

After History: Alexandre Kojève as a Photographer

20.05.–15.07.2012

BAK, basis voor actuele kunst

Boris Groys

The Photographer as the Sage

Our cultural memory can be entered in very different ways. Some authors assert their historical presence with their first book, artwork, or film, and the public can then follow their personal trajectories from early on in their careers. We experience such authors as always already familiar to us. Other authors are only partially present and exposed to the public view during their lifetimes. It is only after their deaths, and very slowly, that their figures begin to emerge and take shape in the public memory and imagination. As a rule, such known but unfamiliar authors are cultural migrants endowed with complicated and fragmentary biographies. Alexandre Kojève was one such cultural migrant, and even if he is well known to specialists in twentieth century philosophy and political history, he has remained rather unfamiliar to the greater public and his historical figure has only recently begun to take on a distinct shape.

Kojève was born in 1902 in Moscow as Aleksandr Kozhevnikov. His family was rich, politically well connected, and culturally aware. It is important to mention that he was the painter Wassily Kandinsky's nephew. Kojève left Soviet Russia in 1919 for Germany, where he kept himself afloat by doing business, and, at the same time, was studying philosophy. In 1926 he received his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Heidelberg under the direction of German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers—one of the most important representatives, besides Martin Heidegger, of the phenomenological school of philosophy that was founded by their teacher Edmund Husserl. But it was not until after his emigration to France in 1933 that Kojève developed his own philosophical discourse on the “post-histoire” [post-history], which in many ways defined our understanding of postmodernity, and thus our present moment.¹

¹ Postmodernity and the notion of post-history were at that time thought to be linked through their mutual reference to a social, political, and artistic consciousness that emerges in an era that no longer relies on a belief in progress and the teleological instruments needed to achieve it.

Indeed, since the emergence of the discourse on postmodernity several decades ago, we have repeatedly been confronted with the discourse on the end of not only history but also, of subjectivity, art, as well as the death of man, the death of the author in particular, and the impossibility of creativity and the new in present culture. This discourse has its origin in the course of lectures on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) that was given by Kojève at l'École des hautes études in Paris from 1933 to 1939. This course was regularly attended by leading French intellectuals such as Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, André Breton, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Raymond Aron. The transcripts of Kojève's lectures circulated in Parisian intellectual circles and were widely read, notably by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. These lectures—they were known under the simple title *Séminaire*²—acquired a semi-mythical status at that time and kept this status almost until now. While the discourse on the impending end of history is not new, Kojève's approach offers something different in proposing that the end of history does not wait for us in the future as is usually thought. Rather, the end of history already took place in the past, namely, during the Napoleonic wars—as it was certified by Hegelian philosophy. According to Kojève, the end of history came into being through the French Revolution as it enabled the universal recognition of the human desires. We have thus already lived after the end of history and under the post-historical condition for a relatively long time. We are just not fully aware of this condition, yet.

This transfer of the end of history from the future into the past came as news when Kojève tried to make the notion plausible to his audience. However, Kojève consistently maintained that he never tried to say anything new, because saying anything new had become impossible. He pretended to simply repeat, reproduce the text of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* without adding anything to it. Beyond some short articles, Kojève never published any of his philosophical writings during his lifetime. His course on Hegel published after WWII titled *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'École des Hautes Études* (1947) is a fairly loose patchwork of texts and notes written by Kojève alongside transcripts made by those who attended the lectures. This heterogeneous collection of text fragments was produced not by Kojève himself, but by the Surrealist writer Raymond Queneau. After the war, Kojève abandoned philosophy altogether because to philosophize after the end of history did not make sense to him anymore. Instead, Kojève began a diplomatic-bureaucratic career. As a representative of France in the European Commission, Kojève became one of the creators of the contemporary European Union. He worked out an agreement on the European Common Customs Tariff, which is still one of the important pillars of the European economic system. Kojève died from a heart attack during one of

² Jacques Lacan later named his own course of lectures *Séminaire*, which started after Kojève's death.

the meetings of the European Commission in 1968. One could say that Kojève was a kind of Arthur Rimbaud of modern bureaucracy—a philosophical writer who consciously became a martyr of the post-historical bureaucratic order.

Today, the discourse on post-historicity, or postmodernity—both marking an era beyond a belief in progress—is ubiquitous in the art context: almost nobody believes in the possibility of creating a new artistic form. But we still have no single example—with the exception of Kojève’s texts—of theoretical writing that proclaims its own complete non-originality. We have a lot of such examples in the field of literature and art but not in the field of theory. Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, or Jacques Derrida—who have written extensively about the death of the author—never said that their own texts were completely non-original, that they were in fact merely the repetitions of existing and well-known theoretical writing. Under our postmodern condition, theory is the last area where the claim of originality is allowed and even required from the writer. So the case of Kojève continues to be unique and exceptional. Through his proto-postmodern claim of non-originality, Kojève is the only philosophical writer who can be compared to artists Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, or Pierre Menard (the hero of the famous tale by Jorge Luis Borges). That is why the singularity of the Kojévian claim of his own non-originality calls for even more attention than his philosophical ideas themselves.

Now, the Kojévian contention that we live after the end of history could easily be misunderstood as an expression of the uncritical acceptance of the political status quo. It would seem that if history already came to an end then political change is no longer possible. However, Kojève’s political position is rather that of an activist. When Kojève speaks about the end of history he means the end of a search for the optimal social order. He believes, however, that this search was successful. According to the Kojévian interpretation of Hegel, the optimal social and political order is embodied by the secular, universal, and homogeneous state in which every human being is equally recognized. Such a state was already envisioned by Napoleon after the French Revolution, and well over a century later, an attempt to create such a state was undertaken again following the Russian October Revolution. Like Karl Marx before him, Kojève believes that after the emergence of Hegelian philosophy, the time had come not to interpret the world, but to change it.

But, unlike Marx, Kojève is interested not in revolutionary but in post-revolutionary politics. When a revolution succeeds what should happen on the day after? The universal and homogeneous state can be revolutionarily proclaimed, but what does it mean to build such a state? If one takes a look at the political reality of our present moment, it becomes obvious that we still do not live in a universal and

homogeneous state. The financial markets have become globalized but politics are still national and local. We still live in a plurality of nation states that are driven by national egoism. And these states are in no way homogeneous, rather, they are characterized by a growing gap between rich and poor, as well as by multiple ethnic conflicts. Beyond that we are confronted today with the neoliberal discourse directed against the state in all its forms—especially against the social state, state support for education and culture, etc. The concept of the universal and homogeneous state is, indeed, already formulated and the modern revolutions opened a way to its realization, but this state by no means became a political reality. Thus, it would be wrong to identify the Kojévian interpretation of the end of history with its interpretation in Francis Fukuyama's essay "The End of History?" published in 1989 that popularized the notion of the end of history. Fukuyama uses Kojévian thought in a very substantial manner. In fact, his book can be seen as an effect of rewriting and updating Kojève's *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*. However, Fukuyama misses the central point of Kojève's political philosophy: the universal and homogeneous state also remains a project after the revolution—an abstraction that needs to be realized through the efforts of the sage. In this respect Kojève's political philosophy is as relevant today as it was in his time.

Kojève's characterization of his own attitude is consistent with his consideration of what it means to secure the homogeneous state. Instead of characterizing his attitude as that of the philosopher, he believed his attitude to be that of the sage. The philosopher is moved by his desire for absolute knowledge, by his love of Sophia. The ideal of absolute knowledge can be realized, according to Kojève, only under the conditions of mutual recognition of all human beings. In other words, the philosopher strives for self-sacrifice and revolution in the name of the state in which universal recognition would become reality. In contrast, the sage is somebody who has already satisfied his desire for revolutionary change; he is a philosopher in a post-revolutionary, post-historical society. The sage does not need to invent a new revolution, but to implement the program of the revolution that already took place. In other words, the sage deals with the administration of the post-revolutionary state. The sage becomes a functionary or, to use the term that was introduced by philosopher Julien Benda in his famous essay "La trahison des clercs" (1927), a clerk of this post-revolutionary state. And by being a clerk the sage has to actively realize the goals that had only been proclaimed by the revolution, that is, the universal and homogeneous state in which everybody is recognized to the same degree. As Kojève says, the philosopher strives for success—specifically in literary output, or, today, media presence—but the sage strives for achievement.

According to Kojève, post-historical reality is defined by a divorce between the content of human desire, which is the animal hunger for food and sex, and the specifically human, cultural, symbolic

form that this desire has historically taken. The post-historical man struggles only for satisfaction of his desires of the first degree, his animal desires, but not for the desire of the second degree, the properly human, or even, according to Kojève, “anthropogenic” desire to be recognized. The return of humans to their elementary animal desires is an effect of establishing the universal and homogeneous state. Yet such a return simultaneously endangers this state, since post-historical humanity tends to forget its history and even the end of history and the essence of the post-historical condition. Thus, the role of the sage is to keep the historical memory intact—to defend and reaffirm the historical project of the universal and homogeneous state. The sage does not strive for a new revolution but prevents the achievements of the previous revolutions from being lost.

After he had developed his understanding of the role of the post-revolutionary intellectual, and once WWII had ended, Kojève began working as a clerk by representing France in different international institutions. He began to collect postcards with images of historical monuments and works of art, and to practice photography. Kojève produced more than 5,000 photographs and collected many thousands of postcards that one can find in his archive at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. The photographs that Kojève made during his travels reflect his administrative view of the world combined with a certain post-historical melancholy. On the surface of it, Kojève’s photography simply documents the travels that he undertook in his role as political dignitary, mostly in Europe and Asia between 1959 and 1968. However, one could argue that Kojève’s photographic work is a continuation of his philosophy by other means.

First of all, every photographic practice has a lot in common with administrative work. In the old days, painters produced images through the immediate involvement of their bodies. The painter was basically a handworker. But photographers are not manual workers. Rather, they do everything that an administrator does. They select, choose a standpoint, collect, or discard. Their gaze is a sovereign gaze. It does not produce images but consumes and orders them. At the same time, the figure of the traveling administrator, like Kojève, reminds one of the flâneur, as it was described by Walter Benjamin—of the tourist in search of profane illuminations, for example, images that fascinate in spite of their ordinary, profane character. For Benjamin such images are images that produce in the subject the feeling of happiness, of fullness of life (like the Italian landscape that Benjamin evokes in his famous 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”). However, Kojève is much more interested in the images of the past, in the historical monuments that remind one of the time before the end of history. Kojève’s photographs manifest and confirm his faithfulness to the event of history, in the midst of post-historical reality.

Photography often tries to catch a unique moment of life, to eternalize the fleeting “now” with the click of a camera. But Kojève totally ignores the chances that are offered by photography to stop the flow of time. Instead, he photographs only the monuments that already relate to the past, that already represent arrested, immobilized time. In this respect, Kojève makes no exception for his native Russia. The Soviet Union that Kojève had visited in the 1950s and 1960s looked very different from the Russia that he left in 1919. Nevertheless, Kojève does not let himself be fascinated by the new Soviet reality. Instead, he obstinately photographs old Russian churches. Looking at his images, one would wonder in which century they were taken. At the same time, Kojève was anything but an Orthodox Christian believer. Quite on the contrary, Kojève adamantly proclaimed his own consequent and uncompromising atheism. Thus, Kojève indicates—with his photographic strategy—that Soviet socialism is for him merely another version of the same mode of existence in the post-history that is characteristic of states in the West.

As indicated earlier, Kojève collected many thousands of postcards representing different historical monuments and artworks from different countries—a part of this collection is on display in the present exhibition. Kojève adopts this anonymous and highly conventional postcard style in making his own photographs. It is possible to say that Kojève photographs the photography itself—by appropriating the style of postcard photography and repeating it. Kojève’s photography celebrates the disappearance of the subject in the neutrality, anonymity, and objectivity of the camera’s gaze. One can see here a parallel to Warhol’s paintings or Richard Prince’s early photographs that practiced the same neutral, emotionless repetition of images of American mass culture. Surely, at first glance Kojève repeats not the mass culture of his time, but represents the monuments of the glorious historical past of Europe. But Kojève does it in a style of cheap, mass-produced postcards and in this way establishes a connection to the artistic concerns of his time.

It is no accident that the artistic practice and discourse of post-history and postmodernity took photography as its main point of reference. The initially reproductive, non-original character of photography has made it the leading medium of our time. Indeed, in today’s society, photography takes place continuously and ubiquitously. Anyone who looks at a photographic image will often enough find himself in the position of both photographer and photographic model. Here again the social status of photography differs from that of painting. Not everybody is a painter, and not everybody is painted. But every observer of a photograph is, at least potentially, a photographer or a photographic model. And everybody who looks at a photograph finds it easy to identify with the photographer’s strategies of self-dramatization, self-concealment, narcissism, or voyeurism.

In the context of his photographic work, Kojève continues the strategy of original non-originality that he already pursued in his philosophical writing. Applied to photography, this strategy raises an old but still valid question: is photography art? To take Kojève as an example, can we interpret his photography as artistic work? For a relatively long time an artwork was defined as something other than an ordinary object or image. But in our postmodern times a visually recognizable difference between an artwork and an ordinary object ceased to be a criterion for art. Accordingly, an individual photograph made with artistic intent needs not differ visibly from an ordinary photograph any more in order to be recognized as art. Today the difference is produced in the placing of an individual photograph in a certain aesthetic, ideological, or political context. Thus, photographs by Kojève could be seen, when considered individually, as ordinary tourist photographs since Kojève consciously made them in a stylistically neutral manner. But they can and should be considered as artistic works when they are considered within the context of Kojève's philosophy and political practice—because then the overall artistic strategy emerges behind the surface of the individual images.

Over time Kojève's strategy shifted. While his images of Europe and Russia are consistently post-historical, their mood changes when he begins to photograph Asia. Already in the context of his analysis of abstract paintings by his uncle Kandinsky, Kojève spoke about the commitment to pure form that could save post-historical humanity from falling into pure animality now that history has come to an end.³ During his travels through Japan Kojève believed he discovered that Japanese culture was the best manifestation of a commitment to pure form, contending that he would prefer the Japanization of Europe to its Americanization. In his famous footnote to the second edition of his *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Kojève writes that his voyage to Japan in 1959 has shown him a society in which self-sacrifice (in the form of gratuitous suicide) as well as Noh theater, the tea ceremony etc., also remain possible after the end of history. Here the subject, he writes, is still opposed to the object in the name of pure form—even if the historical action negating “the given” disappears. And for Kojève the ability to say “no” to reality as it is remains the only criterion for humans to preserve their humanity. In relation to Japanese culture, Kojève spoke about “snobbery” and noted that an animal can never be a snob. That is why Kojève's photographs of Asia, and

³ Alexandre Kojève, “Les peintures concrètes de Kandinsky” (Paris, 1936). An abridged version of this manuscript was first published under the title “Pourquoi concret” in *XXe Siècle*, no. 27 (December 1966). The original manuscript was published in Alexandre Kojève, Vassily Kandinsky, and Christian Zervos, *Correspondances avec Zervos et Kojève*, comp. Christian Derouet, Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne, Hors-série/Archives (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1993).

especially Japan, present a harmony between humans, architecture, and nature that Kojève missed in Europe. Thus, in Asia, Kojève has found his profane illumination, after all.