

## Historical and Aesthetical Discourse of Greek Culture: Clio as a Muse Too

Natalya Anatolyavna Tereshenko and Tatyana Mikhailovna Shatunova  
Kazan Federal University, Kremlevskaya Str. 35, 420008 Kazan, Russia

---

**Abstract:** Modern world presents us with unappealing forms of interaction of humans and their historical past. Oblivion of historic experience, neglecting historical facts and their distortion depending on man's needs is becoming a norm. These negative tendencies in development of historical consciousness are becoming common thing. In such conditions aestheticization is a form of keeping human content of historical process. However, it opens the question regarding genuineness of aesthetic interpretation of historical reality and regarding legitimacy of the wish to see reflection of real course of historical events in fictional work. This text is dedicated to the question of possibility and legitimacy of using history in aesthetic and artistic dimension.

**Key words:** History as a piece of art, aestheticization, historical and aesthetical discourse, genuineness of interpretation, aesthetic

---

### INTRODUCTION

European history of the latest one and a half millenniums as was accurately noted by O. Spengler is a result of conscious actions, human's well-directed creative efforts. Let us ask a simple question: Is it possible to consider this historical creativity in the ways like we consider labour activity in general, i.e. as creativity "in terms of any other types and thereby in terms of the rules of beauty as well" (Marx and Engels, 1974). In other words, does history (as well as mythology, religion and art) has its beautiful, humane face? Can we speak about History as a real world of human life and human culture? Can it actually face a human? These questions are by no means idle ones, especially if we remember that history is mainly interacting with people by pulling its arms, covered with blood of wars, fierce social cataclysms and the events that more often tear and cripple people's lives when enormous numbers of people become victims of historical circumstances.

Historical processes, just like natural phenomena, sometimes also take its "pure", developed form that is consistent with its essence. Then, we may speak about history's phenomenology (according to Heidegger, phenomenon is nothing but a thing in which its essence is reflected in the most apparent and adequate way). Historians and philosophers have been searching for such pure forms from olden times. History has its classics (which is by no means always coincide with classical epochs in development of culture or arts): classical capitalism of England classical bourgeois revolutions of France, well-developed slavery of Rome. There are also

other classics the classics of transitive epochs. It is the wave crest that reveals historical maximum of two historical forms, meeting each other: patriarchal slavery of the Athens developed at the turn of primitive communal and police relations, Hellenism as a path from mythological and Christian world, etc. Historical forms interchange they come and go in the sphere of human activity and this sphere is the one where aesthetic rules start being effective. And there is more to it than only a fact that in aesthetical categories people investigate and describe the course of historical events. The history itself is often unfolds as a drama of human life or the life of the entire nation; history plays its tragedies and farces; outmoded historical form must be funny in order to perish completely. The last phase of global historical form is a comedy since, the humankind likes to "joyfully leave its past behind" (Marx, 1974).

However, aesthetics corresponds to its nature only when it serves for the beauty. In this relation, the question about History's aesthetics would be even more burning and problematic one. It is not easy to imagine History in a beautiful cover. Well, let's try.

First known historical theses where myths fancifully mixed with reality, gods were interactive with humans and heroes were created by the Greek. What kind of stories those were? What purpose were they created with? Aristotle mentioned that history is an independent literary form rather than the description of true events. He compared history and poetry within the contest of poetics as a definite canon of creativity. In the history of Rome, it was represented by description of the epoch and later, it was a narration about real or fictional (who cares?) events, a kind of historical novel.

Hardly, anybody remembers the name Miltiades, under the leadership of whom the Greeks won the battle of Marathon. However, everyone remembers about the young boy who ran 40 km from the battle field to the Athens in order to report fellow citizens about the victory, gained over the Persians. Everyone remembers that the young boy paid the cost of life for that wish (or instruction?). Well what is Marathon battle today? What kind of heroes those were? Nietzsche defines a history as “a collection of effects it itself”. This is how he calls the events that indelibly impress the person who addresses to some historical facts, regardless of the times he lives in. Warriors fought like lions. Though, actually all warriors fight like that. And the boy died, having brought joyful news to the town. It’s obvious that it is his death that would become the event Nietzsche gave the description to. This death is tragic and beautiful. It is a common thing for history to combine tragedy and beauty. However, tragedy is far from mass phenomenon and the masses do not face tragedies. So, if history faces the tragedy of some individual, it may become dignified and tragic. And, here the focus is shifted from the course of historical events to human’s deeds to heroic acts of an individual. When history takes form of biography, it starts being not something socially significant but something that impressed and touched contemporaries and descendants to the marrow of their bones. M.K. Mamardashvili once said that tragedy of the times lies in the impossibility of tragedies. May be he meant mass character of epoch’s events. And, here we deal with statistics but not the history itself.

Heroic deed is deprived of mass character. Act of bravery act, movement, movement away from generally accepted rules, customary measure of the action. And the notion of measure has conventions, mass character. Heroic deed is excessive and thus, it is individual action. That’s why there may be mass heroism but mass heroic deed is a kind of ludicrous notion. Cassirer used the term “individual reason” that apparently explained the moment of switching from mass area to the plane of individual significance, transit from the social sphere to the area of ethics and aesthetics.

Sometimes, heroic deed is a single-step act that is similar to a stroke of genius in artistic or scientific creation, a rise that is being approached by the person during all his life and which is performed in a blink of historical eye. In some cases, we may speak about heroic deed in daily life. It is most often a noteless heroism which is made for the nearest and dearest rather than for those who are far away and which is rarely enlightened with vague humanely beautiful face of historical being.

Another function of antique history needs to be explained. History as well as hardly any thing in this world, has its prominent pedagogical sense. As Aristotle mentioned, history as a poetic genre is surely a form of imitation moreover, imitation of the highest order, imitation of an action which by convention means the form close to tragedy. A piece of art, written in historical genre, being a collection of examples, becomes a source of imitation. And here Clio engages the daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the muse who gifted glory, magnified heroic deeds and made them comprehensible for further imitation.

There is another interesting mythological plot. Aphrodite, revenging Clio for her comment made once by the latter made her love the human Macedonian king. To love human should be intrinsic for History. Only humans may be imitated as well. If we recollect that, according to Aristotle, imitation is natural but not social action, it becomes apparent that only individual may be simulated, who is an “ideal totality” of police and a natural organism. Thus, antique person historical things were only those that could become an example of the bravery deed made by an individual in the name of generation. May be, it explains why historical biography genre was so popular in Greece and Rome which was not actually a biography, since it pursued other objectives pedagogical ones.

Let us also recall that Muse means “reasoning”. Thus, she is anyhow connected with understanding (let me emphasize the meaning of understanding) of the beautiful, to be more precise, the unity of the beauty and the boon, *kalokagathia*. Here, where starts the possibility of artistic interpretation of historical event.

I am not referring to creation of artistic works with historical plot but to aesthetic form of human’s historical actions themselves. “Regardless of severe course of historical process in which any gain leads to lose and there is no such thing as a free lunch, there is some convergence point where history and nature tightly interact with each other as well as global process of accumulation of civilization’s abstract forms, strain of human will and free game of the powers unite with the kingdom of necessity and kingdom of freedom. And if we suppose that such “smart place”, according to the Greeks, exists or is at least possible, then the real world is not deprived either of good heart or of sensible rationality” or beauty may we add, meaning the beautiful and even poetic creation of history by the humans.

Numerous books are devoted to the beauty of the Greek culture but as for their history, let us refer to V.V. Rozanov: “No matter how diverse Hellenic genius was we may still note one characteristic which not interfering with its other sides was ruling over all of them:

it was the sense of beauty. It's not that the Greeks created unequalled monuments of poetry and plastic arts. It's not that simple ideas of Homer and statue of Venus de Milo that have been astonishing people for >2000 years. Yet, there is another plastic that amazes us even more: the plastic of their life and history. All that life was clear and simple as a naked statue. But it's strange that in the course of all events of Greek history some amazing measure is seen. It's strange how all these vents ended right at the time when it was needed and in the way it was needed.

Unproductive activity of Demosthenes, the boy running from the Marathon battle field, Thucydides as Herodotus' audience all that is not necessary at all these things are the whims of playful fancy which had one goal while creating history to decorate. The boy could have not died, Thucydides could have born later, Sophocles could have done without his bad children but these details form the Greek history which would lose some part of its beauty".

Though, may be the time of beautiful creation of history by the human has ended and everything said doesn't refer to contemporary history? Is there a place in modern history for aesthetic component of the human who pursue his goals? Anyways, we may suppose that if for no other reason than because a number of philosophers considers history to be "a piece of art". For example, Walter Benjamin said: "the artwork of the past could not be completed". It means that any fact in the historical past could never become truly past event, it never disappears from historical scene. Historical events and deeds are co-present according to principle of drama piece. The same characters plus Sophie.

Even the most terrible historical events create a feeling close to catharsis in their contemporaries the feeling of the highest aesthetical emotion which is often felt by the human when faced with the piece of art. Nietzsche (1993) who didn't agreed with Aristotle's understanding of catharsis, seems to have written about it as "an unexpected and unexplainable impression that was made by successful production of "Lohengrin", so incompatible feeling that astonished us was left without repetition which was out after the short flash of light". And here what V. Benjamin writes about the work of the historian: "Genuine image of the past slips away. Past can only be imprinted as a vision that flushed for a short moment when it is cognized and then it disappears and never comes back".

If human feels catharsis-like feeling while meeting the historic past, it means that historic being has its aesthetical side and it seems that it is perceived from the

modern viewpoint. This aesthetic historic component is a warranty that history is not only an endless chain of mistakes, crimes, outrages and misfortunes.

Bourgeoisie civilization's society seems to occupy the most difficult position in terms of history's beauty. Powerful philosophy tradition, represented by romantics, Hegel and existentialists thought that capitalism is the greatest tragedy in a history of mankind and that the entire world turned into wrong way of development. This world is rather prosaic, utilitarian and built on the principle of seeking only profits and gains. There is no place for aesthetics, beauty, truth and boon in such world.

Let us wait a bit before agreeing with this position. Thus, Kant who was a representative of that epoch, formulated a number of definitions of aesthetical nature and all of them were based on acceptance of ability to disinterestedly contemplate, admire and feast eyes with pure view, non-utilitarian form by human. How could it happen in the epoch of hard cash and consideration of people as a product? The thing is that Kant appeared to live in the crossing point of two important tendencies of bourgeoisie civilization's establishment. From the one side, art has already stopped piggying back on the cult (V. Benjamin) and from the other side, the market of "mass spiritual production "has not been created yet. Art appeared oneself in the space where it was relatively free from church order and free enough for functioning in the form of free spiritual production. This "glimpse of existence" was noted by Kant's presence. Actually, these two logics would have never met each other in social reality of Western European culture of the end of 18th the beginning of the 19th century, if Kant hadn't locked them up in his "Critics". However, combination of these tendencies found some social ground anyways. There is a well-known notion of Marx that stated that the merchant who sells minerals don't see their beauty, he can only think of their price but the purchaser is the one that is able to see this beauty. Although, the purchaser looks on the minerals through the various prisms (prestige, public image, etc.) he is any way able to percept this beauty with non-utilitarian, free sight. Paradoxically, it is induced by bourgeoisie civilization too.

There is another block of questions that touch upon aesthetics of the beautiful in history: what can historian "add" to the objective facts of history? In other words, can history be aestheticized by philosophy and historical discourse and what is the human sense for it?

While answering these questions, we find various facts that prove that historical and philosophical discourse often aestheticize the space of historical consciousness. History is constantly written and

re-written; it is its normal state in contemporaries' minds. Though, it should be noted that this process has been sped up and intensified. H.G. Gadamer once said that modern human lives in the constant condition of hyperwakefulness of historic consciousness. Historical concepts interchange too quickly, people just don't have time to master them. This frenetic pace makes history lose its cultural attribute. This situation creates mission of historian who is able to think frankly and moreover to think in an artistic way, (like V. Benjamin said, "to foment the spark of hope in historical past"), since cold discursive sight, deprived of human's measure or the beauty, "won't have mercy even for the dead".

If we consider the abovementioned, we start understanding (Or, leastwise, we are provided with new heuristic possibilities of such understanding, since we may not say for sure that we understood the author's thought correctly in the way he meant it) for example, Nietzsche (1997)'s reasoning about critical quotient to history which may be understood only by poetical ones (Ref. to the work "Regarding benefits and harms of history"). It turns out that critical historic quotient to history always recreates historical event from empirical fact, makes it commensurable with the human. This is not a falsification but may be the only probability in the words of P. Ricoeur "to reason history historically by historical human". In this context history comes across us as a piece of art and the rules of art start being effective in its space including the rules that prove the objectivity, rather than the rules that deprive history of such objectivity. However, this natural historical mode of existence is often considered as a proof of its falseness and triviality. At the same time, rhetoric's shift may become a symptom of changes in historical process itself, the consciousness reflecting its process and the text in which this consciousness is presented.

The ability of text to become a historical narration depends not only on materials and historian's intentions but also on external circumstances for instance on correspondence of epoch's character to mechanisms of meaning-making which may not also be reflected by the author. At the same time, correspondence to these principles can turn any text into historical evidence, again without author's intention to do that. Switch of text-building character becomes the evidence of its historicity.

This notion may be expressed in some other way: since historical fact may be expressed orally only (or in the text of historical document or in description of some artifact it doesn't matter in this case), then historical event would be also presented as a segment of linear time (since thoughts and particularly, verbal speech or written speech

are always linear), empirical facts would also be somehow time-shifted (not least because they can't be spoken of in one moment), the scale of history-making would depend on the fact how much the person feels he corresponds to history. Correspondence of narrative form to the event in which empirical fact is presented is possible exactly because this text and this event are created by people who think in the same grid of meaning-making which depends on people's ability to act according to measure of any kind and thus (let's remember about that), according to the laws of the beauty. Otherwise, sense and empirical fact just could not have coincided in the text.

While using this approach, the stylistics of historical narration may speak much about history in the version that is contemporary to that text. Thus, Aristotle understands history as a genre of literature like a imitation of the best. He considers it to be a narration, full of details and scrupulousness but which lacks capturing inner sense. However, let's recollect Lyotard explanation of overcoming narrativeness in any narrative form he refers us to myth, emphasizing that in terms of event, myth is legitimation of this event but legitimation of smaller order. This is a small narrative that knows that it is predeterminedly incomplete. If taking this Lyotard's reasoning into account, we'll see that Aristotle's interpretation of history as a narration is rooted in his own mythological thinking and it is quite necessary to analyze mythological thinking within the framework of historical source's analysis. Aristotle speaks about kind of "drawing" of myths into mythology; about the fact that mythology falls short of its expression and style in comparison to myth, however, it creates a kind of appearance of systematization. This though can be formulated otherwise: weaving small stories into big history will surely lead to transformation of its sense. Or vice versa, capturing the event in other time perspective (retrospective) opens new senses, i.e., provides cognitive heuristic result. Efficiency of this text will be defined by "its ability to be an intermediate party between antecedent and preceding events" Smirnov (2000).

But, if the strength of text is the evidence of its coincidence with the epoch and the character of events' combination, it means that in history similar subject is operating the one who has similar system of meaning-making and goal-setting. Principle of identity of existence and cognition will not be defied.

Intent look at the history in terms of artistic work allows understanding some processes which may be observed by us today in the sphere of attitude to history in historical consciousness. Augmentation of epic component is a vivid evidence of non-correspondence of history to the layman which is represented by theorists

and historians. If we speak in terms of Lyotard, we'll have to admit that nowadays historical consciousness and historical texts are going to be more and more mythologized (legitimized by small order). Macro-history becomes too difficult for historical subject. This is and will be the reason of creation of various versions of historic events that are written by measure of one episode, one character and one fact, presented as an absolute. Retelling will be the only natural form of history soon. That's why history is being constantly re-written in numerous forms, adjusted to this or that national and linguistic consciousness, etc. It is a naturally determined stage of development of historical consciousness. If you prefer it's the fact of this genuineness. It's just the genuineness of this consciousness is not the genuineness of interpretation but just the correspondence of this interpretational fact to the character of epoch's historical consciousness. It is the evidence of the searching adequate historical form for its artistic and aesthetic expression.

### **CONCLUSION**

Aestheticization (poetization) as a form of cognition of history is interesting due to its ability to make empirical

events and forms of their narration commensurable to human. Aestheticization is the most appropriate variant (in terms of human nature) of exploration of historical space, besides, it is also the optimal variant of exploration of any other social and cultural space. It means that approaching history with aesthetic measures is certainly a way of its exploration.

### **REFERENCES**

- Marx, K. and F. Engels, 1974. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. 2nd Edn., Vol. 42, Publishing House of Political Literature, USA., pp: 94.
- Marx, K., 1974. Regarding the Critics of Hegel's Philosophy of Rights. 2nd Edn., Vol. 1-M, Publishing House of Political Literature, USA.
- Nietzsche, F., 1993. The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music, Poems. Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, Saint-Petersburg, Russia, pp: 130-249.
- Nietzsche, F., 1997. On the benefits and harms of history for life. Idols Twilight Dawn Compilation. Translated from the German. MN: LLC Potpourri, pp: 512.
- Smirnov, I.P., 2000. [Megahistory: Toward a Historical Typology of Culture]. Agraf, Moscow.