapes.

The idea to hold the conference was chiefly informed by the historiographical research undertaken by its convenors GRANT POOKE and BEN THOMAS of the University of Kent: the former in writing an account of the Marxist art historian, economist and cineaste Francis Klingender (1907-55) – also a member of the British Communist Party –; the latter in his involvement with the estate of the philosopher and Warburgian art historian Edgar Wind (1900-71) who, prior to being appointed as first professor in the history of art at Oxford University (1955), had taught in the U.S. and become an American citizen. The opening comments by DAVID AYERS (Kent) stressed the conference's

aim of approaching the phenomenon of the Cold War from a cultural point of view whilst owning up to the methodologically relevant fact that most of the researchers present experienced it at least partially themselves. Principal topics raised (not necessarily in a systematic way) were: the mutual perception and representation of East and West during the 1910s-80s, the ideological and propagandist objectives shaping the public sphere within which these processes took place, and the function fulfilled by images and art displays in this context; the ideological constraints imposed on the perception of, and research on, cultural phenomena and artefacts of the past; the impact of political and ideological allegiances on the intellectual output and careers of academics and critics. In preparing this review for publication several months after the conference, the striking topicality of several themes and images especially of the 'Cold War Cities' day – whether of the nuclear exclusion zone surrounding Chernobyl or the view over Tahrir Square in Cairo – is unsettling.

From a British point of view, a 'perfect cold war figure' still arousing passionate debates is the art historian Anthony Blunt (1907-83), appropriately the subject of the keynote address delivered by his biographer MIRANDA CARTER. She gave an overview of his unintegrated 'lives' as authority on French and Italian 16th/17th-century art and architecture, establishment figure, and Soviet spy during World War II, noting how his public exposure and disgrace in 1979 was in itself related to the hardening political and social climate of the beginning Thatcher era. She traced Blunt's encounter with methodologically sophisticated art history practised by German émigré scholars at a time when the discipline hardly existed in Britain, and engaged with his introduction to Marxism and Marxist art theory (not least by Frederick Antal), analysing his

1930s art criticism as evidence of his move towards fully-fledged Stalinism at the time. Blunt's attitudes towards Picasso's 'Guernica' epitomize his shifting positions as critic and art historian: damned in 1937 as defying art's sole purpose of propaganda, hailed as 'modern Calvary' from 1952 onwards.

The conference's morning session was dedicated to *propaganda and photography*. IRINA BYSTROVA (Moscow) provided a historical chronology (from 1945/6 to the 1980s) of the mutual perception of the military threat posed by the 'Anglo-Americans' on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other and the strategies of 'guessing, bluff, and blackmail' deployed by either side, touching upon the use of caricatures as means of propaganda and presenting striking 1960s images taken by the U.S. reconnaissance satellite system 'Corona'. MARTHA LANGFORD (Montreal) and JOHN LANGFORD (Victoria/British Columbia) presented photographic snapshots of the Cold War world of 1962/3 – such as the not yet completed Berlin Wall or the Soviet Memorial at Treptow – taken by their late father during his world tour organized as part of Canada's National Defence College curriculum. They demonstrated the methodological issues arising in the assessment of this specific example of 'Cold War tourism' within the wider context of 'photographic history from below'. SARAH JAMES (Oxford) discussed the 1955 Berlin stage of Edward Steichen's exhibition 'The Family of Man', its relationship to the Cold War world of divided Germany, and its legacy in the West German context. Comprising more than 500 photographs arranged according to universal human themes such as birth, love, and death, the exhibition toured the world under the auspices of the United States Information Agency from 1955 until 1963, attracting 9 million viewers in its course. In spite of its close association with U.S. policy of the Eisenhower era – which few reviewers picked up on – the Berlin show attracted support and 44,000 visitors from both West and East, with Brecht considering its visit a 'must'. James linked general criticism of the exhibition – notably for its universalising and hence levelling humanism, but also for the absence of the Holocaust – to its particular, German dimension: The c. 20 images with German subjects hardly depict war and destruction yet frequently show happy crowds or dancing

children, a 'saccharine sentimentality in tune with Adenauer's Federal Republic'. German biographical and ideological continuities from the 1930s to the 1960s were exemplified by the case of the photographer Karl Pawek and the three *Weltausstellungen der Photographie* he conceived between 1964 and 1977, similarly advancing a sentimental view of mankind. CAROLINE BLINDER (London) focused on the anthology *Time in New England* (1950) by the photographer Paul Strand and the writer Nancy Newhall. The juxtaposition of 17th-20th-century historical and fictional accounts of New England with Strand's 'redemptive' images of New England landscapes, vernacular architecture and people emerged as a conscious, timeless evocation of American values and democratic ideals in the face both of post-war European traumas and the onset of McCarthyism in the U.S. which targeted both authors and prompted Strand to leave the country. JANE POWELL (Kent) presented findings of her research on Soviet political posters held in the collection of the Marx Memorial Library in London, considering their changing aesthetics as well as propagandist contents from 1917 to the 1980s. Emphasising the artistic quality of the early Soviet era posters – displaying graphic artistry and increasingly informed by Constructivism – and tracing the adoption of Socialist Realism from 1932 in the service of Stalin's personality cult, the fight against Fascism and the early Cold War, she observed a decline both in quality and clarity of messages from the 1960s onwards. VICTORIA ZHURAVLEVA (Moscow) followed long-term stereotypes and symbols deployed by American political caricaturists and cartoonists in constructing and demonising Russia and, respectively, the Soviet Union as 'other', as enemy, as 'kingdom of darkness' since c. 1900, right until the present of Putin's Russia. Structuring the material according to the themes slavery versus freedom, Communism versus Christianity, and Bolshevism as anarchy/destruction/menace, the speaker aimed to demonstrate how certain motifs – such as the figure of Ivan the Terrible or the 'Statue of Tyranny' – have been used continuously to portray Stalin as well as Putin. Zhuravleva's take was challenged in the discussion where it was pointed out that there has also been a notable critical and nuanced strand in U.S. cartoons and caricatures. The genre's

strong set of traditions and rules – which should prevent them from being taken at face value and used as straightforward historical evidence – was also emphasised. The discussion further raised the question as to whether or not the ‘beginning’ of the Cold War – in taking a long view of the cultural phenomenon – should be dated back to c. 1917/18, or even earlier.

During the afternoon, the conference divided up into two strands, *Cold War Art History and Criticism* – attended by the reviewer in view of the thematic emphasis of *Ostblicke/Looking East* – and *The Contested Cultural Sphere*, papers of which can only be outlined here on the basis of the abstracts provided.

MATTHEW POTTER (Leicester) advanced the thesis that the lack of interest in German culture shown by British and American post-1945 scholarship – and the resulting ‘writing-out’ of its influence especially on Britain – was determined by post-war conditions rather than the stigma of war culpability, developing this view from Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann’s argument of a disavowal of ‘Germanism’ by exiled art historians’ decision not to resettle in Germany but to ally themselves to the U.S. Potter went on to demonstrate the impact of German art and philosophy on British artists such as Frederick Leighton (1830-96) and Edward Wadsworth (1889-1949). BEN THOMAS (Kent) provided the Cold War context to Edgar Wind’s post-war research on the Renaissance as well as his take on modern art. In the 1950s, the ‘enlightened liberal’ Wind became associated with the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom, specifically with the programme accompanying the 1952 Paris exhibition *L’oeuvre du XXe siècle* and the 1954 Hamburg conference on ‘Science and Freedom’. The Congress’s objective of contrasting modernism as expression of artistic freedom with Soviet Realism and Communism provided Wind with a forum to advance his enthusiasm for modern art by stressing its capricious, marginal, playful and fantastic qualities – he believed in Plato’s dictum that art is dangerous. Prompted by his own life to reflect on intellectual freedom, he developed his notion of Renaissance artists, and especially Leonardo, reconciling opposing forces. MARINA DMITRIEVA (Leipzig) discussed the appropriation of, research in and attitudes towards the Renaissance under Communism in the Soviet Union on the one hand and

countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia on the other. She showed how Soviet architecture embraced a monumental ‘neo-Renaissance’ from 1934 and sketched the extent to which the idealising Soviet perception of the Italian Renaissance – distant as it was – was shaped by pre-Soviet era German and Austro-Hungarian scholarship. In contrast, there was ignorance about the Renaissance of Eastern bloc countries and a particular derision and rejection of ‘Mannerism’ – a subject of central importance to Polish and Czechoslovak scholarship (especially of the 1970s) where the engagement with Renaissance and ‘Mannerist’ art and architecture was central to long-standing debates on national identity and style, and thus crucial to the problem of post-war reconstruction. Jan Białostocki’s vision of an ‘Eastern Europe’ unified by the Renaissance could only be published in English (1976). MONIKA RUTECKA (Kent) addressed the conflicting aesthetic and ideological assessments of Poland’s national painter Jan Matejko (1838-93), emphasising his indebtedness to ideas of Polish Romanticism (Mickiewicz), and tracing 19th-century aesthetic and patriotic discourses targeting his works – for instance the condemnation of his disinterest in historical mimesis. Special attention was paid to concerted political efforts in 1940s/50s Poland to appropriate Matejko’s ‘creative morality’, didacticism, and national character so as to define historical antecedents for a Socialist Realism that was national in form and socialist in contents; two conferences were dedicated to the artist in Warsaw and Cracow in 1953. PETER MCMASTER (Kent) introduced the British Marxist art critic Peter Fuller (1947-90) as an increasingly disillusioned observer of the dehumanisation of 1960s/70s critical discourses as well as art production. Responding with a characteristically English, Ruskin-influenced promotion of material craftsmanship and the notion of art as antidote to mass culture, he became a ‘dissident voice’, yet typified what McMaster defined as the essentially humanist British reading of Marxism. ANTOINE CAPET’s (Rouen) reserve paper returned to the Cold War proper, specifically the premise that nobody was safe anywhere on the planet under the threat of the nuclear bomb. He discussed the adaptation of this insight to the movie screen in the 1959 film *On the Beach* (based on Nevil Shute’s 1957 novel

of the same title), condemned as displaying Western defeatism by the *New York Times* upon its release. It follows a group of people in Australia awaiting certain death from global fallout following the accidental outbreak of a nuclear war annihilating the Northern hemisphere, contrasting their behaviour whilst being faced with the choice of dying slowly or taking suicide pills distributed by the government.

The alternative afternoon strand *The Contested Cultural Sphere* comprised the following papers: JOES SEGAL (Utrecht) discussed the contradiction between the official promotion of the West's and East's respective artistic norms of Modernism and Socialist Realism on the one hand and contrary developments on the other, such as Western dismissals of modern artists as closet Communists or Eastern initiatives in supporting the works of left-wing European modernists. CHRISTINE BIANCO (Oxford Brookes) considered the explicit Cold War agenda underlying the promotion of Abstract Expressionism in mass magazines such as *Time* or *Life* which advocated the representatives of this movement as embodying key American – and hence anti-Communist – values: free thinking, originality, individualism. TIZIANA VILLANI (Kent) addressed the inner-Italian controversy surrounding the 1977 Venice 'Biennale of the dissent' organised by Carlo Ripa di Meana and dedicated to the theme of non-official, dissenting art of the Eastern bloc countries. DAVID AYERS (Kent) analysed the 'Red Dean' (from 1931) of Canterbury Cathedral, Hewlett Johnson (1874-1966) – an ardent supporter of Russia, China, and Cuba – as an instance of the religious dimensions of the Cold War. VERITY CLARKSON (Brighton) examined the 1971 exhibition *Art in revolution* held at the Hayward Gallery in London, a groundbreaking display of USSR avant-garde art of 1917-27 which became embroiled in political-ideological controversy when the Soviet authorities challenged ownership of the project and insisted on the withdrawal of some abstract works (e.g. by El Lissitzky). LUCY WEIR (Glasgow) proposed the presence of latent 'Cold War aesthetics' in Pina Bausch's revolutionary *Tanztheater*, examining two of her works – *Kontaktthof* (1978) and *Nelken* (1982 – with regard to their violent representation of characteristics of divided post-war Germany. GRANT POOKE (Kent) investiga-

ted the significant shifts in Francis Klingender's (see above) 1950s publications towards themes of redemption and love.

The diversity of the themes and phenomena discussed at the conference reflected very much the organisers' declared intention to develop and open an expanding academic forum for the discussion of the cultural dimension of the Cold War – a dimension previously addressed in London by the successful exhibition *Cold War Modern* at the Victoria & Albert Museum (2008/09). The conference was much determined by research currently undertaken in the U.K. and thus provided an interesting British point of view on the period looked at; Eastern Central Europe would have remained absent, had it not been for Marina Dmitrieva's paper. The British perspective was thus also prevalent during the conversations and discussions, whether it concerned the specific mutual perception of Britain and Russia, or the influence exerted by German and Austrian émigrés on the U.K.'s cultural and intellectual life from the 1930s, a topic attracting much scholarly interest in recent years and here raised e.g. with regard to Frederick Antal.

The *Cold War Cities* programme on the following day complemented the conference in many ways. More coherently focused on the topic of cities – real, imagined, photographed, filmed – it carried on from issues raised at the conference and also added further geographical dimensions to the overall theme. Thus, MARIA PRIETO (Manchester) took the audience to Cold War Spain where Franco's alliance with the U.S. led to the reception of contemporary large-scale utopian urban schemes conceived on the model of Manhattan and intended to form an urban network across the emerging European Economic Community. This model of 'Capitalist Urbanism' was to find its expression in Madrid's new financial centre (AZCA), a project undergoing numerous changes since the 1950s whilst Spain moved further towards Europe and eventually realized on colossal scale as 'Madrid 2000'. VLADIMIR DOBRENKO (Konstanz) exemplified Soviet Cold War film propaganda as reflected in the urban fabric of the fictional divided town of Altenstadt in Grigory Aleksandrov's 1949 film *Meeting on the Elbe*. Inspired by, and reacting to 1940s 'rubble films',

it juxtaposed the respective impact of the American and Soviet occupation upon the town, contrasting the moral depravity and lack of culture in the ruins of the American sector with the rebuilding efforts and small town values flourishing under Soviet authority – and positively embraced by the film’s German main character. PAUL DOBRASZCZYK (Reading) offered a methodological framework to his experience of the exclusion zone surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and the abandoned purpose-built socialist town of Pripjat. His paper centred on the problem of being exposed to a site where the long-developed trope of the post-apocalyptic city – from 19th-century literature to contemporary movies and computer games – and the end of urban modernism have become real, and where perceptive faculties are pushed to their limits in the face of everything being in ruin. He postulated Pripjat as modern Pompeii in relation to Freud’s aesthetic trope of the uncanny. MARTHA and JOHN LANGFORD continued tracing their father’s 1962/3 world tour, in this case to Nasser’s Egypt where Western and Eastern influence spheres overlapped at the time. They focused on an unusual snapshot of their father’s, his sole image of Cairo: a view out of the Nile Hilton Hotel’s back across Liberation Square/Midan Al-Tahrir. Guessing as to what motivated the taking of this photograph, they raised the Cold War associations as well as the de-colonizing and pan-Arabic notions of this particular cityscape. JILL BUGAJSKI (Chicago) investigated the relationship between performance art and politically loaded public sites in the 1960s. She centred on the artist and author Wolf Vostell (1932-98) – notably his actions engaging with the Berlin Wall (1965) – who advocated action as the taking-apart of architecture. An Eastern Central European dimension to this movement was provided by Tadeusz Kantor’s conceptual interventionist schemes for Warsaw and Cracow, partly displayed at the 1970 Cologne exhibition *Happenings and Fluxus* (e.g. ‘Clothes hanger to bridge the Vistula River’).

The afternoon session started with an entire panel dedicated to the city of Trieste and its hinterland, an area of iconic Cold War status. A historical perspective was provided by SABINE RUTAR (Regensburg) who set out the methodological parameters defining

her comparative research project on ‘Physical Violence and State Legitimacy’ in Italian and Yugoslav Adriatic coastal cities. She sketched the complex territorial, demographic and political changes taking place in this region since the 1920s, culminating in Trieste’s liberation by Tito’s army in 1945 and the creation of the Free Territory of Trieste as international buffer state 1947-54 prior to the eventual drawing of the Italian-Yugoslav border and the subsequent migration movements out of and into Yugoslavia. MATTEO COLOMBI (Leipzig) and KATIA PIZZI (IGRS, London) explored the portrayal of Trieste in post-war Slovene and Italian films, giving an outline of the city’s character as multi-cultural melting pot falling into decline post-1918 and subjected to enforced Italian nationalisation in the 1930s. Colombi focused on three Slovene productions which variously address the nationalist and ideological issues shaping Trieste at the time of the liberation and its aftermath – the city as a place to reach by the advancing army; the city as site of the Communist uprising from inside in which there is a possibility of Slovene-Italian collaboration; the post-war city as setting for clandestine operations in support of Yugoslav Communism. Pizzi delivered examples of the tropes embodied in some of the more than 70 Italian films featuring Trieste (1940s-60s) – quasi-Levantine demi-monde at the edge of law, Cold War city of spies and soldiers – and wittily concluded with the short reference to the city at the end of the James Bond picture *From Russia with Love* (1963).

DEBORAH JAFFÉ (London) sketched the influence exerted by the ‘Bauhaus diaspora’ on design, art and architecture in England since the 1930s – arguing for its impact on Frank Pick’s celebrated London tube map – and went on to give an autobiographical account of her 1979 visit to the Bauhaus in Dessau within the framework of an international conference. SIMON BACON (London) considered the portrayal of Berlin and the burdens of its past in Wim Wenders’s *Der Himmel über Berlin / Wings of Desire* (1987) – populated, he argued, by angels embodying Freud’s ‘psychic wound’ feeding off all that surrounds it – and Stephen Norrington’s *Blade* (1998), the title character for him becoming a metaphor of the divided city, even of Walter Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* or Angel of History. RICARDA VIDAL (London) contrasted Bruno Kle-

berg's and Walter Marten's film *Geschichte einer Straße* (1952-54) on East Berlin's Stalinallee with Charles and Ray Eames's *Glimpses of the USA* (1959). The former's evoking of a grand communal and national effort 'by workers for workers' – jeered at by the West yet still admired by many West Berliners – on the street through which the Red Army entered Berlin completely ignores the 1953 uprising, and Vidal set the street both in the context of the GDR's embrace of Stalinist neo-classicism and the nostalgic feelings articulated by those residents who first moved there. *Glimpses of the USA* was part of the American National Exhibition in Moscow 1959 where it was displayed on 7 screens in a temporarily constructed dome. It contained 2 rough storylines on a working and weekend day of ordinary Americans, their individual progresses and pleasures, and confronted Russians with U.S. suburban houses, cars and technical appliances – with enormous resonance, as one participant of the study day reported.

The relaxed, informal and stimulating atmosphere of the event was characterised by the emphasis on presenting little-known material rather than advancing grand arguments or narratives. There was ample opportunity to reflect on the wide scope of contents raised in the papers especially the engagement with and reflection on destroyed and ruined cities, and the myth of Trieste and its afterlife and to provide background information relevant to the complex and frequently 'peripheral' themes – 'peripheral' from the London perspective, which made the effort all the more valuable.

Conference schedule

(Paper titles not necessarily fully in accordance with the contents of the papers as delivered)

Art Histories, Cultural Studies and the Cold War

Opening address: David Ayers, Grant Pooke, Ben Thomas (Kent)

Irina Bystrova (Moscow State University): The Americans, Russians and the British in conditions of the Cold War: from the history of mutual perceptions

Martha Langford (Concordia University, Montreal) and John Langford (Victoria/British Columbia): Showing, without telling: A Cold War Tourist and His Camera

Sarah James (Christ Church College, Oxford): 'Scratching the History of Men': Humanism, Photography, Art History and the Politics of the Subject in a Divided Germany

Caroline Blinder (Goldsmith's College, London): American Alphabet: On Paul Strand's Post-War Photography

Jane Powell (Kent): The changing iconography of Cold War posters at the Marx Memorial Library

Victoria I. Zhuravleva (Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow): The Cold War of Images: the Soviet Union in American Political Cartoons

Miranda Carter: Anthony Blunt: Art and Intelligence

Matthew Potter (Leicester): The Neglected Field of Germanism in British Art History, 1850-1939

Ben Thomas (Kent): Edgar Wind and the Congress for Cultural Freedom

Marina Dmitrieva (Leipzig): The Renaissance behind the Iron Curtain

Monika Rutecka (Kent): Jan Matejko: a symbol of Polish national identity or a victim of political manipulation?

Peter McMaster (Kent): Peter Fuller – A Dissident Voice

Antoine Capet (Rouen): On the Beach (Nevil Shute's novel, 1957, and Stanley Kramer's film, 1959): a scenario of "Cold War Culture"

Joes Segal (Utrecht): Modern art and cultural warfare in East and West

Christine Bianco (Oxford Brookes): Modern Art and Freedom: Cold War Cultural Politics in American

Mass Magazines

Tiziana Villani (Kent): The "Biennale of the dissent": a page from the Italian Cold War

David Ayers (Kent): Hewlett Johnson: Britain's 'Red Dean' and the Cold War

Verity Clarkson (Brighton): Contested Visions of Soviet Art in Britain: the *Art in Revolution* exhibition (1971)

Lucy Weir (Glasgow): "The Pornography of Pain": Exploring Imagery of the Cold War in Pina Bausch's *Kontakthof* and *Nelken*

Grant Pooke (Kent): Francis Klingender: Cold War Reflections and Valedictions c. 1948-1955

Cold War Cities

Maria Prieto (Manchester): Europe between millenniums: urban imaginaries from the Cold War to the year 2000

Vladimir Dobrenko (Konstanz): Divided Europe in early Soviet Cold War film: the mirror and the screen

Paul Dobraszcyk (Reading): Petrified modernism: Chernobyl, Pripyat and the death of the city

Martha Langford (Montreal) and John Langford (Victoria): Re-aligning the view: Cold War Cairo

Jill Bugajski (Northwestern University and Art Institute, Chicago): Happenings in crisis: monumental performance and urban iconoclasm in the 1960s

Sabine Rutar (Regensburg): Violence in Cold War cities: riots, strikes and protests in dockyard workers' milieus on both sides of the Italian-Yugoslavian border

Matteo Colombi (Leipzig) and Katia Pizzi (IGRS, London): Cold War's inconsistencies: Trieste in Slovene and Italian films

Deborah Jaffé (Museum of Childhood, London): The Bauhaus, Dessau, 1979

Simon Bacon (London Consortium): Mourning and melancholia in Cold War Berlin: how *Wings of Desire* by Wenders and *Blade* by Norrington embody two faces of a divided city

Ricarda Vidal (IGRS, London): Cold War Street Scenes: Bruno Kleberg and Walter Marten's *Geschichte einer Straße* (1954) and Charles and Ray Eames's *Glimpses of the USA* (1959)

Author

Andreas Puth M.A. studied art history and history at Freiburg and the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, where he is writing his PhD. He held visiting lectureships at University College London and the Courtauld Institute and was a visiting fellow at the GWZO in Leipzig. His research focuses on late medieval ruler representation, political iconography and architecture. He has been involved with kunsttexte.de/Ostblicke since 2010.

Review

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