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EDITORIAL

Editorial

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In Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, the most maddening thing about war is the impossibility of trying to maintain sanity in an insane situation, like war. Through the bomber pilot Orr, the novel introduces us to the concept of Catch-22, a now familiar *bon mot* the post-War era popularized to describe a bureaucratic absurdity. In the book, the "catch" describes the insanity of war and the impossibility of maintaining sanity within it. Heller writes, "There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to." This impossible logic – wherein seeking to preserve one's own life through rational means produces further irrationality – embodies a struggle of retaining a semblance of sanity in an overwhelmingly insane situation.

One of the most maddening aspects of the culture wars that are currently being waged on all fronts, is the reclaiming of artistic identities. A recent article in the *New York Times* reports on the curator Oksana Semenik. In response to the destruction of Ukrainian art during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Semenik started a social media campaign to educate people about overlooked Ukrainian artists and to press museums worldwide to reclassify art traditionally labeled as Russian. Her campaign, described as "decolonizing Ukrainian art", has led to significant changes in how global institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art label their collections, acknowledging the Ukrainian identity of artists who were previously misrepresented due to historical Russian dominance.

The destruction of Ukraine's cultural heritage, its art and architecture, is a distressing loss for both Ukraine and the world. However, attempts to claim cultural figures as belonging exclusively to one national identity reflects a kind of madness that mirrors the absurdity and paradoxical logic found in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Take the example of Kazimir Malevich's life and work, one of

the “decolonized” artists of Semenik’s campaign. Malevich was born in 1878 in Kyiv, Ukraine (part of the Russian Empire at the time) into a Polish family, which had originally settled in Lithuania but later resided in what is now Belarus. His mother tongue was Polish, but he also spoke Russian as well as Ukrainian due to his childhood surroundings. (Malevich reportedly identified with different nationalities at different moments in his life.) His artistic identity, on the other hand, was fully formed in Russia and Western Europe as he gained an early exposure to Western avant-garde art, particularly to the works of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Later, Malevich spent much of his career teaching in Vitebsk, Kyiv, and Leningrad (Saint Petersburg). To make things worse, Malevich was himself a victim of Stalin’s violent cultural revolution. In the early 1930s, many of his works were confiscated, he was banned from creating and exhibiting his art, and he was even interrogated and imprisoned. So what is one to make of this identity? To claim it to be solely representative of a single nation – the Poles and Belarusians would have as many justifications to make such claims (and have indeed done so) – oversimplifies the complexity of his experiences.

This “decolonization” effort, while seeking to rectify historical oversights and to affirm national cultural legacies, paradoxically mirrors the absurdity of war-time logic when imposing binary identities on figures whose lives were inherently transnational and transcultural. It reflects a desire to find clear-cut solutions and identities in histories that are anything but straightforward. In the context of ongoing conflict, such as the one between Russia and Ukraine, these efforts become charged with additional significance. Like Orr, cultural managers worldwide are now facing their own version of a Catch-22: choosing to participate in the culture wars can inadvertently perpetuate the divisive logic of wartime, a paradox that mirrors the maddening choices of violent conflict. On the other hand, opting out of this contentious arena might preserve integrity but also risks obscurity, not capturing the attention of platforms like the New York Times. Recategorizing cultural figures within nationalistic frameworks is only one example; others include banning the artworks of artists according to their nationality or their alleged political beliefs. In the best case, such thinking merely leads to informal censorship, but it can also lead to blacklisting and the outright suppression of artistic voices, stifling creative freedom and cultural exchange. If there is any lesson to be learned from Malevich’s life, it is that the question of his national identity was only raised when a totalitarian state accused Malevich of “Polish” espionage.

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This month, we are publishing several articles that reflect on related themes of transnationalism and migration. Anastasia Eleftheriou reviewed Radu Jude’s *Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World*, whose dialectical premise is built around the exploitation of Romanian employees at the hands of multinational corporations. At DOK Leipzig, Zoe Aiano saw *El Shatt – A*

Blueprint for Utopia, through which Ivan Ramljak revisited the all but forgotten story of a Yugoslav refugee camp set up in Egypt during World War II. You will find an interview with Ramljak on his documentary's historical background in our Interviews section. From Trieste, Antonis Lagarias reports with a review of Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border*, which deals with one of many humanitarian catastrophes taking place at the European Union's outer borders (in this case Poland's border with Belarus).

Finally, we are publishing reviews of Marcell Jankovics' 1981 *Son of the White Mare* by Julia Skala and of Alexandru Solomon's 2023 *Arsenie: An Amazing Afterlife* by Martin Kudláč, both of which deal with myths – in the former case as a source of inspiration, in the latter as an object of reflection.

We hope you enjoy our reads.
Konstanty Kuzma & Moritz Pfeifer
Editors