

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

SPECIAL SECTION

The Threat to Artistic Freedom in Hungary

There are images that can evoke a time . . .



There are images that can evoke a time, that are condensations of the crises, schisms, and hopes, the most salient phenomena, of an epoch. Max Ernst's *L'Ange du Foyer*, 1937, and *Europe After the Rain II*, 1940-42, come to mind as emblematic in great part of our epoch. And we might do better to reach farther back for the image of the temper of our time, to the image of Saturn devouring his children by Goya or Rubens, to the devouring god that may be another of the more trenchant and defining images of the 21st century. Era of sacrifice, cannibalism, and madness. Era of cruelty, mercilessness, and the corruption of power.

Over the past days, we have smelled the sweat, seen the blood, witnessed the fires, and heard the *schrei* of the human voice rise in protest, objugating Saturn. The world has been watching as the streets of Egypt have burst with revolutionary fervor, all of it concentrated in Cairo's Tahrir Square, where protestors demanded a transvaluation of the existing political regime. After sustained and persistent demonstrations, on February 11, 2011, Hosni Mubarak relinquished his presidency after 30 years of autocratic rule, handing authority to the Supreme Council of the armed forces, an entity equivalent to our Joint Chiefs of Staff. Ecstatic cries still resound in the street and they are resonating around the world, but transformations are slow and painstaking, and threats remain.

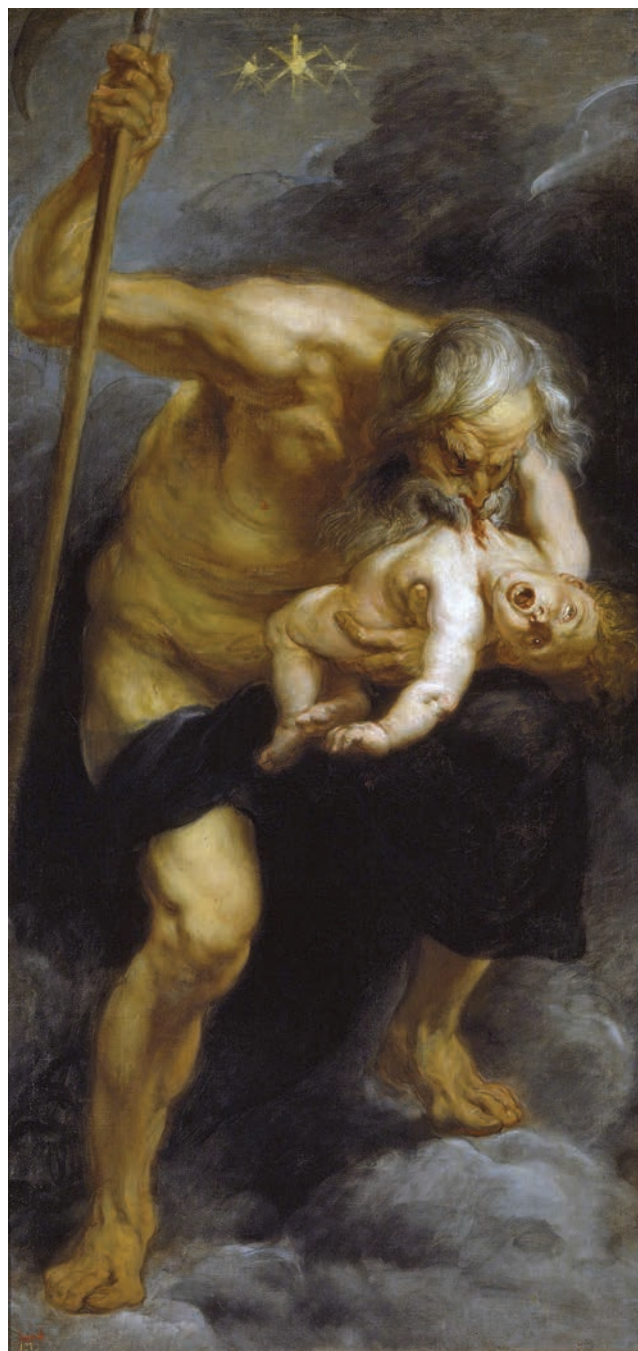
What has been erupting in Egypt resembles the European revolution of two decades ago. Egypt is engaging in what the Eastern European bloc did at that time. With the revolutions of 1989, Soviet-style communist states in the Eastern bloc were dismantled, and within one year, the dictators of countries from Poland to Hungary, East Germany, and Romania were displaced, and the Berlin Wall fell, which symbolized the political transfiguration and the cessation of more than 40 years of dictatorial communist rule.

Yet, constant vigilance remains necessary. Nothing is settled forever. Despite the bracing and vivifying news coming from Cairo, news of an entire population risking their lives to bring authentic democracy to their country, there are also increasing signs that a resurgence of oppressive and nullifying forces is at hand in the world.

One can see it in the very tools that helped make the Egyptian uprising possible: the Internet and, in particular, the new social media. They make universal communication possible, but where there is no crisis calling for knowledge and organized opposition, often we see just the opposite: complacency, smallness of mind, thoughtlessness in place of inquiry, and

the division of interest into “enclaves of petty obsession.” Intelligence is being eclipsed by stupidity, self-reliance by ever so subtle modes of conformity, and true invention by utility, or the pervasive and engulfing juggernaut of consumerism, which often if not generally neutralizes or simply erases that which is singular and rarefied through obscuring it with its squid-like cloud of suffocating black ink. There is a peril upon us, and it is evident in the very refusal to think, in social media forums and blogs where opinion masquerades for thought and self-criticality is absent. Where cynicism is mistaken for insight when it is often nothing but an attitudinal pose—the disaffectedness of the self-consumed misfit. If a culture yields nothing but forms of escape, of empty spectacles where titillation and visual effects eschew silence and the truly oneiric, then it is not a culture, merely a narcotic industry whose soporific does not appear in the form of a pill or other supposed medicine, but as entertainment—that which is meant to amuse, to divert the attention, to beguile and delude. Entertainment is a drug. It deceives and cheats, provokes us to lose ourselves, not to remain aware, cogent, thinking, questioning beings who strive for knowledge and insight, even if it is the insight of our limits, before which we can only stand with our questions.

The Internet and universal communication has made 1984 an obsolete nightmare. Governmental authority is no longer capable of defining truth and rewriting history, for it is no longer capable of controlling information—it has been made merely one voice among many. (And perhaps the famous Apple 1984 commercial was more prescient than we could have realized then.) But in place of one threat, another arrives: the complacency of instantaneity, the meagerness of immediate gratification, and the cacophony of the mash up, the compounding of all voices together that amounts to the eradication of the individual voice, and with it, the individual will, the individual conscience—the self-reliant individual in its entirety. At its extreme, this is the mentality of the totalitarian state, coming not by imposition



COVER:
Francisco de Goya
Saturn Devouring His Son
1819-23

ABOVE:
Peter Paul Rubens
Saturn Devouring His Son
1636

but through spontaneous accretion, and those of a totalitarian bent presage it in their preference for the narcotic to the question—that is why the writer, the artist, the poet, the painter, the director *et al* are feared, because such figures, when they are truly what they fashion themselves to be, refuse the narcotic, maintain their status as fiercely individual voices, and demand that we remain awake, even while dreaming—for lucidity, even in the midst of the dream, is the harbinger of freedom. Even though a volley of bullets cut Lorca down, his voice has not been silenced.

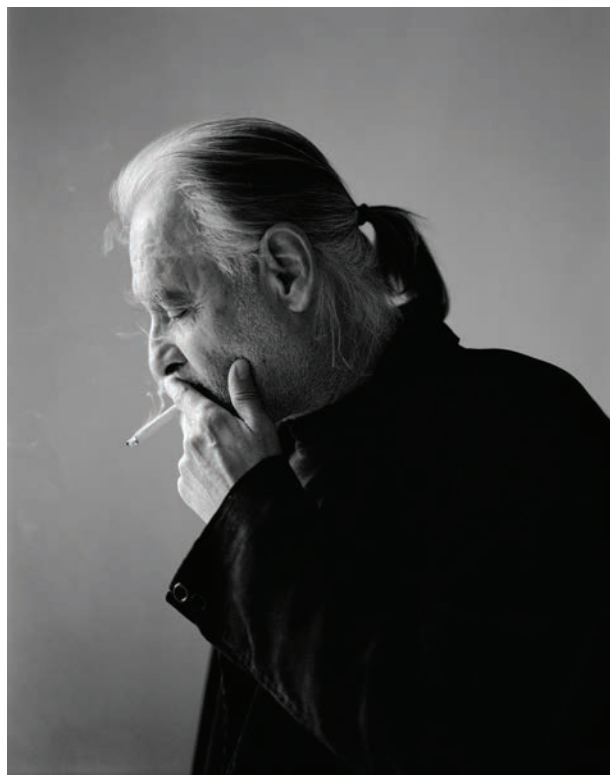
Although the complete governmental authority over heart and mind of 1984 is no longer possible, measures of totalitarianism still can return by imposition, can be attempted again as they were managed before. At this moment, one can see the threat most particularly and pertinently in one of the countries that, two decades ago, overthrew the oppressive forces whose defeat Cairo now celebrates. In Hungary, one can see the returning threat of the suppression of dissident voices, the eradication of the singular, idiosyncratic vision that is predicated upon such unerring lucidity, upon the oneiric and its power of transfiguration. On December 21, 2010, parliamentarians in Budapest approved a contentious new media law that would give unilateral power over all media sources to a state regulatory body, the National Media and Communications Authority's (NMHH) Médiatanács (Media Council of the Hungarian Media Regulatory Office). NMHH is largely composed of figures loyal to the Hungarian ruling Fidesz party, a major right-wing national conservative political party whose president is Victor Orbán. Médiatanács will oversee all public and private media bodies, including national broadcasters and the Hungarian news agency MTI. Editorial content will be overseen and monitored and all media outlets are expected to provide “balanced coverage.” Whatever Médiatanács does not deem appropriate journalistic conduct may be censored. The media law enables Médiatanács to levy fines against all media sources convicted in libel cases. In addition, it can suspend or revoke the licenses of any media entity in cases of repeated infringements.

Nearly two weeks later, on January 1, 2011, the same day that Hungary assumed presidency of the EU (a six-month rotating position), the government enacted the new media law, which Arne König, President of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), said would “create a blanket of self-censorship across the country’s media.” Other nations have voiced concern over the new law and the EFJ argues that it is in breach of the Charter for Fundamental Rights and Article 11 on media freedom and media pluralism. The EFJ is demanding that European institutions vigilantly monitor the impact of the law on citizens’ rights and is anxious that the growing Hungarian crisis may presage the deterioration of rights in other EU states. König noted that the crisis is not particular to Hungary alone, that similar circumstances arise in Romania. The Hungarian Association of Journalists wrote a protest petition and continued efforts are being made against the law. Other organizations,

including the European Newspaper Publishers' Association (ENPA) and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, have roundly condemned the bill and written their own letters of protest.

As reported by the European Federation of Journalists, some of the revolutionary fervor that we have witnessed in Egypt has been erupting in Hungary. On January 14, 2011, "approximately 10,000 people including members of the Hungarian Association of Journalists protested in front of the Parliament Budapest objecting the controversial new Media Law." Social media outlets were instrumental in the organization of the protest, at which a proclamation was addressed to the Hungarian Parliament, government, and constitutional court demanding amendments be made to the media bill and that it undergo constitutional examination for its violation of free speech. The protest was claimed to be one of the largest demonstrations for free speech since the fall of the Iron Curtain. A sister protest was held in Vienna at the Hungarian Embassy.

Further efforts are being made against those not in line with the ruling ideological forces. On February 4, 2011, the *Science Insider* reported that numerous philosophers and scientists are under investigation by the Hungarian government for the alleged misuse of research funds. As reported by *Magyar Nemzet*, philosophers Ágnes Heller and Mihály Vajda were linked to the supposed fraud, and literary scholar Sándor Radnóti was also indicted. Heller argued recently that she and others are being persecuted "because of their liberal or leftist inclinations, because [we] criticize in the domestic and the foreign press certain strategies of the present rightist government, especially the strategies of Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, who in my view is behind this harassment." Jürgen Habermas and Julian Nida-Rümelin, president of the German Philosophical Society, denounced the proceedings as "the scandal of scandals" and have issued a manifesto, *Schützt die Philosophen!*, protesting the actions. Despite such protests, the Hungarian government has not relented, and its investigation is now also focusing on funding that historians have received. Many of the thinkers under scrutiny were classed as dissidents during communist rule, and all of them have been extremely critical of Orbán and the ideological bent of his party. Not surprisingly, what Heller has called an "inquisition" began just a day subsequent to the publication of an open letter that 70 civil rights activists



from throughout Europe signed, protesting what they deemed the collapse of democracy in Hungary.

As many writers, philosophers, and artists fear, these events may be symptomatic of the onset of a sub-fascist state. In addition, there are state plans to reconfigure and reform the film industry. Previously, the Hungarian film industry was a democratic, self-governing structure. Now, it is to be overseen by one person, Andrew G. Vajna, famed for producing such significant and estimable narcotics as the *Rambo* series and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*. As reported by the international newspaper *France 24*, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s right-wing government named Hungarian-born U.S. producer Andrew G. Vajna [...] as government commissioner in charge of reforming the film industry.” After this decision was made in January 2011, Béla Tarr wrote a declaration protest and, in cooperation with numerous other filmmakers, sent it to the Hungarian news agency MTI. It appeared to the general public on Monday, February 7, in *Népszabadság*, one of the main daily Hungarian newspapers. (*Hyperion* received the text through private correspondence.) In his protest declaration, Tarr asserts that culture is a basic human right and emphasizes the significance and singularity of Hungarian films, which use their own “autonomous artistic language” to “inform the world” about their country and its fate. Opposing this autocratic rule and reformation of the film industry were numerous other directors and artists, all of whom expressed their fidelity to and solidarity with what Tarr called in his declaration “the survival of the polyphony of Hungarian film!”

Although the creation of art is not contingent upon institutions and art will survive without them, direct attacks upon such institutions, however dubious or farcical some of them sometimes can be, are symbolic of more pernicious forces. Here in America, the Republican Study Committee recently introduced to Congress the *Spending Reduction Act of 2011*, new legislation that would cut government spending throughout the next decade in order to “resolve the growing debt crisis and preserve the American Dream.” Their plan to reduce spending by \$2.5 trillion dollars in the next 10 years includes but is not limited to eliminating in its entirety all funding to PBS (Public Broadcasting System), the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts), and the NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities). Even though few of us in the arts depend on grants from such institutions, what is evident here is that art and education are not part of “the American Dream” for the Republican Study Committee, and that concerns everyone. If no one is being silenced here as artists may be in Hungary and as Jafar Panahi and others are in Iran, there is an echo of such oppressive forces. And Orbán’s regime is making cuts quite similar to those that the Republican Study Committee wish to make here in America. Slated for termination include nearly 40 different foundations, including one for assisting the homeless, the Foundation for the Gypsies of Hungary, the Gandhi Foundation, established to educate the Roma, and the foundation

for the collection of classic Hungarian films. Social, educational, and artistic elements are all then under fire.

Before this affront to the oneiric powers, which have always terrified those who find transfiguration and the exploration and articulation of it inimical to ruling forces that want to retain control, it is imperative to sound our voices in protest. In the future, the artistic version of the Underground Railroad and the French Resistance may be necessary. For now, the actions of those in Egypt show us that revolutionary forces are not limited to 1789 or 1968, or to 1848 and 1956, and that autocracies still must be and still can be dismantled. The impossible promise remains just within our grasp.

For links to numerous news reports and copies of significant documents concerning the Hungarian crisis, please visit:
http://www.nietzschemcircle.com/hyperion_hungary.html.

In the near future, *Hyperion* will be providing additional material, including original statements from several of the participants in the developing resistance to the new Hungarian media authority.

The Editors of Hyperion