

## DECODING ALLEGORIA SACRA

### ALLEGORY

Allegory is a form of extended metaphor, in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative are equated with the meanings that lie outside the narrative itself; a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another.

This is similar to the way children play around the apple tree on the painting by Giovanni Bellini. The latter became for AES+F an inspiration source for new interpretation of the category of sacred and for exploring of the very possibility of its integration into the field of contemporary art. The cultural history of humanity has built its fundaments on studying sacred, connecting it to the origin of life and seeing it as a manifestation of a divine plan, which fills the earthly path of a man with a meaning.

Sacred allegory supposes the game of meanings, which contemporary culture considers fundamental. These meanings are forms and directions of the civilization, products of its self-study, its views on natural, its views on a norm; they contain phobias, desires, fantasies and pudency.

### 'ALLEGORIA SACRA' BY GIOVANNI BELLINI

The painting by Giovanni Bellini (1490-1500), depicting a group of seemingly disconnected characters, gathered on the bank of a river, interpreted as Lethe, remains one of the Renaissance paintings whose meaning is not yet completely understood.

The scene is set on a wide terrace with a polychrome marble pavement, in perspective, separated from a river by a parapet. On the left Mary is enthroned, under a baldachin whose support is in cornucopia shape, a symbol of her fertility. The baldachin has four steps, and on its side is a frieze with scenes of the myth of Marsyas, interpreted as a parallel with Jesus' Passion. Near to Mary are two unidentified female figures, which could represent two saints (supposedly St. Catherine is one of them) or two virtues. One of them looks to be floating in the air, although the effect could stem from a loss of color near her legs and feet.

In the middle of the scene are four children playing with a small tree and its silver fruits, perhaps a symbol of the knowledge tree, a symbol of life and wisdom. On the right are Job and St. Sebastian. Outside the parapet, are St. Joseph (or St. Peter) and St. Paul, the latter with his attribute of a sword. He is advancing to the left, where a man with a turban perhaps symbolizes an infidel. In the background, beyond a large lake, is a landscape with rocky spurs with men and animals. On the shores are a shepherd in a grotto, and a centaur.

In the early 20th century, Ludwig interpreted it as a pictorial transcription of the early 14th French poem *Le Pèlerinage de l'Âme* ("Pilgrimage of the Soul"), by Guillaume de Deguileville. According to him, the painting represents the ideal path of purification of the soul. The hermit shepherd would be St. Anthony the Abbot, descending from his hermitage in the spiritual path inspired to the first hermit, St. Paul, and overcoming several obstacles including the centaur which waits for him at the end of the staircase. The terrace would

represent the Paradise Garden, where the souls in Purgatory, symbolized by the children, wait before they are admitted to heaven. Mary, advocate of the men before God, judges the souls with the help of the crowned Justice coronata. Amongst the children, who are playing with the mystic fruits, the one at the tree would be a soul called to the eternal beatitude. The two saints standing on the left would be the patrons, perhaps connected to the works' commissioners, while the two behind the parapet would be Peter and Paul, who guard the gate of Paradise. The river in the background would be Lethe, which surrounds Paradise. The animals would represent the hermits' virtue: the mule for the patience, and the sheep for humility.

According to other scholars, the painting would represent a common holy conversation or a vision of the Paradise. Some see Jesus in the children on the cushion, giving to the work the meaning of a meditation about incarnation and redemption.



### 'ALLEGORIA SACRA' BY AES+F

'Allegoria Sacra' is the last and, according to art critics, the most complex part of 'Liminal Space Trilogy'. It immerses a viewer in a state of endless self-forgetful guessing and decoding of the contained meanings.

Calling their work 'Allegoria Sacra' by the name of Giovanni Bellini's painting, the artists let us know that it deals with life and death.

### CONCEPT

*'This painting has always intrigued us', explain the artists their concept. 'When we started to think of a third project after Last Riot and The Feast of Trimalchio, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and 2009 respectively, we decided that the mysterious image of the Allegoria Sacra was in keeping with our view of the modern world.'*

*We see Bellini's heroes in those passengers who meet accidentally while awaiting their flights at international airports. The feelings of being cut off from one's life and of the as yet unachieved aim of traveling from one world to another are familiar to the majority of those who fly, whether with large or small airlines. We become part of a special club of people who are united by the condition of a body and soul located between the abandoned and*

*the not yet found. Together, i.e. simultaneously, we listen to the flight announcements, watch the flight board with its changing tableau of figures and cities, try to focus on the newspaper, on an SMS or the internet, or simply on the advertisements on the airport monitors. But everyone is wrapped up in himself and it is this, which unites us. There is, perhaps, one more thing we have available and which somehow links us during this interval in time – we look at each other, having never seen one other before and being unlikely to do so again.*

*The airport is Purgatory. Only there does one understand that the knowledge of one's 'tomorrow' is a total illusion. We imagine the airport as a space where reality transforms itself – it gets covered with snow, which alters the interior and then melts, the runway turns in to the river Styx as in Bellini's painting, airplanes become ancient, mystic craft. The lightboxes in Duty Free live a life of their own, showing pictures of heaven. In our new project, Allegoria Sacra, we wish to retain Bellini's metaphorical heroes using the image of modern-day people from various countries and cultures. At the same time we believe that the airport space can include such mythological personalities as the centaur, who we imagine in his literal embodiment. Or the Indian elephant-god Ganesha, with the features of a coffee machine. Even the various companies' planes may take on the image of ancient gods like the eastern dragon.*

*The allegorical heroes of the painting can be seen in those awaiting their flights. The Saracen turns in to a group of transit passengers from Darfur or Peshawar. Sebastian is a young traveler from the exotic countries of the south, naked to the waist and barefoot, having not yet changed his shorts for jeans. Job is represented as an elderly patient being transported on a hi-tech stretcher and covered with tubes, indicators and monitors, who becomes younger before our very eyes and turns in to a magical mutant-baby. A policeman of Biblical appearance carries a sword alongside the more traditional equipment, like Paul. The stewardesses, angels from a new heaven, appear on fantastic flying machines like the cabin crew in Stanley Kubrick's film 2001: A Space Odyssey, and start to serve passengers.*

*The film follows in part the reality of airport life. As well as experiencing the usual crowds of passengers we witness the location and destruction of an unidentified piece of luggage, a fight between migrants, the emergency services helping a patient. Alongside everyday reality we see a whole range of mystical transformations of this world, from a jungle with exotic tribes to an underwater kingdom, then to a snow field which melts to form the river Styx, flowing to the horizon in to an endless sea in the direction which the passengers will eventually fly, their planes becoming mystical craft...'*

## INTERPRETATIONS

If 'Feast of Trimalchio', the second part of trilogy, was a story about the external event, which takes place somewhere far away, and viewers alienate themselves from its characters, 'Allegoria Sacra' is a narrative which is unfolding now, in the present, and is made in such a way that we can not distant ourselves and feel innocent and secure. It is involving. It is us who are there.

## SPACE

Contemporary Purgatory is not Dante's mountain-island with seven terraces, but a futuristic waiting hall, reminiscent of Zaha Hadid architecture. 'I am the path and the truth and the life', says God's Son in the text of Gospel of John. Might it be that this is why the

action in video takes place in an airport, where the time is spent in waiting for the path, the journey, i.e. waiting for life? A viewer has to define what life and what reality is. The confined space of the airport and the planes, long-frozen in the snow, look like a mockery over the way and content of life of a new man. Similar to the way Dante's Mount Purgatory on the far side of the world is separated from everything by the endless sea, this modern airport, concentrated depiction of 'global', has no outside world around it. The snowfields, the jungle, the waters outside of its bubble-like walls are only visions of its passengers.

Allegoria Sacra is not only apocryphal version of one of the sacred stories, but at the same time a live broadcast from the place, translated by surveillance cameras. The spectator is simultaneously in different places and belongs to different stories. It is this effect that brings us back to experiencing here and now and to taking the decision on the threshold of the world, which has no borders, where is only a waiting hall.

## CHARACTERS

The representatives of various races, nationalities, social groups, religions and confessions are gathered in the space of an airport in expectation of their delayed flights. The protagonists, disconnected from each other, face their own dreams, loanings and fears. The visions of passengers merge into a new mythical reality, a metaphor for modern civilization.

The children playing under the apple tree in the painting by Bellini are interpreted as placed into Purgatory souls, for whom saints are praying. Apples symbolize human sins, and one of the babies is interpreted as Christ. AES+F have placed children in the waiting hall: an African child, probably as a wink to democratic concept of tolerance, and angelic blond twin-girls.



Allegoria Sacra. Giovanni Bellini. Fragment

Three female figures by Bellini, Maria and two saints, one of whom is seen as St. Catherine, are present in the airport as a Woman in Red (might the seductive bright red of her dress have replaced the blue of Maria's cloak, symbol of her virginity?) and a female couple, pulling a carriage with the obviously adopted African baby, a nod to sexual freedom and family institutes of contemporary society.

Two fathers in AES+F video with their symmetrical identical twin daughters, balancing between Nabokov's Gumbert Gumbert with Lolita and homosexuality, might as well refer to the variety of family forms in contemporary western society. They might represent people of 21<sup>st</sup> century like in the painting by Bellini figures on the opposite bank of Lethe are living their common life.



Allegoria Sacra. AES+F. Still 3-1-04 from 1-channel video. 2011

The centaur, a character taken from ancient Greek mythology, combining upper body of a human with the lower body of a horse, embodies worldly temptations, which obstruct the road to virtue. In the same manner, how this hybrid creature, belonging to the period half a millennia BC appears alongside with the characters of Christian sacred books in one pictorial plane under Bellini's brush, so he feels natural among futuristic environment of the airport among 21<sup>st</sup> century personages. Though barely noticeable at the background of the 15<sup>th</sup> century painting, he becomes one of the main characters in the video-work and digital collages.

Saracen wearing a turban from the painting by Bellini, who symbolized non-Christian 'infidel', turned in the AES+F video into a group of Middle Eastern men. Dressed in traditional clothing, which serves as a distinguishing mark of the other culture, alien to European, they are perceived as a potential threat. In his book 'Clash of civilisations' (1996) political scientist Samuel P. Huntington proposed that people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflicts in the post-Cold War world.

### St. Paul

*'...We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places'* These words could have come from the global world leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, defending democratic values with the help of troops. Yet they belong to Apostle Paul, with his sword he banishes 'the unfaithful' (not Christian) Saracen from the peaceful scene at the Lethe's bank. Heavily armed as a policeman, Apostle Paul of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the work by AES+F guards the airport hall and destroys the nightmare of these times – the unattended luggage, Louis Vuitton bag, which explodes with confetti of perfume and personal belongings. Sharp as a sword criticism of the society of fear and consumerism. In a characteristic for AES+F mix of aesthetics, St. Paul wears an outfit reminiscent of a Robocop and computer game imagery but takes poses, typical for baroque or mannerist

paintings. On the right panel of 'Jungle Elegy' triptych the saint is kneeled as if in an adoration for the new born Messiah.

As it happened before, with their 'Islamic Project' (1996), made years before 9/11, which showed the Statue of Liberty dressed in burka, 'Allegoria Sacra' (2011-2012) by AES+F is again prophetic. The Robocops dressed in shields and helmets appear on European streets and in public spaces as a symptomatic sign of the days after Charlie Hebdo and Batlakan.

*'Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the tactics of the Devil. Stand, therefore, with truth like a belt around your waist, righteousness like armor on your chest, and your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace. In every situation take the shield of faith, and with it you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word.'*  
Apostle Paul in Letter to Ephesians, 6:10-18

St. Sebastian, the early Christian saint and martyr, commonly depicted shot with arrows, is embodied in a long-haired young man. Half-naked in shorts and sandals, as if a tourist, just arrived from a tropical destination, he is trapped in the transit zone, the Purgatory. In the course of the video a huge centipede – a symbol of death and rebirth - emerges from his backpack and climbs over the sleeping passengers. On the contrary to Bellini's painting, where he's placed at the foreground, St. Sebastian of AES+F takes his place at the background on the left panel of the triptych 'Jungle Elegy'. The artist group shows him canonically tied to a tree, but this time to a palm



Job, prophet featured in Judaic, Christian and Islamic religious books, stands next to St. Sebastian on the painting of Bellini. Righteous man, he was put to sufferings, which took away his children, wealth and health, by Old Testament God, who decided to challenge Job's faith. Rewarded for his faith with long 140 years life and 10 children, this character has become a symbol of patience in suffering. His intuitive recognition of divine will is opposed to philosophical constructions built on the power of reason. Russian philosopher Berdyaev wrote, regarding the story of Job: 'A man can hardly give up the purposefulness of what is happening in the world, and therefore, can not understand the suffering of innocent. If the latter exists, people conclude that there is no God and no divine will'. Is this story not actual today, when the collective soul of humanity is challenged by merciless terrorist attacks? AES+F depict Job as a patient transported through the airport on a hospital bed, probably a hint of his biblical physical sufferings. We see the elder between life and death, in transition, or in coma, which art critic Alexander Balashov comments as a metaphor to a coma state of contemporary culture.



The stewardesses, assisting the passengers, dressed in white, look like as if they appeared from Stanley Kubrick's '2001: A Space Odyssey'. They are angels of a new heaven. Placed in the centre of the triptych 'Jungle Elegy', one of them carrying the newly born baby, these characters remind of the angels from 'Mystical Nativity' by Sandro Botticelli (1500-1501).

The surrealist mixture of mass media stereotypes, fantasy films, comics and iconic symbols of new and ancient religions reaches its culmination at the point when the old man, who embodies prophet Job from Bellini's painting, dies and reincarnates into a new-

born mutant baby, a new Messiah. The dialogue with Italian painter is not accidental. Bellini worked on the turn of two epochs, when the aesthetics of the Renaissance, which emphasized the value of an individual, was just taking shape. Modern civilization is also on the threshold of an evolutionary leap. With the invention of Web 2.0 and extreme intensification of information flows we are witnessing the birth of a new collective nervous system. A new man, Generation Z, born after 9/11 and living in the virtual space will build the future. Will the new processes lead to new achievements of human civilization or will they result in destruction – time will show.

AES+F through their own visual language, which exploits fashion photography, advertising, popular culture, classical art heritage and aesthetics of old masters, analyse the modern world, presenting the aching points of today's reality.

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