

The Ultimate Sacrifice:

European Festivals in a Somber Mood Summer 2016

Kjell Skylstad⁺ Editor in Chief

My subject is War,
and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.
All a poet can do today
Is warn
Wilfred Owen

What would have happened if Abraham had actually killed his own son? Would the history of the three Abrahamic religions- Islam, Judaism and Christianity have taken a different course? Hardly. Because their history leaves behind a bloody trail of internal wars and wars against each other in which millions of sons have been paying the ultimate sacrifice in the name of upholding the true Abrahamic heritage.

This is the background for the directors of one of this year's most central artistic events in Oslo, the Ultima Festival, deciding on a program built around the first stage production of Benjamin Britten's anti-war oratory *War Requiem* by the Norwegian National Opera. In welcoming the audience to this unique event our opera director Per Boye Hansen pointed to the inherent power of music to put us in touch with pain and suffering, but also with atonement, hope and love. "We have of course no illusions that our contributions will put an end to atrocities and war crimes. But we invite the audience to reflect upon the brutality of war through poetry, music and stage action, and to consider the need to cultivate our humanity".

For Wilfred Owen, upon whose stark anti-war poetry the composer built in composing his *Requiem*, history had already proven that Abraham in fact killed his son. This became the background for a panel discussion at the festival of the modern day relevance of a work that continues to challenge a world still relying on war to solve political problems.

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Following up on the practice of inviting to a public discussion around both the social and cultural relevance of the works being presented at the festival, this years Tonal War symposium ventured into the cultural battlefield to ask how to-days composers and musicians can deal with the horrors of the 21st century.



Figure 1. House of open gates – Welcoming and recreation center for refugees in the Peoples Park.

Venturing into the same battlefield that in the Austrian southern city of Graz also has become a cultural and social battlefield for the soul of a city and in the final round the nation, the annual Steirischer Herbst (Styrian Autumn) Festival this year invited to a coming together around the challenging but empowering slogan on the background of a Europe under pressure: We can do this. Heidi Oberegger, Director of the festival press office with this slogan referred to the global refugee and migration movements and (intra) societal radicalization, even actual terror as the most obvious symptoms of this pressure.



Figure 2. Artwork at the House of open gates – Welcoming and recreation center for refugees in the Peoples Park.

One of the this years themes – Shifting Cultural Cartographies was conceived as a critical analysis of European history with its repeated incantation of the Age of Enlightenment as proof of moral superiority over the world of Islam, while in fact it coincided with carrying its less enlightened luggage of slavery and oppressive colonialism.



Figure 3. “This is My Blood” A picture of the border “fence” and Jesus on the cross.

In the exhibition “Body Luggage” performances, photo documentation and archival objects were brought together to stimulate or provoke a discussion of what this cultural and social luggage has meant in today’s shifting world.

One of the important question left for us viewers to answer was formulated in the program: “Can there be only one history of art? Or should there be several histories of art, overlapping and interwoven? The increasing mobility of people, objects and information over vast spatial distances is progressively forcing us to reconsider – to examine the countless networks of relations that can be determined in the evolution of art”

In order to stimulate a much needed discussion about the policies and attitudes of Europa and particularly Austria towards the new waves of immigration, and using a similar radical cultural form, the festival had invited the Angolan born Portuguese multi-artist Kiluanji Kia Henda to present his installation “Dies ist mein Blut” (This is my blood). A series of red fence poles were erected in the wine fields of southern Styria near the border with Slovenia symbolizing, at once the erection of borders against the flow of new immigrants and their suffering and sacrifice. Associating the wine culture of Southern Styria with the liturgical texts of the Christian Holy Sacrament, and observing the countless crosses across the land-

scape, the artists comes up with a challenging epitaph: “The Middle Eastern Man With No Papers Crucified In The West.”

About the Author:

Kjell Skylstad began his international career as an art critic while working as research assistant at the Institute of Evaluation Research in Graz, Austria cooperating with the Styrian Autumn Festival in arranging accompanying thematic conferences at the Academy of Performing Arts.



Figure 4. Conversation and food sharing at the welcoming and recreation center.