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ANATOLIY MELNYK'S ARTISTIC VISION OF THE “EXISTENCE” PROJECT

Abstract. This article interprets the “Existence” painting project, created by Anatolii Melnyk, a People’s Artist of Ukraine and Academician of the National Academy. The artist views this project as a comprehensive artistic model of human existence amid war and social upheaval. *The study aims* to identify the artistic features of the project, reveal the specifics of its symbolic language, and analyze the methods of visual representation of the inner states of modern humans. *The methodological framework* consists of formal-stylistic, iconographic, and iconological methods, which enable an analysis of the structure of the artistic image. A hermeneutic approach is applied to the interpretation of the deeper meanings of the images, while comparative analysis helps to determine the place of A. Melnyk’s work within the context of contemporary European painting. The article examines key paintings from the series, in which the artist visualizes experiences of suffering, fear, loneliness, and inner resistance through the deformation of the human figure, grotesque elements, intense coloration, and dynamic composition. The study demonstrates that the color scheme, built on a combination of cool shades and expressive red accents, serves as the primary vehicle for conveying meaning. The research substantiates that despite the tragic nature of the images, the light accents in the canvases symbolize a “life-affirming intention” and the indomitable spirit. The study elucidates that the visual language of the project reflects the philosophical ideas of 20th-century existentialism and a contemporary understanding of the social crisis. Particular **attention is devoted** to the moral dimension of the works, which prompts the viewer to reflect on personal responsibility and spiritual resilience. A. Melnyk’s artistic discourse is conceptualized as a “philosophy of tragedy,” in which Faith emerges as the quintessence of overcoming the absurdity of existence. *The conclusion* reached is that the “Existence” project combines Anatolii Melnyk’s individual artistic experience with the collective memory of society, creating a dialogue between art, philosophy, and the reality of contemporary life. The artist’s works **serve** as an effective tool for overcoming traumatic experiences through deep existential reception. The scientific novelty lies in a comprehensive analysis of the painting project in the context of wartime events and contemporary Ukrainian culture.

Key words: painting, existence, trauma, war, visual art, symbolism, philosophy.

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МИСТЕЦЬКА ВІЗІЯ ПРОЄКТУ «ЕКЗИСТЕНЦІЯ» АНАТОЛІЯ МЕЛЬНИКА

Анотація. Стаття присвячена мистецтвознавчому осмисленню живописного проєкту «Екзистенція» народного художника України, академіка НАМУ Анатолія Мельника як цілісної художньої моделі людського буття в умовах війни та соціальних змін. *Метою* дослідження є виявлення художніх особливостей проєкту, розкриття специфіки його символічної мови та аналіз способів візуальної репрезентації внутрішніх станів сучасної людини. *Методологічну основу* становлять формально-стилістичний, іконографічний та іконологічний методи, що дають змогу проаналізувати структуру художнього образу. Герменевтичний підхід застосовано до інтерпретації глибинних сенсів образів, а порівняльний аналіз сприяє визначенню місця творчості А. Мельника в контексті сучасного європейського живопису. У статті розглянуто ключові полотна серії, де через деформацію людської фігури, гротеск, напружений колорит і динамічну композицію художник візуалізує досвід страждання, страху, самотності та внутрішнього спротиву. Визначено, що колористичне вирішення, побудоване на поєднанні холодних відтінків та експресивних червоних акцентів, виступає головним носієм смислового навантаження. Доведено, що попри трагізм образів, світлові акценти в полотнах символізують «життєствердну інтенцію» та незламність духу. Показано, що образна мова проєкту відображає філософські ідеї екзистенціалізму ХХ століття та сучасне осмислення соціальної кризи. Особливу увагу приділено моральному виміру творів, які спонукають глядача до рефлексії над особистою відповідальністю та духов-

ною стійкістю. Мистецький дискурс А. Мельника трактується як «філософія трагедії», де квінтесенцією подолання абсурду буття постає Віра. Зроблено *висновок*, що проєкт «Екзистенція» поєднує індивідуальний художній досвід А. Мельника з колективною пам'яттю суспільства, створюючи діалог між мистецтвом, філософією і реальністю сучасного життя. Твори митця визначено як дієвий інструмент подолання травматичного досвіду через глибоку екзистенційну рецепцію. Наукова новизна полягає у комплексному аналізі живописного проєкту в контексті воєнних подій та сучасної української культури.

Ключові слова: живопис, екзистенція, травма, війна, образотворче мистецтво, символізм, філософія.

Problem Statement. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, artistic projects focused on existential experience acquire special significance and become instruments for comprehending national trauma. Against this backdrop, the art project “**Existence**” (2018) by the People’s Artist and Academician of the National Academy of Arts of Ukraine, **Anatolii Melnyk**, stands as a vivid example of artistic discourse. The artist integrates his personal experiences with the realities of war, offering a new interpretation of existential motifs.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. This research draws upon an analysis of a broad source base that encompasses theoretical works, philosophical reflections, and artistic practices. Existential motifs in European painting of the 20th and 21st centuries are expressed through specific visual means, notably the transformation of the human figure, grotesque imagery, dramatic coloring, and dynamic composition, which convey ultimate states of being such as fear, loneliness, and the pain of loss.

A. Melnyk’s use of figure deformation and expressive lines aligns his work with the tradition of European Expressionism, particularly the art of Edvard Munch. At the same time, unlike the individual-psychological focus of Oskar Kokoschka’s portraits or the urban dynamics of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s compositions, Melnyk’s painting is oriented toward generalizing the existential experience of a person within the reality of war [1–3].

The works of art historians related to the study of existentialism in visual practices, the analysis of color symbolism in painting, and the issues of thematic representation of war and tragedy in contemporary art were taken into consideration [4–8]. Scholars examine how, in the context of war, the works of Ukrainian artists demonstrate a transition from traumatic bodies to symbols of resilience through grotesque imagery and contrasting plasticity [9–12].

The article also references publications that highlight aspects of A. Melnyk’s creative work, partially revealing the characteristic features of his artistic practice [13–15]. Authoritative art-historical assessments provide a contextual foundation for the study; at the same time, the main emphasis focuses on the

author’s own formal and semantic analysis aimed at identifying the existential nature of the artistic language of the project.

The research methodology provides a philosophical understanding of the project. For a systematic analysis, a formal-stylistic method was utilized, allowing the study of compositional structure (plane rhythms, accents, symbolism), color scheme, form plasticity (deformation, grotesque), and chiaroscuro contrasts. The comparative method helps juxtapose the project’s formal and compositional solutions with the European Expressionist tradition, revealing both inheritance and the author’s transformation of tradition in the context of contemporary warfare. The profound meaning of the works emerges through the analysis of symbols and images. Familiar narratives of loss take on a philosophical system, where color and metaphor simultaneously convey both the tragedy of war and hope. Elements of hermeneutics enable the interpretation of states of being depicted in images of solitude, fear, dignity, and faith. The concept of “existence” is applied in an interdisciplinary sense, combining the philosophical understanding of the 20th century with art-historical interpretation as a visual form of experiencing conditions shaped by war and social crisis.

The comprehensive application of research methods reveals the painting of Anatolii Melnyk as a space for reflection on trauma and spiritual resilience, in which the viewer becomes involved in the process of empathetic engagement.

The article aims to analyze the artistic vision of the project “*Existence*” as a model of human existence in the context of war and social upheavals. In accordance with this aim, the following objectives guide the study: to trace the formal and stylistic features of the key paintings; to identify the connection between artistic imagery and the principles of existentialism; to examine the symbolism of trauma; and to assess the communicative potential of the project for the contemporary viewer.

Presentation of the Main Research Material. The artistic paradigm of A. Melnyk’s work is composed of emotional periods and episodes experienced by the author, each with its own unique history. These

stories are reimagined and transformed, eventually finding a painterly vision crafted through brush and pigment. This refers specifically to the works included in the “*Existence*” project, which followed his well-known series of poignant “*Mamaichuks*”.

It is worth noting that, overall, Melnyk’s oeuvre reflects a symbolic interaction between all his painterly compositions. The “*Existence*” project cannot be analyzed in isolation from the artist’s previous work; yet, at the same time, it is entirely distinct and individual, imbued with new meanings. This series of canvases becomes an artistic discourse on the theme of humanity and spiritual anchors, manifested through forms, lines, silhouettes, and colors.

Art historian R. Yatsiv notes that A. Melnyk has “deeply integrated himself into the painful pressure points of social existence”, positioning himself as a participant in the dramatic collisions of modernity and as an artist who assumes civic responsibility for his artistic expression [16]. This observation is crucial for understanding the social dimension of the artist’s oeuvre. In our view, the “*Existence*” project attests not only to the artist’s social engagement but also to a profound focus on the internal dimension of a human being experiencing a crisis amidst the conditions of war.

In many of A. Melnyk’s works reveal that the theme of war and its impact on the formation and transformation of human consciousness can be traced. Through a deliberate color palette, expressively deformed shapes, and grotesque imagery, the artist represents the existential state of a human being on the brink of death, decay, destruction, and disappearance. A particular intensity is brought to this dimension by the cycle in which “*Pieta*” stands as a pivotal work, concentrating the experience of trauma and collective pain while addressing each viewer.

The aesthetic impact of the painting “*Pieta*” lies not in its monumental scale, although this aspect plays a significant role in the perception of the subject. The primary power of the work resides in its imagery, which conveys pain and despair with almost physical intensity. The breath of death within the composition is palpable and inevitable. A helpless mother holds her deceased son in her arms, and the suffering that dominates the thematic structure is symbolically visualized through every element of the system: from the portraits of forgotten ancestors to the grief-stricken faces on the left.

The color palette, built on a combination of cold shades of green, brown, and blue, explicates the tragedy of the artistic image. The light accents of

the male figure in the mother’s arms interplay with muted orange touches, elements that carry the symbolic weight of a life-affirming intention.

Dramatically consonant with “*Pieta*” are the works “*Requiem*”, “*Searching for the Cuckoo, or the Lost Shadow*”, and “*Seagulls*”, among others. These works serve as a visual reflection on tragic stages of history that should not be overlooked or neglected. They call for a profound existential reception to overcome traumatic experience and enable further progress.

Several works of thematic orientation express a similar emotional intensity, such as “*At the Tavern*” and “*Children*”. The complex palette of human emotions finds expression in the painting “*Father and Mother*”, which depicts elderly parents standing in contemplation at the twilight of their lives. The work provides viewers with a basis for associative interpretation and the unfolding of the narrative. The deliberate deformation of the figures intensifies the impression of a wounded and distorted human life. Behind the elderly couple, the artist depicts a complex, colorful background whose rhythm of planes and colors evokes frames of a life lived: within it, one senses unbearable pain, dramatic events, and moments of light. The entire composition, with its figures and auxiliary images, is arranged into the form of a symbolic cross, as if affirming the truth that every person on earth carries their own destined burden.

In the context of this study, it is important to note that the process of creating narrative compositions **in Melnyk’s** oeuvre is a long path of searching and sketching. First and foremost, the outlining of content and form occurs in the artist’s mind. The future composition becomes imbued with his intellectual and emotional experience and is grounded in an analytical comprehension of the concept. The artist moves through a prolonged stage of developing visual solutions, similar to a literary search for precise rhymes, seeking to find adequate plastic forms. This process gradually shapes the central idea that unites all elements into a coherent concept.

In his search for suitable artistic means, the artist engages not only the conscious mind but also subconscious images and sensations. At times, in moments of intense creative expression, A. Melnyk may radically alter or even overwrite previously completed sections of the canvas. This process continues until both compositional balance and conceptual completeness are achieved.

The artist’s work reflects a distinctive worldview and philosophical vision. In his paintings, particular attention is given to poses, facial expressions,

intonations, and the subtle gradations of light and shadow. He deliberately employs grotesque representations of figures, enhancing the articulation of existential modes such as loneliness, fear, and despair. At the same time, he uses connotative techniques, imbuing images with symbolic significance and thereby conveying collective experiences of war-time trauma.

A. Melnyk is concerned with the challenge of revealing the personal essence of an individual, with all their unique psycho-emotional traits. This active engagement with reality and contemporary events, along with vividly expressed compassion and sorrow for human fate, is always palpable in his works. In depicting his characters, A. Melnyk seeks to uncover their inner world. The protagonists display diverse personalities, ranging from gentle and restrained to strong-willed and defiant. The artist portrays both vulnerable and defenseless figures, as well as successful characters who, however, often exhibit internal conflict or aggression.

The artist depicts a wide range of emotions through human figures, including feelings of love, anger, joy, and sorrow. His works explore the problem of “external” loneliness, when misfortune separates an individual from others and excludes them from society, as well as “internal” loneliness, which arises from a person’s conflict with themselves and is often destructive to the individual [17, pp. 19–20]. This psychological framework is evident in his associative portraits and narrative compositions, whose typologies reflect the destruction of personality, tragedy, and the helplessness of situations.

Overall, A. Melnyk emphasizes that individual personalities constitute one of the central themes of his artistic practice. He maintains that it is important for each person to perceive themselves from an external perspective – to gain insight into how they are seen by others [18]. The artist’s philosophical thinking emerges in the work “*Portrait of an Elderly Man. Fate*”. Professor L. Medvid, analyzing the piece, emphasizes its inner energy, the archetypal quality of the figure, and its philosophical focus, highlighting both the strength and the submission of the individual to an inexorable fate. “Undoubtedly, this vivid image is a remarkable achievement of the artist, aptly reminding us that not everything is well in our contemporary social ‘kingdom’” [19]. Sharing this assessment, we consider it necessary to complement it with an art-historical analysis of formal elements, particularly the modeling of the figure and the carefully chosen, restrained color palette, which intensify

the sense of existential inevitability. In this context, the portrait emerges not merely as a generalized depiction of human fate, but as a visual metaphor for the existential choice between submission and inner dignity, a key motif in the “*Existence*” project.

Indeed, A. Melnyk’s psychological portraits invite profound reflection, particularly on issues central to existential philosophy. A key question that arises concerns human existence during social crises. Resonating with the ideas of existentialist philosophers, A. Melnyk explores the underlying causes of humanity’s moral and ontological crises.

Scholars note that it is no coincidence that existence, as the spiritual being of a person, became a central object of attention for existentialist philosophy. The turn of the 21st century, like any transitional era, heightens the sense of crisis and disorientation within human consciousness [20, p. 26]. Has humanity ever been truly sheltered from the storms of life, from the power of money, from slavery and the fear for one’s existence, from infirmity, deformity, disease, or loneliness? This “philosophy of tragedy” embodies the inherent drama of human existence. According to its tenets, against the general backdrop of unending pain, paradoxes, absurdity, and controversy with the established world, there is a moment of truth that illuminates its most vital meaning. The quintessence that fills this existential space of thought is **Faith** [21, p. 15]. In A. Melnyk’s heroes, faith emerges as a value-based anchor, imbuing the figures with a sense of resolve and symbolizing the triumph over life’s crises.

It is also essential to address the symbolism in A. Melnyk’s art. The striving for symbolic representation dictates the generalized silhouette, the conventionality of proportions, the expressiveness of form, and the absence of meticulous detailing. This results in a laconic plastic language of the depicted subjects, as well as specific intonations and moods within the works. Characteristically, Melnyk employs a dynamic, expressionistic line charged with internal tension, alongside a broken and often conflictual color-plasticity [19, p. 1]. In his painterly compositions, several sign systems interact seamlessly: image, content, color, and light. Color, in particular, is imbued with a special symbolic character and at times acts as the dominant force of the entire composition. In the paintings “*Seagulls*” and “*Searching for the Cuckoo*”, everything is permeated with red – crimson or dull, agonizing or incinerating – in combination with black. In “*Requiem*”, red borders on blue, creating a sense of threat, fatigue, and hopelessness.

Similarly, in the works “Declaration” and “Solar Eclipse”, color serves as the key carrier of meaning. Laconic abstract forms pulsate within the images of people and birds, clashing in a struggle with black to create the very tension the artist seeks, thereby heightening the emotional impact of the perception.

A distinctive feature of A. Melnyk’s works are the natural synthesis of artistic idea, clarity, and originality of visual imagery. He conveys his experience, both cognitive and emotional, as the process requires. He reflects, and, following Aristotle, thinking is impossible without sensory experience and arises from it. “The soul,” the philosopher asserted, “never thinks without images” [4, p. 51].

In the master's work, a refined aesthetic, professional experience, and acute social issues interact seamlessly. A. Melnyk is “an author with a distinct social identity who reacts appropriately to the modern world and the historical epoch; this epoch is revealed by him through an adapted painterly form”, notes R. Yatsiv. Melnyk emerged almost spontaneously from his own individual genetics that connect him to his family environment and his perception of a landscape that is simultaneously natural, historical, and spiritual [16, p. 1].

In concluding the analysis of A. Melnyk’s creative project “**Existence**”, it is pertinent to recall the words of Ralph Rugoff, a curator of the Venice Biennale, who stated that “the meaning of a work of art lies not within the work itself, but in the dialogues that surround it... The most important thing about an exhibition is not what hangs on the wall, but how the viewer utilizes the experience of the exhibition after it concludes” [22]. Indeed, such valuable qualities of

dialogue are inherent in A. Melnyk’s canvases. His work is so multifaceted that every viewer perceives and distinguishes something unique, personal, and most profoundly moving.

Main conclusions and prospects for utilising the research findings. As a result of this study, we have reached the following conclusions. A. Melnyk’s pictorial project “Existence” emerges as a coherent visual model of human existence in the context of war and social crisis, combining individual artistic experience with collective traumatic memory. A formal-stylistic and iconological analysis has shown that the deformation of the figure, the grotesque, the intense colour scheme, and the dynamic composition are not merely plastic techniques, but means of visualising existential states such as fear, loneliness, suffering, and inner dignity. Appeal to existential discourse in A. Melnyk’s project correlates with 20th-century philosophy and contemporary interpretations of cultural trauma, whilst acquiring an individual authorial voice shaped by the Ukrainian wartime context. The study demonstrates that painting in the “Existence” project serves not only a representational function, but also a reflective and ethical one, prompting the viewer to reflect on their own moral compass and responsibility. Thus, the “Existence” series demonstrates the potential of contemporary painting as a tool for coming to terms with war trauma and supporting the spiritual resilience of society, confirming the achievement of the set goal and the fulfillment of the tasks. This material may be used for further comprehensive study of A. Melnyk’s work, as well as for the development of lecture courses on the development of contemporary painting in Ukraine.

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