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KITSCH IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE



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## PREFACE

The presented special issue of the „Cultural Studies Appendix” – an academic journal of the Institute of Cultural and Religious Studies at Faculty of Humanities of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw – features translations of various archive articles, which were published in previous issues of the journal over the period 2015-2017. The texts included in the thematic section, entitled *Kitsch in Contemporary Culture*, were originally published in issue 3/2016.

Staying true to the concept of interdisciplinary studies and the idea of studying the multitude of aspects of culture, its complexity and convolution, we decided to focus our academic endeavours on a number of issues, processes, texts and artistic depictions connected with various forms and manifestations of kitsch in contemporary culture. The phenomenon at hand seems to be important for studies in humanities, particularly those that concern the area of artistic cultural texts – since kitsch can be mediated by arts, literature, painting, music, sculpture and architecture, as well as those which aim for exploring the links between the nature of civilisational changes and transitions, and the processes occurring in the sphere of social behaviours, collective and individual mentality, values and ideas. Undoubtedly, we live in a time where kitsch is expanding. This phenomenon is associated primarily with the impact of mass media on the consciousness of contemporary individuals, particularly the pursuit of self-fulfilment and success that they promote and push onto people. Researchers studying this issue look at kitsch from many points of view, presenting a variety of classifications for cultural texts, which they tend to consider manifestations of ‘creation in a bad taste’. Thus, some of the deliberations focus on kitsch in television (in its many forms) and in opera, as well as religious, social, patriotic, totalitarian, Hollywood, exotic and even academic kitsch. These are of course selected randomly from among many kinds of kitsch. At the same time, the opinions that kitsch and ‘true art’ are entangled in the dialectic relation of mutual links and references, as well as that kitsch – despite being disregarded and despised – is a crucial element of the artistic system, seem to be justified and well-grounded. There is little doubt that high art pieces and kitsch enter into various kinds of relationships with each other, what is more, there are reasons to believe that sometimes only a mutual connection

between them allows them to achieve the expected aesthetic effect. This means that even an outstanding work can annex and use various elements and qualities that at first seem despicable – this happens for example in the case of *La Strada* by Federico Fellini, a film which is sometimes referred to as ‘kitsch with a philosophical load of *Hamlet*’.

We encourage you to explore the issues related to kitsch and other interesting topics undertaken outside the thematic section of this issue of the „Cultural Studies Appendix” together with Polish scholars.

The Editorial Staff



## WHAT IS CULTUROLOGY?

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### I. THE CONTEXT, SUBJECT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTUROLOGY

Culturology deals with a study of culture with the intention to encompass it in its entirety, cognize its complexity and the processes occurring within it as well as identifies the qualities decisive for its hypothetical unity and for its relative difference from the other domains of being<sup>1</sup>. The difficulty in solving the latter issue stems from the fact that – quite literally – the ‘entirety’ of culture is of tentative, ephemeral, mobile, multi-shaped nature, thus it relentlessly changes its content and boundaries. It is so because its resources include such diverse classes of artifacts – seemingly of no common denominator – as: tools, utensils, machines, means of transportation, architecture, scientific discoveries, works of art, music, texts, customs, institutions, lay and religious rituals, etc. Additionally, all of the above evolve in time and differ according to the type of their society of origin and its spatial context. As a result, it proves much easier to recognize cultures created and practiced by various communities, situated in a specific time and a defined space, than to characterize ‘global culture’ or ‘culture in general’.

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<sup>1</sup> The origin of the term ‘culturology’ is in itself complex. The author regarded as its creator is a German scholar Wilhelm Friedrich Ostwald, a chemist and philosopher, Nobel prize laureate in chemistry, and the author of the seminal *Energetische Grundlagen der Kulturwissenschaft* (1909), who was the first to use the term with regard to culture in 1913. However, renown and wide significance were rendered to the term by an American anthropologist and theorist of culture Leslie A. White (1900-1975). See: Carneiro 2004: 165. The term ‘culture’ is discussed also by: Ort 2003: 19-20.

Moreover, the same applies to all the various fields of culture (customs, arts, technology, consumption, etc.), which in contrast to extremely heterogeneous and internally diversified entirety of culture are characterized by a relative uniformity, duration in time and potential for diffusion. Another quality of culture – and concurrently another obstacle in developing a definition thereof – is the fact that it enters into mutable, dynamic relationship with what is considered the extra-cultural domain (at times including nature, religion or science)<sup>2</sup>. Other difficulties arise from the methods of identification and conceptualisation of the aforementioned entirety. The field is contended for by various aprioristic approaches, descriptive and inductive empirical procedures and comparative studies<sup>3</sup>.

All these inconveniences point to the fact that general characteristics of culture are elusive for definitional immobilization and exhaustion and also that themselves, much like their subject – culture – they undergo cultural relativization. Attempts at finding and reconstructing a uniform, lasting symbolic and/or systematic order of culture, willingly undertaken once by structuralists, are barred by seemingly insurmountable obstacles. They were aptly defined in terms of ‘collisions of cultural systems’ by the Estonian-Russian culture and literary theorist, Yuri Lotman:

The history of the culture of any population may be examined from two points of view: firstly, as an immanent development; secondly, as the result of a variety of external influences. Both these processes are closely intertwined and their separation is only possible in the modality of scientific abstraction. Furthermore, and taking into account the aforesaid, it follows that any isolated examination of either immanent movement of such influences inevitably creates a distorted picture. The complexity does not, however, lie in this factor but rather in the fact that any intersection of systems

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<sup>2</sup> However, it is true that the extra-cultural domain does specifically influence culture and the symbolic, textual and dialogical expressions can be found in culture (as climate, for instance, motivating couples every day, medial, artistic and scientific discourses of the weather); culture, too, comprehensively influences the form of nature by domesticating animals, agriculture, horticulture, parks, utilization of natural resources or ecological activity.

<sup>3</sup> As an example of the latter, one may point to the so-called cross-cultural studies. See: Minkov, Hofstede 2013.

sharply increases the unpredictability of future movements. The case where an external intrusion leads to victory over one of the colliding systems and suppression of another is far from characteristic of all such events. Sufficiently frequently the collision produces a third, fundamentally new, phenomenon which is not an obvious, logically predictable, consequence of either of the colliding systems. The matter is made more complex by the fact that the newly formed phenomenon appropriates the name of one or other of the colliding structures, such that something which is, in principle, new lies hidden under an old facade (Lotman 2009: 65).

The obstacles in the identification of lasting order of culture are therefore created firstly by its dynamic productivity: the advent of new phenomena, forms and creations in various fields, as well as the falling from circulation of existing or domesticated ones. Another source of interference can in turn be identified as the overlay, mutual blending and motion of diverse patterns, behaviors and artifacts. The driving force behind them tends to include global and regional trans- cultural processes. In the past, the latter were initiated, for instance, by the Christianization of Europe and America, the Islamization of vast lands in Africa and Asia or the Africanization of the American continent due to the import of slaves. To date, they have not ceased to occur, stimulated by the globalization of the market, the Internet or, say, Americanization. In turn, the mutual influence and interpenetration of differing cultures and civilizations – previously mutually incomprehensible, alien or inaccessible – fosters the creation of novel, hybrid cultural formations, as well as the emergence of intercultural<sup>4</sup> focal points, which constitute an alternative both to the practices of cultural ethnocentrism and of segregation (e.g. in relation to the Aborigines or exotic immigrants) and to the phenomena of acculturation and assimilation by the dominant culture.

However, these transformations do not occur without clashes and conflicts. Idyllic images of a collision-free exchange or harmonious cultural order are disrupted by the practices of imposing hegemony, leveling the distinct features innate for the ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities, subjugated and dependent in terms of military, political and economical

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of the intercultural was introduced and popularized by: Terkessidis 2010.

power. An expression of such attitude came to be known as the praxis of the so-called cultural genocide, applied even today in some regions of Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa, as a result of the conviction that traces of a distinct identity and culture within a minority ought to be erased and that culture should conform to the hegemonic social powers.

The above circumstances and processes are the reason why numerous attempts at identifying the 'essence of culture' – as a model for such activity one could regard a forgone book by Alfred Kroeber *The Nature of Culture* (1952) – often lead to a disappointment<sup>5</sup>. For they draw the charges of normativity and essentialism, as they solidify in such 'essence' the preferred type of culture at the expense of limiting pluralism, diversity or mutability of the respective cultural fields ('subsystems'). Moreover, there are many more traps of the kind for culturology to avoid. Still, that does not justify, as could be supposed, resigning from the search for what constitutes culture as opposed to non-culture, or for what could be considered common in our seemingly motley multiplicity, diversity and mutability of cultures. Negating the idea – albeit only hypothetical – of unity and community of cultures seems rather out of place here, especially when one assumes that such sort of research should not blur the differences between them nor their distinctness. For, although the knowledge of culture could not be exhausted by way of induction, it cannot be encapsulated in a uniform system nor established *a priori*. What remains is the method of approximations, which admittedly does not aspire to the status of irrefutable knowledge, yet it envisions a certain 'possible' image of culture, able to undergo corrections and falsification. That is therefore the way trodden by culturology (or the way it should progress along).

Hence, it does not renounce rational research procedures, at times charged with logocentrism by the followers of Jaques Derrida. Neither can it be boiled down to detailed empirical studies and those focusing on specific phenomena, e.g. Tadeusz Kantor's theatre, novels by Elfriede Jelinek or graffiti on the city walls of Warsaw. It extends beyond the research

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<sup>5</sup> A wide range of definitions of culture put forth from various theoretical standpoints were formerly compiled in the: Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952. Meanwhile an insightful overview of the proposed definitions from the perspective of culturology was put together in: White 1959.

of independent areas of culture, e.g. customs, theatre, music, painting, literature, politics or media<sup>6</sup>. It does not limit culture to ethnic enclaves, to mention only the artifacts and customs of Guaycuru and Bororo peoples of South America described by Claude Lévi-Strauss, and other, countless studies by ethnographers, ethnologists and anthropologists. Likewise, it does not confine it to social criteria, to mention in turn the research on the morals of bourgeoisie or sociological studies of neighborly bonds in rural areas. Neither could one identify culturology with the history of culture, despite the attempts of the last couple of decades by Stephen Greenblatt, New Historicism and culture poetics, nor numerous descriptions and efforts made to isolate the separate cultures of antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque, and the Enlightenment. Culturology does not blend with such sciences within humanities as psychology, sociology, semiotics or anthropology, either. These sciences do indeed focus on cultural phenomena, but they treat it as a general rule derivatively, concentrating instead on their field-specific issues of psyche, group behavior, interpersonal relationships, society, types of signs and sign systems, or generic traits and markers of the human (*homo sapiens*). Obviously, neither does culturology deal directly with natural and mathematical sciences, which *ex definitione* direct their attention at non-cultural phenomena.

Thus, the conclusion to be drawn from the above enumeration is that culturology is not concerned with a delineated section of culture, nor any of its pre-defined fields, nor still that or other aspect or function thereof, but on its entirety. The above considerations should not however lead to the inference that culture as such exists and functions outside the realm of the human psyche and activity, out of the bonds humans enter into and their

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<sup>6</sup> That does not mean that culturology ignores such research. In that respect it honors the principle of deconstruction of the whole as a methodological device, cf. Adam Kuper (1999: 245): 'to understand culture, we must first deconstruct it. Religious beliefs, rituals, knowledge, moral values, the arts, rhetorical genres, and so on should be separated out from each other rather than bound together into a single bundle labeled culture (...). It is worth noting that the existence of relatively distinct segments of culture does not abolish the question of the effects they may have upon one another nor their interfusion, nor still their position in the dynamic, ever-changing cultural whole.'

interactions, the society, its institutions, public and private communication, the circulation of signs, languages, texts and discourses. It is not assumed in them either that culture is indifferent to biological and ecological stimuli, which support and shape the human life. Of course, it is not suggested that its forms do not change in time and space and that they always and everywhere remain the same ('equal with one another'), regardless of the era, ethnic group, social strata and other circumstances. Thus, culturology accepts the view that cultural forms, events and phenomena align with the life, activity and characteristics of the human, of the society, civilization and history, i.e. they enter in a multitude of relations with phenomena other than culture itself.

The particularity of culturology, however, resides elsewhere. As it is, sciences such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, xenology, and the history of culture inscribe the latter into their own structures, which differ from it both ontologically and in terms of their qualities. They subjugate it and oftentimes entirely dissolve it within them. This is the mode of operation for anthropology of culture, sociology of culture and semiotics of culture. They define cultural factors in terms of – respectively – anthropological, sociological, psychological, semiotic ones, etc. One is thence unable to determine with precision what part is 'the cultural' in anthropology, sociology or semiotics of culture, as well as to what extent those elements are of independent, formative nature and to what extent they are dependent and subordinate only<sup>7</sup>.

Culturology attempts to face the challenge posed by that situation. It operates on the assumption that cultural phenomena of their ontological essence belong to a capacious, internally diversified category of artifacts, and not to organic or inorganic nature. They are not exhausted in their functions or features by the laws of biology or physics. Meanwhile nature to some extent has to be reckoned with, for instance, within anthropology, which analyzes

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<sup>7</sup> Demarcation of that sort proves difficult due to the fact that culture is defined not only by the meanings ascribed to various artifacts, but also by its material components: e.g. marble, metal or wood in sculpture, paints in painting art, fabrics, leather, glass, plastic in collages, costumes and props in theatre, etc. In modern art they usually play the leading role, both in terms of construction and the 'spiritual' content.

kinship, within psychology, which researches innate characteristic and unconditional reflexes, and within social sciences, which consider not only the organization and political system of the society, but also the influence of the existing natural conditions (geographical location, climate, natural resources) on the way of life of any given community.

Conversely, cultural phenomena are primarily determined by human characteristics, behavior and agency: the intellect, the acquired qualifications, applied technology, knowledge, existing models, the artistry of craft, customs and traditions, emotions, imagination, sensitivity. These are after all derivatives of the above. Concurrently, they are subject to social circulation, they are detached from their creators, users and consumers, becoming to some degree independent, they reflexively influence their creators or receivers. The circulation of that sort oftentimes changes, modifies or updates their original characteristics and purpose. Together with material carriers and meanings, it co-constitutes the reality of culture.

Contrary to the causally determined world of nature, culture remains within certain limits arbitrary (discretionary), conventional and 'flexible'. Its creations might be reproduced, they can be mobile, 'nomadic', exchangeable and replaceable<sup>8</sup>. Their fates are largely – though not on every occasion – determined by choices, decisions, actions and reactions by the subjects of culture. They form inter-subjective and trans-cultural conventions, genre patterns and shape traditions embedded in a given environment, much like they subsequently fall form circulation and atrophy. They engage real culture-forming forces: the exiting individual, social and material – cultural potential ('assets'), including its symbolic aspect. They decide both on creation, reproduction and sustenance of certain cultural systems, forms and values, and of their modification, changes introduced to them, expansion, reduction, and abolishment. Hence, they influence the above-mentioned

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of mutability, replaceability or exchangeability of cultural elements is often at odds with the ethnocentric view of culture, which tends to underscore its folk roots, organic character, duration, particularity, its being unchangeable and irreplaceable. See: Kaschuba 1955.

uninterrupted circulation of works, forms and values both within a single cultural area and between such fields, as well as in the universal scale<sup>9</sup>.

These properties are decisive for ontological, qualitative and functional specificity of the cultural phenomena. They make it not only possible but requisite that they should be considered not only in the context and in relation to qualitatively different phenomena of being – human psyche, interpersonal relationships or behaviors, the society, history, nature – but also, to use the language of philosophy ‘in and for itself’, especially due to their particular ability to symbolize, archive and transfer meaning, as well as their expressive (incl. aesthetic) influence. It is worth stressing that such approach is a prerequisite for the very possibility of culturology – otherwise it would lose the distinctiveness in terms of its subject matter and theory and would end up aligning itself with particular sciences of culture.

At this point, one should differentiate between linguistic systems (e.g. speech) and semiotic ones (e.g. the International Code of Signals) specialized in transferring meaning and formulating messages and, on the other hand, all other objects primarily serving other purposes – such as production, consumption or military activity – which may also on some specific occasions perform sign (symbolic) functions, communicate meaning and have expressive effect. Such functions are performed in various cultures for instance by bread, sickle or a sword<sup>10</sup>. According to L.A. White (1959:

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<sup>9</sup> An example of such phenomenon may be seen in literature and the existence, as noted by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, of supra-national world literature (*Weltliteratur*).

<sup>10</sup> In the chapter *Symbol in the System of Culture* Y. Lotman (2001: 103) defines symbol as ‘a content which in its turn serves as expression level for another content, one which is a rule more highly valued in that culture’. In terms of expression and content, a symbol is embodied in a particular text of specified meanings and boundaries enabling one to recognize a specific symbol in the sign and textual context. Additional indicators of cultural symbols are: 1) inherent archaic components, as the memory contained in symbols tends to reach to the prehistoric times, 2) internal memory of symbols tends to be in principle older than its contemporary linguistic and textual environment (context), 3) due to their archaic and long-lasting character symbols are responsible for the continuity of culture, 4) their combinations define the identity of various cultures, although 5) some



230-233), the ability of a given object to perform a symbolic function, whether linguistic, sign or communicative one, decides of its affiliation to a culture, though it does not rule out its other uses, say, as a working tool (sickle, hammer, hoe, seeder, scales, a pair of compasses, trowel, etc.), an object of consumption (bread, grain, the grape, fish, corn, apples, etc.) or pieces of armament (sword, bow, spear, machine gun, cannon, etc.). Neither does it eliminate the potential expressive (aesthetic) effect. Such multi-faceted and multipurpose character of artifacts originated in the culture of everyday life makes it different from those similar to the articulate language, which specialize in determining and transferring meanings.

Hence, culturology deals with the phenomena which – regardless of other practical applications they may have (as tools, food, clothing, decorations, etc.) – serve or are able to serve first of all symbolic functions, i.e. transfer meanings and messages, and, secondly, in that respect they constitute a separate class of internally interconnected artifacts, i.e. culture in a narrowed-down meaning of the word. The ability to express and transfer meaning, as well as to participate in human communication is what *de facto* separates in terms of substance, pragmatics and function the class of cultural phenomena – with their internal diversification – from nature, production, technology and consumption. The fundamental difference stems from the fact that signs and symbols indicate (mean) by their nature something different than themselves, whereas non-sign creations are in essence equal to themselves. They are granted the ontological status of a thing (*res*) and are subject to description and use, so to speak, in themselves.

The above makes apparent the need to identify other features of culture against the backdrop of extra-cultural entities, as well as in comparison with them, especially those ones which, although serving symbolic function, possess properties and functions not limited to creating, transferring and archiving meaning, as they also participate in such utilitarian, marketing or administrative spheres of human activity as production, consumption, distribution, trade, army, law, etc. It is beyond question that these spheres impart their influence upon cultural phenomena. They impact fields which, like the articulate language or other conventional sign systems,

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symbols are subject to transcultural migration and a process of internationalization of sorts, oftentimes related to a change in meaning.

serve primarily to express and transfer meaning. These borderline domains are also entailed by culturology – without them the resulting perception of culture would prove selective and limited to, say, artistic culture, and hence curtailed.

It should be particularly stressed that the selection procedure of the cultural components *sensu stricto* does not mean that they can be regarded as isolated, self-sustaining and independent items ‘working on their own account,’ without entering any ‘misalliance’ relations and mediations with organic and inorganic nature, the social environment and technology. Nor does it entail the lack of interactions and interdependencies. Those bonds, mediations, interactions and interdependencies constitute a fertile field for the above mentioned sciences of history, sociology, anthropology, psychology and ecology of culture – obviously, providing that research does not in turn replace cultural components with somatic, mental, existential, social, political or environmental ones.

The above problems are also a point of interest for the culture-oriented *Geisteswissenschaften*, practiced predominantly in Germany, which highlight foremost spiritual factors: moral, mental, ideological. At the opposite end of the spectrum, one could situate the *cultural studies* originated in Great Britain, on the whole materialistically driven, initiated by the works of the Birmingham School (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), inspired by the works of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, the originator of the cultural materialism movement, as well as many scholars from other countries like: Germany (the Frankfurt School), France (Louis Althusser), Italy (Antonio Gramsci), USA (the New Historicism movement). Anyhow, the list does not exhaust the entire scope of the international expansion of *cultural studies*<sup>11</sup>.

Their importance for culturology is expressed particularly in the fact that they generally take up current and vital issues, beforehand frequently marginalized, from the fields of sociology of culture, cultural politics, ideology, power, hegemony, colonialism and post-colonialism, cultural

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<sup>11</sup> Baßler (2003: 132-155) considers these movements as one conglomerate, extending it to also include Michel Foucault’s ‘discourse analysis’, the notion of the ‘thick description’ originated by Clifford Geertz, Paul de Man’s ‘allegories of reading’ and Stephen Greenblatt’s ‘poetics of culture’.

identity, gender, emancipation movements, transgression. They concern transformations and shifts which change the image and the map of the post-modern contemporary culture 'undergoing the process of internationalization'. They study the methods of waging cultural manipulation by centers of power. By expanding the very notion of culture, the movement discussed goes beyond the framework of 'high', 'élite' or 'avant-garde' culture. At the same time, it takes into consideration a wide scope of the culture of everyday life and of the deprived strata of society, the issues engendered by cultural industry and the mass culture it produces, the popular culture, the operation of new media in that field (incl. television, the Internet, mobile telephony, video, advertising). In other words, it follows the current technological breakthroughs and examines their influence on cultural transmission and transformations. Moreover, it does not refrain from including the youth subcultures, the underground and the counter-culture. These researches, on the one hand, adapt and modify the notions of cultural science and culturology to suit their own purposes; on the other, however, they provide culturology with influential feedback. What is characteristic of them is that, as a rule, they situate cultural phenomena in the light of the contemporary civilizational and social transformations. They often display journalistic, whistle-blowing, critical attitudes.

The discussed issues of the interrelations between culture and the broadly understood 'non-culture' does not, as can be inferred from the preceding considerations, the main and direct subject matter of culturology, which instead strives to first of all express and establish what constitutes 'the culture in culture.' Also in that case, it avoids the substitution of cultural content with the issues of its material and technological carriers, as the misleading thesis by McLuhan that 'the medium is the message' would have it. It does not mean, however, that culturology turns a blind eye to or underestimates those technological or electronic mediators, as the distinctive feature of contemporary cultural symbolization and textualization is that ever more often they refer to those data storage media, although the latter when left to themselves and severed from the transmission of relevant content fall from cultural circulation and populate the domain (wasteland?) of deaf and mute things 'in-themselves'.

## II. DELIMITATIONS OF CULTURE

Undoubtedly, one of the aims of culturology is the delimitation of culture: the reflection on its scope and boundaries. On this matter an opinion has been established – and it cannot be denied that it is in some respects correct – that culture was not only created by the species of *homo sapiens*, but also that it constitutes the species and is an expression thereof. Having culture at hand – which entails the ability to create, assimilate, accumulate and infuse it into various fields of both individual and social life as well as narrowly defined psyche and personality – distinctly differentiates *homo sapiens* from the world of things, plants and animals. However, the advancements in research along with the accelerating civilizational transformations have posed multiple questions regarding this traditional notion.

For the above view is complicated by observations and research which claim that ‘culture-like’ behaviors and forms, such as imitation, learning, adaptive behavior, issuing and reception of signals, signs or speech as well as partner and social communication are present not solely among humans, but also in the world of animals, especially among the eutheria<sup>12</sup>. Besides, there has been a long-standing dispute regarding whether and to what extent the cultural and culture-like behaviors in human and animal worlds are at all comparable with one another or parallel with respect to their structure, function and level of development. This question pertains to an important from the point of view of culturology issue, to wit, whether and to what degree culture is immersed in nature, to what extent it emerges from it and participates in it in one way or the other. One more crucial question is in turn whether it owes its existence and development solely to the human, *homo sapiens*, or whether it is in some proportion the result of a common, millions of years long evolution of life forms and species<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Numerous instances of such cultural or *quasi*-cultural behaviors of animals and arguments for and against the existence of culture in that domain are provided by Laland, Galef 2009: 1-18.

<sup>13</sup> A hypothesis of an affinity between the world of humans and animals and their ability to communicate was postulated from biblical and Christian standpoint by Cyprian Norwid in his polemics against the 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalists and evolutionists to which he devoted a late essay of his, *Ostatnia z bajek* (1882).

The attitude of culture towards the 'reified', mechanical and automatized world of technology also undergoes reevaluation. H. Böhme and K. Scherpe (1996:14-15) managed to aptly highlight the issue:

The interfusion of cultural processes with technological strategies, devices, media and sets renders culture (cultures) to a growing degree as a technological conglomerate, which in light of the tasks undertaken by science no longer separates natural sciences from 'sciences of spirit' (*Geisteswissenschaften*), understanding from explanation (Wilhelm Dilthey, Stephen Toulmin, Georg Heinrich von Wright) nor literary from technical intelligence (C.P. Snow), according to their method of description. After all, traditional 'sciences of spirit' themselves largely resort to explanatory and technical procedures – for instance in the field of media discourses and theories – causing the above distinctions to lose their validity. Hence, the neo-Kantian, fundamental definitions of *Geisteswissenschaften*, originated at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, favoring bipolar approach, seem to cease their viability as theoretical reference points at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>14</sup>.

Setting aside the complex and controversial theory of evolution and the consequences thereof, it can be assumed that the differences between human and animal worlds transpire in several ways. They find a striking expression in the fact that all the respective works and fields of culture, a notion pertaining mainly to historical eras when writing was used, unfold as an exercise of will, intentions, consciousness, decisions and skills of individuals or a joint effort by groups of social or ethnic communities. Additionally, the difference lies in the historical character of culture, a feature conceptualized and articulated through various cultural behaviors. It is an inherent component of the early-modern and modern cultures and it impinges on cultural choices and activity.

Other illustrations of cultural differences between the two worlds are provided by literature, art, architecture, technology, agriculture, science. Many works of art, literature, philosophy or science, as well as series of inventions, novel applications and discoveries are of individual, particular, personal and genuine character. They are directly motivated by the initiative and exploratory activity of individual persons and only indirectly influenced

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<sup>14</sup> The spread of technological means in culture was the reason why 'media studies' emerged as a particular, distinct discipline.

by repetitive patterns of behavior and group or generic models. Meanwhile other phenomena, such as agriculture, transportation, architecture, urban planning and industry regarded as cultural and civilizational undertaking display the scale, spectacular character, complexity and quality unmatched when compared with the animal kingdom. They require collective coordination, organization of tasks and complex machines, which either reflect or shape the advanced work culture of humans.

The above grounds make it rather difficult to speak of complete equivalence of animal and human cultures. Instead, one should differentiate the elementary and precisely defined micro- or mini-cultures of the animal world from the developed and intricate human culture. At this point, the differences of scale, significance and level of accomplishment involve a leap in the level of complexity, quality and functionality. Therefore, in lieu of modernist and post-modernists attempts at an utopia of 'humanizing' or 'enculturating' the animal kingdom, the object of reflection (and care!) should be the rather frequent naturalist cases and images of 'theriomorphism' of individual humans and human societies, which do have culture at their disposal. These make one aware of the inconsistencies in the constructive, positive inculturation of human – in the saturation of its 'bios' with humanistic ideals and norms – and are a testament to the existence of degenerate, detrimental versions and variants of culture.

However, one should not lose sight of the fact that some cultural phenomena are a creation of anonymous forces and processes, operating either randomly, according to the 'blind watchmaker' principle, or imperceptibly transmitted and assimilated, lastly it may function at the level of the unconscious or the individual or collective subconscious (see: Bainbridge et al. 2007). Hence, culture is pervaded by works, norms and rituals of which we do not know where, when and by whom they had been created (folklore, proverbs, myths, fables and legends, customs, rites). They provide grounds for the understating of culture as something normative, impersonal and anonymous, as well as of its regulative, systemic mode of operation, which bends all the individual endeavors and behaviors to its systematic regulations<sup>15</sup>. Romantic notions of culture as the domain of freedom (improvisation, invention and

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<sup>15</sup> Such approaches seem typical for the Soviet and Russian culturology of the 1960s and 1970s.

spontaneity) find their counterpoint here in an opposite position assuming its subjugation to norms, coercions and necessities, providing grounds for the Freudian conception of culture as repression and a 'source of suffering'.

The anonymity and the unknown origin of various artifacts, norms, taboos and rituals are partly explained by the fact that some of them date back to, as reported by archeology, prehistoric, preliterate Paleo- and Neolithic periods (or earlier), the people of which could not have been aware of the concepts such as authorship, an individual, individualism or originality, established relatively late within the history and the civilization. It is also doubtful whether those ages saw people capable of cultural and meta-cultural thought. However, the temporal distance makes the prehistoric and preliterate creators of tools, arms, ornaments and pendants, elements of attire, cave paintings (petroglyphs) and cultural figurines (such as the Venus of Tan-Tan discovered in Morocco or the Venus of Berekhat Ram discovered in the Golan Heights<sup>16</sup>) by definition remain just like the Cro-Magnon Man unrecognizable and anonymous. Many archeological discoveries suggest however that it was them who gradually created conditions enabling the relatively young – for only dating several thousand years back – historical societies to come into being, already equipped with a relatively well-developed resources of artifacts and inventions. The latter comprised for instance the division of labor and duties between males and females, the organization of collective activities, the production of clothes, artistic output, elements of agriculture, as well as the establishment or construction of permanent settlements, etc. (Mears 2015: 82).

It should also be considered that a proportion of cultural behavior with time undergoes an imperceptible process of naturalization, its conventional origin becoming obliterated and as a result impossible to reconstruct and decipher. The same is true of the cultural collective memory ever changing its direction and center of pressure. One should therefore acknowledge the hypothetical existence of various deep-seated, 'fossil' sources of culture, still awaiting discovery and identification. From that point of view, the delimitation of culture would be a process inscribed into the history

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<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, scholars are in a dispute whether the above mentioned figurines are indeed man-made artifacts or whether they received their anthropomorphic forms by way of random natural processes.

of mankind, pertaining not only to the existing limits, as established once and for all, but one that must also reckon with the prospect of delineating new borderlands. It follows from observation of how the various cultures function. They benefit both from the rules of reproduction (a repetition of established patterns and techniques), as well as of production (creativity), which takes into account novel ideas and needs, inventions, hitherto unheard of skills, sources of energy, materials and the changing conditions.

Such circumstances make one realize that the lack or scarcity of information on the creators and users of archaic artifacts, their context, techniques and the methods of their production and their actual functions in primary communities do by no means indicate that they came out of thin air. Nor does it prove that such prehistoric creators, users or communities never existed in the first place. The very same considerations apply to the primordial foregone processes, definitively no longer active. Therefore, our ignorance or blank spots we face are no justification for the categorical proposition that culture is characterized by anonymity, the 'everlasting archetypes', the inertia of systemic coercion or unconscious pressures of injuries resulting in hidden and impossible to overcome traumas.

The delimitation is rendered still more complex by the polar opposites of its inherent dispositions. They entail, on the one hand, the ability of a given culture to assimilate the acquisitions derived from other cultures, while on the other, conversely, the capability to resist the promoted or imposed models, behaviors, artifacts, institutions and habits. The latter are usually offered with the view of replacing the local forms with foreign ones, outdated customs with modern ones, the rural with the urban, etc. It is noteworthy that the resistance against the imposed culture oftentimes finds its paradoxical expression in an inflated affirmation of the familiar heritage, even if the latter does suffer from evident shortcomings and proves dysfunctional. For an illustration, let us turn to Sarmatism in its conflict against the enlightened 'Frenchness' and more broadly 'foreignness'. It is impossible however to ascribe always the same tendencies to a given culture and at the same time to provide general diagnoses on the basis of current observations. It may just as well display reluctance to innovate and a tendency for stagnation, as be characterized by openness, receptivity and flexibility. Such potential is inherent in its internal instrumentarium and repertoire, though it is its adherents who decide of their use.



That results in a persuasion that culture as such cannot be fully identified neither with individual nor collective psychology and ethnos; neither social status, nor political constitution. For it is an acquired value whose state (use) depends on particular external circumstances, needs, living conditions or social standing as well as deep-rooted habits of its bearers. The very same culture may be characteristic for various social strata and, contrariwise, the representatives of the same stratum may be representatives of different cultures.

It leads to the conclusion that the relation between culture and its human background, whether ethnic or social, may be dynamic. The culture which undergoes internal transformations and partakes in interaction with other cultures reacts to shifts and changes occurring in that background and at times initiates them itself. That in turn brings to our attention the fact that the 'unity' of universal culture is a rather theoretical and hypothetical than a descriptive and referential notion. At the foundation of the suggested unity, there is an undeniably real multiplicity and diversity of cultures<sup>17</sup>. The striving to coordinate these contrary statements reflects the specific theoretical stance of culturology: on the one hand, an inherent in it tendency to generalize and find the underlying laws connected, on the other, the respect for the emerging and diverse cultural reality.

At this juncture, however, there is an important reservation to make regarding the issue of diversity. Indeed, from the fact that there is a multiplicity of cultures it does not follow that they are unequal. The idea of the unity of culture postulated as the foundation of culturology enters into polemics against the discriminating and restrictive division of cultures into ones higher and lower, better and worse, sophisticated and barbaric, etc. Such

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<sup>17</sup> Such diversity was explained by Claude Lévi-Strauss by the fact that human nature is defined by what is universal in nature, whereas the human behavior on the other hand is governed by various particular and personal rules, which are an effect of the existence of diverse cultures. These cause human attitudes, behaviors and choices to diverge in terms of nutrition (cuisine), clothing, expression of emotions, morality, the understanding of good and bad, the perception and evaluation of others, varying interpretation of events, etc. What distinguishes humans from nature is therefore the 'cultural variability' (*la variabilité culturelle*) they display; see: Charbonnier 1969.

attitudes engender various racist practices, ethnocentrism and nationalism<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, while opposing such views, culturology posits existence of many divergent, but concurrently equal cultures, which interact with each other in various ways, interfuse one another and exchange models and values.

The principle of diversity and equality seems to be contradicted by the position which emphasizes the phenomena of long-lasting inheritance of the very same culture by ethnic, social or religious communities. The latter stance is accompanied by a suggestion that culture therefore defines the 'lasting' or even 'immutable' features of a given community. However, the issue overlooked here is the fact that the process of inheriting does not involve mechanical reproduction and immobilization. For it entails incessant reevaluations and transformations, oftentimes on the micro-scale and hardly perceptible. Additionally, these often occur under the influence of their environment: perfusion, transfers and impact of other societies and the cultures thereof. That is why the claims of 'inherited consistency' and 'immutability' either of a given culture or of a given community narrow down the historical horizon to a complete and fixed past, at the same time ignoring the open and surprise-ridden future. The words of the poet: 'Oh! Incomplete still the labor of History' (Norwid 1971: 19) should sound as a warning and a lesson for all those who rashly identify culture with the process of inheritance.

The specificity of the respective cultures stems from the fact that each constitutes a composition of varied elements, while the diversified shape of its entirety comprises all the essentially different respective cultures. Such state of affairs pervades both synchrony and diachrony. It is fostered by the internal transformation and diversification of cultures, the replacement of those exiting the scene of history by those entering it, the super-session of the defeated with

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<sup>18</sup> In its essence, nationalism treats its own society and its own culture as an unsurpassed model for other ones and perceives any deviation from that model as an indication of inferiority. In fact, such community and the culture thereof make claims to and herald their superiority on a meager basis of an arbitrary criterion, no more reliable than similar criteria posited by other communities and cultures. The 'superiority' of a culture advertising itself as such remains improvable. Which in turn means that ethnocentrism is devoid of any real foundation and ends up reduced to a form of collective solipsism and pretension.

the dominant, the traditional with the modern, the classical with the hybrid. The emergence and sustenance of diversity is supported in an equal measure by: the conservation of tradition, the acts of borrowings, the inter-cultural exchange and dialogue. For the prerequisite for genuine diversity is any 'difference' and 'otherness', as these always counteract entropy. For instance, it benefited on the macro-scale from the processes of supplanting of polytheism by monotheism, of the poeticized ethos of chivalry by the trite bourgeois bonds and affinities, of Indian wigwams by brick-built mansions of plantation owners, of carriages by cars, of fire torches by kerosene lamps, of the water energy by the atomic energy, etc.

In that sense, neither individuals nor communities are determined by a unified and long-lasting type of culture ascribed to them and unaffected by the transformations of the existing relationships or circumstances. For even the existence of an increased systemic control (e.g. in the form of an explicit or covert censorship) does not entirely rule out the possibility of introducing to such cultural system be it only limited innovations, of achieving some reshuffling and reevaluation as well as complementing it with borrowings. History proves that even the most isolated political systems (such as the totalitarian states) do prove to be in some areas permeable and porous. A researcher of an early Chinese intellectual influence in Europe thus characterized the issue:

(...) there has never been an autonomous civilization in history, which proved capable of providing continuous development inside a framework of political or economical autarchy. (...) [T]o assure an extensive, successful era of peace and prosperity, civilizations have to draw on 'useful knowledge' from other centers of civilization.

In nature, as in history, there can be no knowledge without contact – human knowledge is continuously reborn by the forces of contact, ever changing, evolving towards ever more complexity (Gerlach 2005: 3).

### III. ACCELERATION, LITERACY, MULTICULTURALISM, CULTURALISM

The crux of the matter is however that cultures accumulate the acquisitions of the past and that at their sources they have – albeit not always perceptible for the naked eye – the previously shaped and adapted experiences, skills

and traditions which, though somewhat modified and adjusted to the ever-changing conditions, at the same time resist the arbitrary and voluntary innovations. It can be rightly assumed that in the global and historical scale – the observation on such scale being enabled by the contemporary civilizational processes, especially the intense development of exchange, communication and spread of information networks – culture accelerates itself. It assimilates the heritage of the past eras, concurrently liberating itself from their determining influence. Here, the components of inheritance, transmission, as well as innovation and novel initiatives compete against one another and mutually interfuse. The continuity, the recycling and rewriting, the interaction, the acts of breaking out and the cultural turns, as illustrated by the history of culture, serve to shape its contemporary accelerated dynamics which bursts the existing frameworks and models.

Consequently, of interest for culturology are not only the specificity, markers and inter-connections of cultural phenomena, but also – as already mentioned in another context – their becoming and transformations. A version of culturology that would focus on by definition static systemic relations and ignore the changes would soon prove anachronistic and useless.

Still, it cannot be denied that our age also witnesses opinions which underscore the idiomatic, incomparable and closed character of the respective cultures, especially those geographically distant, for a long time bereft of interaction and common history, wide-scale trade relations, exchange and vivid links to cultures of other continents. The issue pointed out here is the distance and distinctiveness of cultural models and traditions between the lay rationalistic culture of the West (of Europe) and the notions, imagery and beliefs of the Far East. How to align then, say, the Bible or the Western lay scientific thought with Shintoism, Taoism, Buddhism or Hinduism? And *vice versa*: how to acquaint the West for instance with the Chinese art of organizing space of *feng shui* or the Taoistic philosophy and ethics known as *wu wei*?<sup>19</sup>

Were we to assume, as some contemporary scholars drawing from the ideas of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend postulate, a fundamental incommensurability of cultures (cultural systems) (Alarcón, *Anthropology...*) – hence

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<sup>19</sup> The principles and application of *wu wei* are discussed in: Singerland 2003.

their internal impermeability, untranslatability, closure, a ‘walling-up’ of sorts – they would become for their carriers hurdles obstructing both communication and exchange with external environment as well as their own flexibility and progress. It would favor ineffectual limitations.<sup>20</sup> In order to avoid such consequences, a given culture – in fact operating so to speak in its own interest – has to (or ought to) consider and emphasize in its working the elements of initiative, innovation and freedom as well as participate in the cultural exchange and as a result directly or covertly accept the inter-cultural transfers and borrowings. Culturology posits such processes as a prerequisite and a factor in the development of culture. Such directed actions have become one of the canons of cultural politics although it is worth noting that often they must face resistance and limitations. The latter are engendered by the influx of bearers of a foreign (‘alien’) culture which poses a threat to the stabilized position of the local culture, accustomed to its own dominance.

A challenge to the theory of incommensurability and untranslatability of cultures comes in the form of the practice of cultural literacy, stimulated by intercultural migrations and contacts. In its extended understanding such ‘illiteracy’ refers not only to the articulate language and literature, but also to the entire field of a given culture, including artifacts as well as behaviors,

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<sup>20</sup> I quote here *in extenso* a high-profile and often cited argument by Hilary Putnam (1981: 114-115) presented to oppose the theses of incommensurability: ‘The incommensurability thesis is the thesis that terms used in another culture, say, the term »temperature« as used by a seventeenth-century scientist, cannot be equated in meaning or reference with any terms or expressions we possess. As Kuhn puts it, scientists with different paradigms inhabit »different worlds«. (...) The rejoinder this time is that if this thesis were really true then we could not translate other languages — or even past stages of our own language — at all. And if we cannot interpret organisms’ noises at all, then we have no grounds for regarding them as thinkers, speakers, or even persons. In short, if Feyerabend (and Kuhn at his most incommensurable) were right, then members of other cultures, including seventeenth-century scientists, would be conceptualizable by us only as animals producing responses to stimuli (including noises that curiously resemble English or Italian). To tell us that Galileo had »incommensurable« notions and then to go on to describe them at length is totally incoherent’.

customs and rituals<sup>21</sup>. It reveals the intellectual, linguistic, semiotic, symbolic and textual (discursive) potential inherent in the latter. As an analogy to linguistic and literary literacy, which consist in the ability to read, write and communicate with the use of one's command of the alphabet, the vocabulary and the rules of grammar – and from there in the skill of creating and receiving messages in a foreign language – cultural literacy, at times erroneously seen as erudition, involves the mastery of the code, rules and conventions of a foreign culture and the ability to enter into efficient communication with its bearers and representatives. It does also involve the awareness of the preferred lifestyle thereof, the orientation within 'the great narratives' and anecdotes of the foreign culture, its forms of entertainment, modes of expression, idioms, idiosyncrasies, cultural and historical allusions, topography, etc. It applies both to its refined expression ('high culture'), as well as to the everyday behaviors (greetings, etiquette, clothing, meals, collective leisure activities, understanding of symbols, etc.). The effect of that sort of literacy can therefore be a shaping of a universe of discourse common for diverse cultures, which would blur the boundaries and seemingly insuperable barriers to communication.

Cultural literacy is a consequence of multiculturalism and the increasing mutual intercultural influence (interculturalism), and at the same time it is a catalyst for the development of both these processes. Their essence being contacts, interference (mixing) and interactions between bearers of diverse cultures, they intertwine the very cultures themselves. Processes of this kind – not always desirable from the point of view of ethnocentrism and the ideals of a national state – foster both the opening to foreign cultures and the assimilation of their codes as well as enable the transfer of culture's own codes and wielding the influence on others in selected fields. These three phenomena – cultural literacy, multiculturalism and the interaction of cultures – doubtless reflect the momentous cultural processes of today

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<sup>21</sup> James Gee (1991) defines cultural literacy as an ability to function within an environment with the use of discourses which bring together 'language, thought and action'. The concept was further developed by William T. Fagan (1996). He framed literacy in terms of cultural competence enabling communication and behavioral passage from the primary cultural context to extensive ones.

which modify many traditional, often outdated, notions of culture and therefore cannot be set aside and excluded from the perspective of culturology.

Thus cultural literacy, rooted in multicultural society and interaction of cultures, stimulates a deeper, authentic intercourse with cultures different to one's own, concurrently enabling one to perceive one's own culture from the position of 'being out of it' and seeing its reflections in the mirrors of other cultures – i.e. from the perspective of someone using a different cultural code (codes), who perceives and models reality (and potentially) their own existence according to different rules. This provides an opportunity to improve and reevaluate the respective aspects of one's culture, to become aware of its potential inconsistencies and to endeavor to amend those<sup>22</sup>. Such attitude of otherness (and a kind of alienation) from oneself could at first glance seem utopian and impossible to perform; however, it is in fact a necessary condition for cultural transgression, for stepping out of an ethnolinguistic monoculture and entering into a dialogue with the other. It provides an opportunity to replenish and diversify a given cultural repertoire.

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<sup>22</sup> One model for a theoretical stance and strategy of the sort remains the existential and epistemic-ontological idea of 'outsidedness' or 'outsideness' (Rus. *wnienachodmiost*) envisaged in the early works by Mikhail Bakhtin. It consists in revealing the fundamental cognitive differences in perceiving oneself and the other. The difference lies in the fact that an individual (or a collective subject) is unable to cognitively define themselves from the outside as comprehensively as they could see the other. It is rendered impossible by the position of the eye which can see what is 'in front' or 'to the side' of it, but not what is 'at the back' or 'behind it'. Therefore, such seeing is characterized by a certain kind of 'surplus of seeing' with regard to the other, with a simultaneous 'insufficiency' of seeing with regard to oneself. Such insufficiency of seeing oneself from the outside and the surplus of seeing the other is in turn reflected in the surplus of the internal, fluid, contour-less self-observation (introspection) of a given subject and the insufficiency of knowledge of the internal reality of the other. A similar cognitive situation enables the subject to relatively delve into the other through transgression and return to oneself with the acquired knowledge of the other and of oneself in relation to the other – without the necessity to resign from one's own perspective and worldview. Such return is a prerequisite of a constructive dialogue with the other and one that can expand the horizons (field of view, circle of values) of both sides. See: Obukhova 2013: 35-46.

The above metamorphosis also serves to create common ground between different cultures and facilitates the exchange between them. Culturology confronts the negative and perplexing thesis of incommensurability, incompatibility and untranslatability of the respective cultures with an alternative image – founded upon the comparative research of history – of their chronic inconclusiveness, insufficiency and incompleteness, obliging them to enter into exchange with their cultural surrounding. The example (and the model) of literary literacy, a feature narrower than cultural literacy, proves particularly useful in that field. It makes us aware that in the modern-day civilization, literature created possibly in any known language becomes an element in the process of being translated to other languages. Thus it is a subject to a double transgression. The manner in which it occurs is through translation and assimilation of works representing foreign languages and literature which could potentially originate or perpetuate some changes in the local literature, at any rate expanding its view of the reality. Another form of transgression involves on the other hand translating local literature into foreign languages. A given literature crosses out of the boundaries of its familiar ethnic language and literary system and blends into new surroundings. As an example, one could look at the international reception of the Shakespearean *oeuvre*, while at present – a similar reception of the Nobel Prize laureates. In both these cases, transgression and translation stimulate the literary process. In such case the self-sufficiency, isolation and closure of literature (or culture) within itself – regardless of whether it was forced or steered from external instances (such as the authorities, ideology, religion or tradition), or whether it was the result of an inflated self-esteem – would amount to a stasis and an impasse in literature. In this instance, the parallelism with culture seems self-explanatory – on condition that the notion of literary translation is complemented by the concepts of inter-artistic and intercultural (inter-semiotic) translation (Faiq 2004: 3).

At the opposing pole to the view of a selective, closed and impermeable for diverse values *Kulturkreis*, one finds the concept of the so-called culturalism. The latter proclaims omniperfusion and omnipresence of culture throughout all aspects of life, thereby questioning our ability to take a stance external and distanced from it. It undermines the ability of an individual or collective subject – whether ethnic or social – to perform an independent and standalone evaluation thereof, further still: to chose, modify and shape



aspects of reality according to criteria other than those inherent in it. It negates the possibility of emergence of attitudes and preferences independent from it or the possibility of taking initiative and introducing innovation. It rules out in advance the opposition and resistance to the irresistible and pressuring itself both from inside and outside cultural *Wille zur Macht*.

What is posited here therefore is that cultural phenomena stem from other cultural phenomena ('of their own accord') and that they leave a mark upon every expression of human life and activity. According to expansive culturalism, the very cognition of culture is culture-dependent (a clear indication of an occurrence of a circularity in the concepts of culturology). Its potent reach encompasses religion, science, politics and economy. Culturalism distinguishes and underscores in all these fields what is in line with culture, while at the same time it blurs and ignores the instances of diversity and variety. It openly or covertly absolutizes the principle of cultural abiogenesis (*generatio spontanea*).

Such notion leaves the individual, society and culture in a shrill opposition to nature. It sees the latter as an ever less influential factor and of ever less influence on cultural and civilizational spheres. At the same time, the idea points to the progressive removal of nature and the irreversible alienation of human beings and communities from it. The concept of the human as a biological part of nature – including the Rousseauian utopia of the noble savage – the adherents of culturalism replace with an anthropological concept according to which the human is the creator and bearer of culture, yet entirely defined by it and constituting an inseparable part thereof. Nature, in turn, was assigned the properties of a substrate, refined and crafted according to the resulting needs and models, subsequently transformed into artifacts introduced into cultural circulation, which in turn delineates the boundaries, framework and space for individual and social existence.

Culturalism also sanctioned notions which see culture as a system of signs, symbols, meaning and texts of all sorts. It identified it as the 'semiosphere'. It assigned primacy to specific systems (and sub-systems) of signs and complexes of cultural texts both over natural and social phenomena<sup>23</sup>. These determined the methods of identification and self-

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<sup>23</sup> The notion of culture as a system of signs and processes of communication is at times extended out of the anthropic sphere to also cover the world of animals,

-identification of the members of communities together with their tradition and mutual communication. They enabled contacts with other communities and co-created the models of the world which allowed for interpreting the surrounding reality and navigating through it.

It is worth emphasizing that the semiotics of culture was formulated by scholars from different countries, to mention only Ernst Cassirer, the author of *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen* (in three volumes, 1923-1929), Claude Lévi-Strauss, the originator of structural anthropology and the author of *Anthropologie structurale* (1958) and Yuri Lotman, the author of a collection of essays *Статьи по типологии культуры: Материалы к курсу теории литературы* (1970). The thought of the kind was entertained and developed – predominantly in an American context – by Clifford J. Geertz in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), a compilation of his earlier essays and dissertations. William H. Sewell (1991: 51) thus generalized the discussed position:

What all of these approaches had in common was an insistence on the systematic nature of cultural meaning and the autonomy of symbol systems – their distinctness from and irreducibility to other features of social life. They all abstracted a realm of pure signification out from the complex messiness of social life and specified its internal coherence and deep logic. Their practice of cultural analysis consequently tended to be more or less synchronic and formalist.

Such views however do not seem to endure the contemporary criticism. By accentuating the uniform character and coherence of the system, on the one hand, they isolate and emancipate culture, relieving it of its historical and social contexts, liberating it not only from external circumstances, tensions and influences, but also from its internal irregularities and transformations. As a result, they purify it from heterogeneous additions, artificially simplifying and standardizing it. Such was the spirit of the advancements made by the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School. Culture – wrote Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky (1978: 211) in the resonating style of the 1970s – ‘is never a universal set, but always a subset organized in a specific manner.

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plants and machines, and according to Romantics even the realm of ghosts and specters.

Culture never encompasses *everything*, but forms instead a marked-off sphere. Culture is understood only as a section, a closed-off [! – E.K.] area against the background of nonculture'. What is symptomatic of his view is the undifferentiated and negative notion of 'nonculture'.

On the other hand, the concepts which regard culture as an impermeable 'closed system' identify it *implicite* with reproduction of the existing artifacts, norms, models and values. Thus they muddle their definition of culture into a *regressus ad infinitum*. Their stance is contradicted, however, by the empirical diversity, changeability and creative (innovative) character of the respective cultural phenomena, *oeuvres*, forms and processes. Therefore, Doris Bachmann-Medick (2003: 102) not without a reason observed that 'culturalism entails a hyposthesis of the cultural, ignoring the issues of power, social and material dynamics, politics and economy'.

To sum up, looking at these issues from the point of view of culturology, it is impossible to identify culture solely with transmission (duration), nor with its volatile changeability of forms; nor still with a reproduction of ready-made models or with rash creation of novelties. For it is characterized by both: duration and changeability, reproduction and creativity. Rarely confined in a closed systemic order, it incorporates and adapts elements from outside its familiar environment. It additionally performs recycling of the outdated and worn-out forms. Its variations and ramifications ('subsystems') are characterized by relative translatability through signs, symbols and meanings. It allows for enclaves of idiolect and separatedness, which in turn cultivate the 'secret' nature of signs and forms, their esotericism, 'the darkness of speech' or the breaking of the norms<sup>24</sup>.

Nevertheless, the above formulation does not fully reflect the manner of operation ('the life') of culture. Its affinity for hegemony, immobilization, systematization, uniformization, codification and hierarchization of values and models (for culture is a powerful weapon of power, of instilling pressure upon consciousness, it is a tool for controlling discourses and 'ruling people's

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<sup>24</sup> The issues related to esotericism are studied i.a. by the Paris chair of *Histoire de l'ésotérisme occidental* on the Sorbonne (currently a part of the *École pratique des hautes études*), Warburg Institute in London, Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam and Exeter Centre for the Study of Esotericism (EXESES).

souls and hearts’) is counterbalanced by the polyphony, diversity and dialogue polarization. The clash of that sort was suggestively illustrated by Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (1965). He shows there the historical conflict between the carnival culture of laughter and grotesque against the official culture cultivating the serious and abstract idealization. A contemporary image of these tense relations of polarized cultures (civilizations) was given in a journalistic – and criticized for over-simplifications – book by Samuel Huntington *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). While foreseeing the end of the age of ideology, the American political theorist decided that the bone of contention at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become the irreconcilable cultural and religious conflict. In that respect, culture engenders sorts of complex, multilayered, volatile, cultural *coincidentia oppositorum* expressed by various circles (‘subsystems’). In untangling and specifying of that notion lies one of the crucial tasks culturology faces.

A significant issue from the perspective of culturology is therefore that culture is produced by way of anthropogenesis. Shaped by man, it reflexively influences both its creators and their activity, as well as the surrounding world of civilization and nature. On the one hand, it is subject to internalization, it forms the personality, psyche and behavior of individuals. On the other, it influences interpersonal relationships and regulates their collective life. Its forms, once constituted and released into circulation, garner a social quality. They become a common good of sorts. They undergo objectification, emancipation, reification and naturalization. They are deprived of their oftentimes personal bond with their creators, inventors and legislators. They become anonymous and impersonal. They frequently turn into both binding and temporary ‘taboos’ and ‘intransgressible norms’. However, it would prove hard indeed to find among the latter any that in the long run could successfully withhold the pressure of transformations and the relativizing influence of time.

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## Summary

Culturology is a distinct reflection on culture that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, whereas the so-called cultural turn in the humanities (the turn that became aware of its cultural background and foundation) became the impetus for its development. The article tries to clarify what the term in question entails, what is the subject of its research, what kind of theoretical assumptions it makes in relation to its subject and what specific learning goals it faces. One of the key questions of culturology concerns culture, it asks about its limits, about the variance of its forms in space and time, and about the extent to which they form – despite differences – a community, unity and a whole. The article emphasizes on one hand the dynamic, processual and creative nature of culture, and on the other its openness, consequently proving the utopian character of aspirations to establish once and for all an unchangeable ‘essence’ of culture as well as its timeless determinants and systemic framework. The article consists of three parts: 1) Context, subject and characteristics of culturology, 2) Delimitations of culture, 3) Acceleration, literacy, multiculturalism, culturalism.

**Keywords:** culturology, delimitations of culture, multiculturalism, culturalism





## DURATION OF THINGS AND DURATION OF CULTURE

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Culture creates two infinities unknown to nature. The first was noticed by Thomas Mann in the introduction to *Joseph and his Brothers*. By examining artefacts, ideas, symbols and human habits, we instinctively seek their sources, believing that in this way we will understand them better. But we never reach the final source – revealing the next antecedences and trying to understand them, we are inevitably guided towards even earlier events and content, and then to even earlier ones. ‘The deeper we delve and the farther we press and grope into the underworld of the past, the more totally unfathomable become those first foundations of humankind, of its history and civilization, for again and again they retreat farther into the bottomless depths’ (Mann 2005: 3). Mann called this phenomenon a well of the past and speaks of an amazing paradox, as this infinity of genesis exists after all in the finite time that was given to man on Earth. The second infinity is heading in the opposite direction, towards the future and is connected with the everlasting being of a historical event. In nature, previous events change into new ones and only in the latter they continue to exist, completely absorbed by them, but the human event, the state of things endowed with meaning, knows no such absorption. Once it has been created, subsequent events cannot erase it. The philosopher Karl Raimund Popper (1979) even came to the radical conclusion that beings endowed with meaning have a distinct way of existence and he coined the name World<sub>3</sub> for them, distinguishing it from the World<sub>1</sub> (physical objects) and the World<sub>2</sub> (mental processes). However, Popper’s World<sub>3</sub> does not exist in time, its everlasting being stems rather from their position beyond time. The French philosopher and musicologist, Vladimir Jankélévitch, took the same riddle differently,

including time and duration in it: 'He who has been, from then on cannot not have been: henceforth this mysterious and profoundly obscure fact of having been is his viaticum for all eternity' (the sentence used as a motto in: Ricoeur 2004). He did not make the problem easier, but somewhat richer. Popper's lasting objects of culture are a matter of cognition focused on timeless meanings, while Jankélévitch also includes a sense of history.

At school, we were taught history as if it was a series of events with emptiness lying in between. We know, however, that apart from great battles and famous founding acts, normal days and hours and minutes of human lives passed by. Emptiness separates historical testimonies (the worry of all historians), but there is no emptiness in history. It does not only last in transient events and their representations, which are prone to destruction: documents, artefacts. We can sometimes perceive those missing days and times by discovering them in ordinary things that do not show signs of being a witness. History exists in them in a hidden, but perfectly continuous way. When the last World War passed, many simple events and things gained a new meaning – lost their innocence and could no longer return to their former senses: knocking at the door, wall, train, canal, forest, basement, barbed wire, barrack. In Polish films from the 1950s (e.g. directed by Wojciech Jerzy Has or Jerzy Kawalerowicz), the camera often looks at things in this way – suspiciously, with fear that the world of cruelty hidden in them will suddenly wake up, as if life entangled in this history were lasting in things, and could not return to balance (see: Pilat 2000).

In the column by Zbigniew Herbert, written in 1951 in connection with the new archaeological discoveries in Gdansk, three methods of the archaeological reconstruction of objects are distinguished. The first is to restore what has been destroyed by time. It is a perennial conflict between man and time, raised to the level of art, resistance, which Roman Ingarden (1973: 17) wrote so suggestively about in his essay *Człowiek i przyroda* (*Man and Nature*):

Culture creations created by man are nothing more than a kind of shadow of reality, being only purely intentional creations. They wear only the appearance of existence that characterizes all spiritual human works, such as works of art or various other products of human culture, regardless of whether they are works of a particular man or the whole

human community. They are formed on the ground of things and processes of the innate world, adapted to this by man, and their properties go beyond the limits of the material objects' remuneration, covering them with a new layer of meaning and new phenomena. Transcending these things with it, they lose their fullness and autonomy of existence and have no power of reality independent of man and his spiritual acts. They can satisfy man's aspirations for life elevated above nature only on the condition of his extraordinary spiritual activity and fall back into complete non-existence, as soon as he loses the will to transcend his simple inborn nature and renounces his creative activity of consciousness.

In harmony with the observations by the philosopher, Herbert (2001: 633) describes the scene that made a great impression on him:

Through the open door, you can see the scientific laboratory of the Museum's unnamed artists. Above a huge pile of tiny fragments that look like a scattered mosaic, the heads bend down and their sniptious fingers draw out the last piece of the 18th century plate. Now the subtle ornament of blue flowers shone with all its splendour. The wise fingers have restored fragile art its former beauty [emphasis mine – R.P.].

Another sense of lasting of things according to Herbert is survival. The poet was fascinated by the processes that, in happy conditions, allow things to sustain much longer than they would if things took the natural course:

In the town, the level of hygiene was not high, and the piles of dirt lying in the streets, along with moisture, bark waste – gave tannin, betulin and methane, thanks to which preservation was better and more than in other early medieval castles in Poland, especially such things as: coloured fabrics, plant and animal remains, bristles, feathers, as well as a hen's egg, on which fierce arguments of visitors take place, whether it is even possible (ibid. 646; emphasis mine – R.P.).

In the same passage, Herbert recognizes the third aspect of duration of material objects – in human cognition and understanding: 'These objects are seemingly trivial, but really allow deep penetration into the social, economic, cultural and political structure of those times [emphasis mine – R.P.]. All three of the poet's observations surprise with a certain positivist

spirit and faith in the power of knowledge and technical mastery, which allows you to snatch history's dormant and seemingly inaccessible secrets. By reproducing, preservation, understanding, we recreate the same history that created us. All attempts to understand history, however, are associated with a deep paradox. Recognizing our genesis leads to owning ourselves, holding ourselves within the scope of understanding perception. However, the relationship to oneself can hardly be described as possession. This metaphor: being in possession of oneself, has accompanied philosophy for ages. It used to express intimacy with oneself, being a friend of oneself. However, it is not the most fortunate metaphor, because it creates an infinite regression of having one who possesses one who possesses one, etc. A man who possesses himself (grasps himself, looks at himself) turns out (paradoxically) to be hidden from himself forever, and this is why the cognitive paradigm did not fully meet the hopes of regulating human communing with history.

Considering cultural objects implies a richer, more promising hermeneutics. In fact, in Herbert's later work, communing with cultural artefacts has a different function. It is no longer a cognitive task, tearing the past of its riddles, but rather, as the poet writes in the volume of the *Mistrz z Delf* (*Master of Delft*), searching for signs and traces of a lost community. Also the word 'object' in the earlier famous book of poems *Studium przedmiotu* (*Study of the Object*), refers to the work of an artist or a person of the drama, not the discoverer – the object appears completely immersed in human fate.

The artefact, which lasts in the most mysterious and peculiar way, is a book. Its physical form today, in the era of electronic memory, is only one of the possible carriers of text and image, which is why many foretell its end. However, this twilight does not happen. On the contrary, the physical garment of a book attracts book lovers, publishers, artists – it is a matter of cognition and expression, not limited to the text itself. Therefore, the passion of restoring splendour to old scrolls, codes and volumes does not cease. The materiality of a book is very special: it lasts in time like other artefacts, but on the other hand, the text contained in it has its own time – the one in which the meanings, ideas and styles last. Both of those components of a book refer to different time structures, but they seem to support each other. It seems that the cover of a book, covered with a patina of time, is a clue for the reader. It triggers his unconscious anticipation that

the text will emerge not only from the pages of the book, but also from the depths of history.

Let an anecdote illustrate this mutual dependence of material and content in the books. The writer of these words studied philosophy in ATK (Academy of Catholic Theology in Warsaw), and naturally, he used to sit in the Academy's reading room. Once upon a time, a book ordered by him was extracted from the magazine, a two-volume English commentary on Immanuel Kant published at the end of XIX century. All it took was to open the cover to reveal that the book had been left unopened for the entire century. The seals in the book showed that the volume originally belonged to the library in Königsberg, from where it went to post-war Poland, marked by the seals of new libraries, carefully cancelled and replaced by the new ones when the book changed its place of residence. Finally, it found its way to the Warsaw's district Bielany, to the ATK library – a thick volume moved around with effort and care of many librarians – catalogued, preserved but not read by anyone<sup>1</sup>. What content and what feelings does one expect while cutting these uncut pages? Will it be a discovery of an unknown genius? Or will it turn out a worthless graphomania? Whatever it is, it is not an ordinary book – under the guidance of yellowed paper and a faded ridge, the book invites to a serious encounter with history.

The efforts of conservators are accompanied by the search for the original. He is the guardian of the truth. The mind, which is supposed to be the nest of truth, must be protected from its own tendency to fantasize, speculate and bend its own knowledge according to some interest and against the original meaning. The conservator protect the original meaning by protecting the original artefact. The concept of the original is, however, unclear. In the field of graphics, for example, there's a concept of a posthumous original, that is, prints made after the artist's death from the matrix prepared by him. However, even in such a peculiar case, efforts are made to preserve the intuition of the original. A good example is a research program lasting

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, despite the efforts of recollection, I am not able to top this anecdote with an effective punch line and give the title of the work. Thirty years have passed since that time, erasing the notes and weakening the memory. I think, however, that some readers, most probably book lovers, will remember their own similar discoveries.

for several years, which aimed to examine the originality of Rembrandt's prints owned by the Poznan museum. The curator of the exhibition crowning these efforts, Grażyna Hałas, tells in an interview for the Polish Radio II Program about the titanic work, subtle techniques and brilliant deductions, which led to dethroning several items and raising several others to the level of the original. The listener to her words has no doubt that this work was not only exciting, but also fruitful. But what is this fruit we're talking about here? Achievement, after all, does not lie in establishing the process of causal or material primacy of one artefact in relation to another. I would say, that the discovery of the original (or 'unmasking' of the copy) is the guiding principle of understanding – it announces the content, opens the legitimate (and longed for) path to interpretation. This phenomenon of opening is accompanied by strong emotions, creating what can be called the experience of the original. As Tim Hitchcock (2008: 83) wrote: 'When you unwrap a parchment document enclosing the 200-years-old evidence given at a coroner's inquest, and the sand used to blot the ink spills into your lap, it is difficult to maintain an appropriate distance'.

On the other hand, Warcin Wilkowski (2012) notices that 'If we recognize that only direct contact with the original has a full value, we reduce the range of archives impact only to a narrow group of specialists, museums – to people who can come to the exhibition (they are able to buy a ticket and get to the place), libraries – to people who will be given the opportunity to take a crumbling codex into their hands'. The emotional relationship Hitchcock writes about, though real and authentic, has a rather ephemeral status. It is difficult to accurately characterize it, measure it, and estimate its significance. Should the original remain a paradigm of access to culture? Wilkowski formulates doubts in this matter, joining a lively contemporary discussion on the subject.

Looking for the original is not about a purely retrospective act of tracing the determining causation, but it is about a prospective act of opening a new interpretation. Causality in the natural sciences binds these two aspects – this is what its cognitive value is all about. By determining the regularities that took place earlier, we are given the opportunity to predict. It is similar in cultural studies, although the bridging is different, lacking the form of mathematical equations. Here the causality gives something similar to Ariadne's thread in the work of interpretation.

There are other ontic properties of the world (in addition to causality), which are of great importance in the search for the original. The first is the identity of the studied objects over time. If one were to take material reality in its entirety, the problem of identity would be trivial – it would appear a priori, because the world in which everything changes is after all and as a whole the same with each other. But with regard to individual objects, works, people, the problem of continuity turns out to be very difficult. For centuries, philosophers have been pondering over the question at which moment the object that changes from moment to moment ceases to be the same subject. They did not stop trying to solve puzzles, like the one with the ship, which during the renovation gets a new plating, frames, deck, masts and equipment, and yet it is (some do not think so) the same ship. In more recent times, the question has been brought back in a more serious context by the British philosopher Derek Parfit (1984) arguing that in human and moral philosophy we do not need a category of personal identity – a gradual and non-transitive category of continuity is enough for practical and moral purposes.

The last category that is associated with the search for the original is the source. The original is not only the leading thread in the search for interpretation, but also directs to its source. Finding a source seems to promise better understanding. However, the difficulties pointed out by Thomas Mann in *Joseph and his Brothers* show that understanding it is not only about the beginning, but about a meaningful point of reference. The search for the beginning can become obsessive and lead to the conviction that the whole truth lies in the past, whereas the only task of contemporaries is to assimilate and store it. But one does not have to be obsessed with the idea of the source. It suffices to recognize the normative power of the past forms of culture. They are a challenge in virtue of the sheer fact that they have already been around, History is the history of normative reference to sources. We take up the commitments arising from these sources, albeit transforming them in reinterpretation. This phenomenon was described by Harold Bloom (1997) as a ‘fear of influence’ – the dramatic work of the poet, who must build his originality from the existed symbols and styles.

In the process of normalizing the culture, a special role belongs to the world of things. An interesting view on this issue was proposed by a French philosopher, Michel Foucault (1979). He was an influential critic

of the concept of subjectivity, which he interpreted as an artificial construct, serving the purpose of social control rather than the purpose of shaping one's own life. He regarded human subjectivity as an invented internal point of view, which makes it possible to ascribe people agency and responsibility for their statements, deeds, attitudes or gestures. To people themselves, this imposes a strong command of self-knowledge, which allows them to participate in this social game of control on an equal footing. The subject is someone who knows what and why he has done, and as such is able to face social judgement. Foucault proposed to change the optics: instead of determining *truths* about yourself – about the sense and value of your experiences, deeds and relationships with others – you have to see your life as a set of *techniques* by which you create yourself. Foucault claimed that the one-sided emphasis on self-knowledge deprives the other registers of self-management of any worth and thus deprives life of what has traditionally been called *decorum* – cultural dispositions, qualities, abilities, states of pleasure and habits, all of them contributing to the desired form of life. An important part of this *decorum* is the world of human products – products of culture. To be sure, in Foucault's philosophy the subject disappears, but thanks to the study of culture he proposes instead, it is possible to set a certain *line*, which can be called a subjective line – a sequence of content contained in things that have created us as we are today. It is impossible to give the rules of this process. It is an art in which one can improve oneself, but whose final riddles cannot be known – not because they are deeply hidden, but because they are simply not there. The art of being yourself is not a cipher written in culture, like a cryptogram, but it is simply the art of being in culture. In this way, Foucault summarized a certain current present in European thought from the Renaissance, especially expressed in the *Essays* by Michel de Montaigne.

The technique of shaping oneself involves things. They become the bearers of culture, and this in turn becomes the very essence of a human being. Personally, I think Foucault's diagnosis is too exaggerated, because I suppose that if we get rid of the metaphysics of a man (however elusive it might be) and replace it with culture, we will not maintain the ability of normative thinking. However, this is a topic for a separate discussion. In the present remarks, I would like to emphasize what is clever and creative in this diagnosis. It namely shows that our life among things is far from



one-dimensional pragmatism. Things are witnesses and guards of meanings, which are necessary for life. Their function does not disappear even when they are physically destroyed. There is still a place left for them in the realm of meaning. It seems that not only educated researchers of culture, but everyone who is looking for an intense experience and understanding of the world, finds delight in contemplating what is no longer there. Formerly, these were primarily ruins, as a sign of what it was – the original, available in fractions, but still materially present. Today, this form of experiencing the world is even more refined: we are wandering around non-existent cities, we are putting old maps on today's areas, we imagine the already abolished political borders, we see the destroyed walls of the Warsaw ghetto and the Berlin wall, we are watching the orphaned column base in the church destroyed in Napoleon's army in Cluny, we look in the empty sky after the World Trade Center. I think that for people who have devoted themselves to the understanding and preservation of material culture, new fields of activity are opening up. Placing the past within the present is no longer either ordinary reading texts, or storing material things, but making the old world present and giving testimony.

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## Summary

This article discusses the relation between temporal existence of things and the persistence of culture. The material and the immaterial aspects of culture are quite different in relation to time. According to philosopher Karl R. Popper, meanings, senses and ideas belong to a separate non-temporal realm of being. They come about in time but henceforth they exist non-temporarily. Their existence, unlike that of physical objects, does not depend on keeping a delicate balance between the change and identity – it is not based on struggle against time. But on the other hand, their seemingly non-temporal subsistence is strictly connected to the temporal existence of things. The latter do not carry meaning in virtue of sheer convention, but rather by means of subtle connection between their material structure and the properties of sentient and intelligent beings. Books hold a very special place in this framework. Physical properties of books are intertwined with their content very strongly albeit mysteriously. It is safe to say that reducing books to their content – by conveying the content to digital carriers alone – would result in a serious impoverishing of culture. In reference to early journalist works by the poet Zbigniew Herbert, three functions of preserving and studying artefacts are distinguished: reconstruction, preserving and learning. In studying artefacts there is always a quest for originals and considerable efforts are made in order to distinguish them from copies and derivatives. The article gives a brief account of recent debate concerning the value of these pursuits. Finally, a discussion with Michel Foucault is presented, concerning the role of things in self-formation.

**Keywords:** artefact, preservation, original, history, Zbigniew Herbert, Michel Foucault

## GOMBROWICZ'S KITSCH IN THE CONTEXT OF (POST)MODERNITY THEORY

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Kitsch has probably existed since time immemorial, or at least as long as the division into higher and lower classes, the aristocracy and the commoners and since the former have been trying to cut themselves off from the latter, whereas the latter have been aspiring, copying and pretending... Yet kitsch is also, to a certain extent, the child of modernity. Ideal conditions for it were born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: on the one hand, there was easy industrial production, offering tons of plastic trinkets; on the other, progressing democratization of life and, along with it, the temptation to take into account, in the creation and reception of art, the principle of the 'common denominator'. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked by the flourish of tacky and superficial aesthetization in the mass culture, criticism of kitsch intensified (see: Ortega y Gasset 1932; Macdonald 1953). First and foremost, modernism – reigning at least until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – with its obsession of 'high art' and 'high artist', which was accompanied by the pressure for innovation and originality - allowed such philosophers as Hermann Broch or Theodor Adorno to repudiate kitsch as a stereotype, banality, a caricature of art, bad art or false art<sup>1</sup>.

Nowadays, in the late-modern times (or, if preferred, the post-modern times), it no longer behooves to stigmatize kitsch: criticism of kitsch is

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<sup>1</sup> In Adorno's (1997) case, this was the avant-garde with the category of grandeur discovered anew. On the other hand, Broch's (1969) concept was more universalist – it assumed ties between aesthetics and ethics and saw the role of art in searching for authenticity of artistic expression, identifying it with the search for truth.

rather placed within the walls - destroyed a long time ago - of obstinate and proud modernity<sup>2</sup>. Contemporary art was particularly conducive to this: the accomplishments of late avant-garde (in particular pop-art, which put a mark of equality between art and mass culture banality) provoked discussions about the end of art and the end of aesthetics (see: Piątkowski 2008; Sekuła 2008). On the other hand, kitsch is especially justified today because modernity has not ended but, on the contrary, its symptoms (homogenization and democratization of culture) have greatly intensified, resulting in further blurring of the borders between 'high art' and 'low art'. All of this has contributed to the post-modernist conviction of crisis and devaluation of high culture, of the lack of criteria for 'true art' at the times of commonplace aesthetization (see: Dziamski 1995).

I believe that today it is impossible to speak about kitsch without referring to the philosophical and cultural reflection on modernity. What is more, whilst analyzing the subject matter of kitsch in the works of Witold Gombrowicz, it is also worthwhile to locate the issue in the context of the writer's attitude to modernity<sup>3</sup>. Fortunately, this task is not ungrateful, as we are talking about a philosophizing artist, an artist who may easily be called a philosopher of modernity (see: Cataluccio, Illg 1991)<sup>4</sup>. By undertaking the issue of kitsch in Gombrowicz's works in this article, I remain in the circle of his concept of modernity and I am trying to reconstruct its certain features.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Shusterman (1992) excellently reconstructs the modernist concept of art with its elitist nature (in order to subject it to criticism from the point of view of neo-pragmatism).

<sup>3</sup> Jerzy Jarzębski (1996) was the first to refer to the issues of modernism and post-modernism by mentioning the theme of kitsch in Gombrowicz's works.

<sup>4</sup> It has turned out in the course of time that Gombrowicz's concept of art (and life) is so acute, deep and far-reaching that it was later successfully compared to various ideas which subsequently described the cultural situation of post-war Europe. Therefore, Gombrowicz was considered the prophet of structuralism, existentialism and post-modernism; from the perspective of time, it may even be said: reflection on modernity and the so-called late modernity (post-modernity).

## GOMBROWICZ'S STRUGGLE WITH KITSCH: BETWEEN MODERNISM AND POST-MODERNISM

Jerzy Jarzębski has justly noticed that Gombrowicz is straddling between two epochs and may be ascribed the features of both a modernist and a post-modernist: 'still »avant-garde«, still believing in the clear »progress« in the realm of art, literature and music, but already induced to parody, distance, playing with the form, already mocking the orthodox followers of the avant-garde doctrine' (Jarzębski 1996: 69). The critic adds that it is possible to interpret the work of the author of *Ferdydurke* either in a more modernist or a post-modernist manner, emphasizing, as the case may be, discoveries and new creative concepts or the diversity and inconsistency of the presented ideas, a desire for inferiority, experiments with the form, as well as a tendency to break it. In the first case, Gombrowicz rather criticizes (parodies) kitsch, in the second, he plays with it, and even 'produces it' (*ibid.*).

Even if Gombrowicz was a modernist, he was no longer a believer<sup>5</sup>. In spite of displaying a modernist longing for Great Art, Gombrowicz's fight for greatness rather resembles the idea of the 'strong poet' Rorty – who is a philosopher considered a post-modern thinker (see: Szahaj 2002: 188-208) – a figure trying (similarly to the 'liberal ironist') to get by in the era of contingency. According to Rorty (1989), grandeur and originality, not giving in to 'other vocabularies' are a tragically difficult task in the modern times (see: Kwiek 1993: 57).

If Gombrowicz was, however, a post-modernist, he was not a 'believer' either i.e. not a post-modernist who enjoyed the multitude, chaos and confusion. He rather suffered due to the failure to speak 'as one ought to'. Therefore, the phrase 'between modernism and post-modernism' from the title does not entail varying proportions of these ideas in the writer's thought, but the fact that also this time he managed to get away from ideologies, even though the anxiety governing them affected him.

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<sup>5</sup> I think that one may even argue with Jarzębski's thesis that the writer 'still believed in progress' even in the realm of art, by recalling the words of the writer: 'Me, a non-believer?' (Gombrowicz 1988). This testifies to the writer's criticism towards the accomplishments of contemporary avant-garde; anyway, Jerzy Jarzębski (1996: 56) finds 'derision of avant-garde poetry' in *Ferdydurke*.

In any case, even though 'Great Form' still remained only a postulate and a dream, Gombrowicz at least knew what was not it, and continually rejected and degraded it. These attacks at the form may be described as attacks at kitsch. In his excellent study, Jarzębski (1996: 57) discussed a number of examples of Gombrowicz's 'represented kitsch'. The writer ruthlessly ridicules the existing social forms, showing the stereotypical, clichéd, preposterous and fake nature of his characters, which is difficult to bear. Failed human forms simply turned out to be unaesthetic: either insufficient, too flat, superficial and ugly (like the social form of aristocrats from the short-story *Banquet at Countess Kotłubaj's*) or, on the contrary: too slick and smooth, too 'pretty' (Zosia from *Ferdydurke*), too immature and infantile (Zuta from the same novel), but primarily too mature, with pretences to grandeur (Lawyer Kraykowski). Therefore, Gombrowicz criticized everyday customary kitsch as 'bad art' like a typical modernist. At this moment, he could shake hands with Adorno and Broch – criticism of kitschy forms is a gesture of the modernist Reason, setting high requirements of originality, authenticity, solemnity and selflessness for art.

Yet, in contrast to the above-mentioned philosophers, Gombrowicz no longer has a deck of aces in his hand, he is unable to show what is perfect and, therefore, what is not kitschy. Thus, this is the place where the writer's 'modernism' ends and the post-modern condition begins. His alter ego, Joey from *Ferdydurke*, is trying to create a mature and brilliant (not kitschy) work, but is incapable of that. Why is it so difficult to be serious today, to write another 'work of high culture'? As Gombrowicz (2000: 4) autobiographically recalls in *Ferdydurke*: 'So why did my pen betray me? Why did holy shame forbid me to write a notoriously trivial novel? Instead of spinning lofty themes from the head, from the soul, I spun the themes from more lowly quarters?'

Thus, why doesn't Gombrowicz want to write 'yet another novel about love' (ibid.: 10)? Let us notice that the tendency for kitsch ceases to be the vice of an individual artist – it becomes the curse of the epoch in which 'everything had already been created'. It is the same situation as in the well-known passage from correspondence between Umberto Eco and Stefano

Rosso – one cannot simply write today: ‘I love you desperately’<sup>6</sup>. In this epoch, faith becomes naivety and truth becomes kitsch as everything that is lofty also seems to turn into kitsch (like Miętus’ solemn face in the famous duel of grimaces). Eternal Works, placed on display in museums and schools, are dead. They are no longer palpable, nobody experiences them (‘Nobody can read more than two or three verses. Oh God! I cannot...’ [Gombrowicz 2000: 44]), they may potentially be used to lift the spirits of the nation – and yet such instrumental use contradicts the modernist idea of aesthetic contemplation.

*Nota bene*, all of Gombrowicz’s exposing and destructive intentions should rather be called ‘holy wrath’ (here, even the figure of Jesus Christ throwing merchants out of the temple would be fitting) than believed to be an example of ‘attacks at holiness’ (and result in removal of their author from the list of required reading). By showing the kitschy nature of religion, patriotism and other values, Gombrowicz does not reject Truth or Beauty, but only their caricatures, the easiness of their substitutes in the era of ‘ready-made objects’. Following this trail of thought, the contemporary young conservatives related to the Church are even searching for similarities between the thoughts of Gombrowicz and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński<sup>7</sup>, which is rather back-breaking, but true in a sense that Gombrowicz was

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<sup>6</sup> ‘For me, the postmodern attitude is that of a man who loves a woman who is intelligent and well-read: he knows that he cannot say today »I love you desperately« because he knows (and she knows that he knows) that that is a line out of Barbara Cartland. Yet there is a solution. He can say: »As Barbara Cartland would say, I love you desperately«. At this point, he has avoided the pretence of innocence, he has clearly affirmed that no one can speak in an innocent mode; but he has still told the woman what he wished to tell her – that he loves her, but in the age of lost innocence’ (Rosso 1983: 2-3).

<sup>7</sup> The entire issue 34 of magazine „Pressje” from 2013 was devoted to this subject matter (title of the issue: ‘Polish form’). Editors of the volume criticise the simplified and strongly solidified (even in the Third Republic of Poland) opposition of the traditional, coarse ‘Polish form’, personified by Cardinal Wyszyński, with Gombrowicz’s freedom and modernity, proving, contrary to common interpretations, that these two Poles were united by a number of joint ideals. See in this issue: Rojek 2013; Lubelski 2013.

longing for Truth and Beauty in the same way as Catholics and other believers; he was not satisfied with the dwarfish form of these values<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, Gombrowicz was a modernist (though a disbelieving modernist) to a degree in which he was still longing for the 'Great Form' and criticized the immature forms. He was also a post-modernist, but eventually everything that was ever written by him (and he claimed that he never knew what he would write [see: Cataluccio, Illg 1991: 27]), turned out to be a parody, a pastiche, and thus, in fact, 'working with remainders.' Hence, his fight against kitsch was also post-modernist. Yet this was not a strategy which he would proclaim or recommend, as militant post-modernists did. He was closer to believing in art as an 'unfinished project'.

Therefore, what was offered in exchange – if Gombrowicz did not propose any new forms to replace the destroyed ones? Well: Immaturity. Jarzębski noted justly that even though it is possible to identify kitsch with Immaturity in a simplistic mode, yet, it is definitely closer to the form, to maturity<sup>9</sup>. Kitsch may constitute immature art (unfinished, infantile and simplistic), but at the same time Gombrowicz's Immaturity is not kitschy: it is deadly serious. Gombrowicz reverses the logic by showing that Immaturity is mature (because it is honest and self-reflective), whereas Maturity is kitschy and false. This is immaturity (after) maturity: it corresponds to the post-

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<sup>8</sup> There are also interpretations of Gombrowicz's philosophy in the categories of a search for the sacred, see: Lubelski 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Jarzębski (1996: 55-56) accurately positions the phenomenon of kitsch between the dichotomies of key importance for Gombrowicz: 'Form and chaos, Maturity and Immaturity, Superiority and Inferiority, Old Age and Youth'. Yet first and foremost, he draws attention to the fact that kitsch escapes simple categorising. Definitely – he notices – it is impossible to put kitsch on the one side of the barricade in Gombrowicz's works and 'high' or 'mature' art on the other side. This results from ambiguity of terms that Gombrowicz used. He writes: 'If kitsch was meant to be the immature art, not thought-through and unrefined, then – obviously – it would be located somewhere in the vicinity of Youth and Immaturity; definitely on the one side of the aforementioned axis dividing the world. If it was a naive »art of happiness« pampering our primitive tastes and bashful dreams – it would also be fully located on this side. However, if we simply consider it art of little value, because it relies on stereotypes and clichés, it would turn out that it is easier to find its place on the side of Maturity and Form'.



-modernist version 'I know that I know nothing' or 'vanitas vanitatum'; it is sheer potency or even an act of humiliation - it is silence. Difficult, if not unattainable (continually succumbing into forms), it is a fulfillment of Ernest Gellner's (1992: 47) prophecy: if everything has already been created, post-modernists should remain silent.

## GOMBROWICZ'S 'LOVE AFFAIR WITH KITSCH' (TOWARDS POST-MODERNITY)

By referring to the title mentioned in Jarzębski's essay, I would like to take a look at the second part of Gombrowicz's ambivalent attitude to kitsch (even though obviously these two aspects, namely criticism and use of kitsch, may be analyzed separately with difficulty only and to the detriment of the interpretation of the whole).

Why does Gombrowicz reach for kitsch, and why – as Jarzębski (1996: 69) writes – is he – in a post-modernist mode – more of its producer than a critic? Gombrowicz's obsession with Inferiority is undoubtedly of fundamental importance here. It might be explained with the use of psychoanalysis, it might be considered an original idiosyncrasy – but it also has its justification in the approaching culture of late modernity. It encompasses a number of notions for Gombrowicz.

First of all, there is the love for the actual 'lower classes'. Here, the writer anticipated the surprising democratization of culture of our times. Joey from *Ferdydurke* perversely falls in love with farm-hands, schoolgirls and peasants: he loves inferiority, greenness, opacity. The 'low' content even has certain advantage over the 'high' content: there is no pretence here, no tiring aspiration. The drive towards inferiority is also a kitschy gesture of members of intelligentsia tired with their superiority, tempted by the democratic epoch. It has already appeared in the fascination of Young Poland's artists with peasants and was shyly expressed in *Ferdydurke* in the desire to 'fraternize' with a farm-hand.

Secondly, Inferiority denotes youth. Gombrowicz was not hailed as the prophet of the youth revolution of the 1960s not for nothing. The Elderly, bowing to the Younger, is still hiding in Gombrowicz's works; in *Ferdydurke* he secretly writes letters to the Modern Schoolgirl. Thus, at some point in time, the attraction to youth was a bashful thing; this fascination was, however, not an obstacle in realizing Superiority on a daily basis – by acting

in a Mature manner. Today, we can clearly see the ‘helplessness’ of wise men towards youthful beauty and freshness (*vide* blight of film directors who were charmed by youth, for example Krzysztof Zanussi, who hired the Polish celebrity Doda, or even Woody Allen, who was enchanted by the quite primitive beauty of Scarlett Johansson; unfortunately, in their case, as opposed to Gombrowicz, their kitsch is rather unwitting...). In the era of late modernity, stately, mature and elitist wise men no longer gain high positions; we are dealing with the abuse of mass culture, present already during the times of Witkacy (Witkiewicz 1980), who was complaining about the omnipresent radio, raping people’s ears.

Thirdly, Inferiority means the furtive secrets of the soul (and the body). Gombrowicz, constantly reminding us about the split, about the dark side of the soul, about the ‘sub-official’ (yet not as something that has to be overcome, quashed, but something that has a right to exist, similarly like a child or a youth in an adult person), creates an area where the rehabilitation of kitsch is possible. This is also one of the aspects of Immaturity in Gombrowicz’s works: the sphere of instinct and desire in man, naked corporeality, everything that has been ‘sucked from more lowly quarters’. Here, Gombrowicz is revolutionary. As Jarzębski (1996: 62) notices, the writer started his very career with such threads; however, he destroyed his first works under the impact of terror which they evoked in their readers. Eventually, Gombrowicz did not have the courage to fully give in to his coy desires and satisfied himself with a ‘love affair with kitsch’. In this context, Jarzębski discusses the novel *Opętani (Possessed)*, created as an intended mass culture product, as well as an earlier attempt at writing a purposefully ‘bad novel’ (*ibid.*: 54). Today, we would call them post-modernist strategies: the double layer of Gombrowicz’s novel evokes associations with the prose of Umberto Eco, becomes a play with inferiority and, at the same time, a living proof of the post-modernist blurring of the borders between high and low art. Other strategies of a ‘love affair with kitsch’ include, for example, a pastiche, mixing of genres, quotations, motives taken from second-class literature, combined with references to high art, as listed by Jarzębski (1996: 62). Gombrowicz, like a typical post-modernist, mixes and blurs the borders, plays with kitsch.

Fourthly: the child. Sometimes the writer straightforwardly calls for the child by asking how adult roles refer to the concept of ‘the child runs

deep' and whether some repression has not accidentally taken place here<sup>10</sup>. Many decades before the advent of 'child studies', Gombrowicz remains close to the general post-modernist aura of 'lack of seriousness', conceding to being childish and infantile and demanding the right to play (for example visible in the soft spot that most modern people have for gadgets of mass culture [Sekuła 2008: 43]).

Thanks to the obsession with Inferiority, a clearly post-modernist landscape is created: nothing is clear or separate any more: high and low, art and kitsch; modernist aesthetics will not return. Today, these divisions are no longer valid also thanks to Gombrowicz (2000: 9), who 'was duly anointed by the lower class at the outset', sensitive to the charms of mass culture, the temptations of democratization of culture.

Yet on the other hand, Gombrowicz not so much 'plays with kitsch', but rather treats it very seriously. Jarzębski (1996: 53-54) claims that kitsch is not only a humorous 'seasoning' of his works, but a 'fixed element of his philosophy of artistic activities'. The artist confesses his desire for inferiority as an attempt of 'making this confession a foundation and evidence for authenticity of own art' (ibid.). He not so much joyfully gives in to the delight of kitsch, 'the art of happiness' (Moles 1978), he rather does it in a gesture of desperate honesty. Absolute frankness, soul searching and... kitsch: all of this comes to the surface, as it is 'a part of us'<sup>11</sup>.

The second, apart from a desire to Inferiority, cause of Gombrowicz's inclination to kitsch appears here, namely jealousy. When Gombrowicz

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<sup>10</sup> 'No, not a word about their own lives – only about the lives of bee-keepers. Indeed, having produced twenty books on the lives of bee-keepers, one can be immortalised - but what is the connection, where is the bond between the king of bee-keepers and the inner man, between the man and the youth, between the youth and the boy, the boy and the child that, after all, he once was, what comfort is the king to the little brat in you? A life unmindful of these bonds, a life that does not evolve in unbroken continuity from one phase to the another is like a house built from the top down, and must inevitably end in a schizophrenic split of the inner self' (Gombrowicz 2000: 5).

<sup>11</sup> Jerzy Jarzębski (1996) devotes a lot of attention in his essay to Gombrowicz's peculiar anthropology, from which it follows that kitsch is close to man's nature; therefore, it is difficult to run away from it.

confesses his love for Inferiority, when he submerges for a moment in its depths, he forgets about Superiority, to which he is also pretending. However, when he remembers about it, when he makes the gesture of mocking the Form, of seeing through, ridiculing, ‘contaminating’ and rejecting cheap kitsch, he is always accompanied by an unwanted friend – jealousy, and even envy. Obviously, they are justified due to the fact that Gombrowicz once again honestly confesses his sins and thus neutralizes them (Jarzębski 1996: 65-66).

Jealousy is caused by the fact that the only alternative for the rejected Forms – succumbing to Immaturity – means an uncomfortable situation. Conceding to it equals social degradation, even if this is philosophical ‘immaturity after maturity.’ Immaturity is not accepted in the society (nobody differentiates it from ordinary immaturity, underdevelopment). Therefore, the main character of ‘Ferdynand’ envies others.... kitsch. He envies the courage of these people who decided to say SOMETHING instead of being silent (in particular when they managed to do it quite well). Joey is tormented with his ‘post-modern condition’ and confesses that he is fed up with remaining in the situation of suspension, insecurity and non-authenticity. Acknowledging one’s own immaturity is, in fact, an act of humility, to which Gombrowicz never really wanted to concede in his life, hoping (quite justly) that he would eventually develop his own great Style and Form.

Meanwhile, Gombrowicz’s jealousy is put in inverted commas, because in reality, there is nothing to be jealous of - the writer only wishes to complain that the condition of immaturity is difficult. This happens when Gombrowicz’s character envies, to a certain degree, all the mature, even primitive, cultural aunts. The attack launched against the opinions of the cultural aunts<sup>12</sup> is not only a satire attacking poseurs, clever dodgers attaching themselves

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Indeed, world culture has been beset by a flock of superfluous hens patched-on, pinned-on, to literature, who have become finely tuned to spiritual values and well versed in aesthetics, frequently entertaining views and opinions of their own, who have even caught on to the notions that Oscar Wilde is passé and that Bernard Shaw is a master of paradox. Oh, they are on to a fact that they must be independent, profound, unobtrusively assertive, and filled with auntie kindness’ (Gombrowicz 2000: 6).

to things that do not belong to them, painfully inauthentic, superficial, who only derive trite clichés from the accomplishments of humanity and impress others with them (like the New York snobs from Woody Allen's comedies). This is also envy of those who cope well in this thicket, who have mastered the art of surfing or patching the holes (or transversality – as Wolfgang Iser [1998] calls this ability flatteringly), who are not afraid of the multitude and accidental nature of own judgments and choices.

It is already at this moment that the use of seemingly simple satire marks the beginning of Gombrowicz's 'love affair with kitsch'. The writer stigmatizes it not with a feeling of superiority, like modernists did, but – even when he lays kitsch bare – as Jarzębski noted – he does it in a kitschy manner<sup>13</sup>. Gombrowicz parodies 'from the inside' and is 'soiled' by the modern mass culture and seduced by its charm. Therefore, when stigmatizing kitsch, he succumbs to it; he cannot remain at a distance – thence, the desperate strategies of 'messing up the compote' and spying on the Modern Schoolgirl. According to Jarzębski (1996: 60), kitsch in *Ferdydurke* was ridiculed, but not disarmed. Gombrowicz only neutralises it, conceding to his own weakness.

However, Gombrowicz sometimes 'envis' no longer with a grain of salt; at times, he envies for real, because the shapeliness of kitsch, even its prettiness and unity is a great temptation as opposed to the conscious lack of form... Gombrowicz is aware of the beauty of kitsch, because youth and kitsch often entail attractiveness and beauty.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, in the short-story entitled *Banquet at Countess Kotlubaj's*, which parodies the kitsch of aristocracy, the narrator plays a stock role of 'a simpleton among the high society'; the writer himself is stuck inside the kitschy characters that he parodies; see: Jarzębski 1996: 58.

## GOMBROWICZ AS A PROPHET OF THE AESTHETIZATION OF THE CULTURE<sup>14</sup>

*Truth is not a matter of arguments.  
It is only a matter of attraction, that is, a pulling toward.*  
Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary 1953-1956*.

In the modernist concepts mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the greatest enemy of art and, at the same time, the synonym of kitsch, is aesthetization. In particular for Hermann Broch (1996), who assumed ties between aesthetics and ethics, aesthetization – understood as the requirement of ‘working beautifully’ instead of ‘working well’ – is a fraud, a chase after effects (flashiness), instead of looking for the truth (as art should). A fraudulent – because over-aesthetized – work of art does not offer fulfillment. It replaces true feelings with a superficial substitute, cheap entertainment.

Meanwhile, aesthetization is a phenomenon that is the quintessence of modern culture. And if aesthetization is the other name of kitsch, it means that we are living at the time of its dictatorship. Even Wolfgang Iser (1997), a philosopher related to post-modernism, theoretician of aesthetization and, at the same time, a critic of its most vulgar and primitive dimension – common beautification of everything, the ‘gilding’ and the ‘glossing’ of knobs, garbage bins, stores, streets, etc. – agrees with it. The philosopher calls this phenomenon a superficial aesthetization and identifies it with kitsch. He uses the appeal for the ‘culture of the blind spot’ against it; he attracts attention to the threat of anaesthetization (reverse of aesthetization), which causes insensitivity to stimuli and to beauty resulting from over-saturation with universal prettiness.

Until this moment, Iser retains his modernist ideas: he rejects kitsch as cheap fraud. But also, similarly to Gombrowicz, he is not completely immune to the power of beautification embedded in the modern culture. He moves to the side of post-modernism when he announces the victory of aesthetics over ethics and designates a very important place to aesthetics in the modern hierarchy of values (in the situation of the post-modernist crisis of Reason).

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<sup>14</sup> I earlier discussed certain threads mentioned here; see: Jaszevska 2002.

Another theoretician of modern aesthetization, Richard Shusterman (1992), acts similarly by proclaiming that with respect to the *horror vacui* that has been left after the fallen Great Narratives, we cannot disdain the aesthetic criteria. Therefore, Welsch (1997) calls aesthetics the first modern philosophy. And that is why he is looking for a deeper theory of aesthetization, combining it with the mass media pervading our world, with the flexibility of visual culture and finally with the condition of the new man, *homo aestheticus*, whose life is guided by form and aesthetic criteria. Here, aesthetization consists of commonplace stylization which is, to a certain extent, a parody of the Nietzschean 'create thyself' (let us notice: in the past, women simply dressed, nowadays, they are choosing their styling). It is not without sarcasm that Welsch writes that in a situation when moral cannons collapse, one may at least impress others with knowledge how to properly choose wine glasses for dinner. 'The power of taste: this is something that should not be disdained in times when 'meta-narratives have collapsed.' The following statement of Gombrowicz (2000: 148) is a great match for the above:

Nothing that is really tasty can be really awful (just like the word 'tasty' indicates), and only that which has bad taste is truly inedible. (...) So why does busybody of a woman, who uses her finger to tear at the most bloody social ills, death by starvation of a worker's family of six, why, I ask, does she not dare, with the same finger, to pick her ear in public? Because this would have been much more dreadful. Death from starvation, or the death of a million in war – this can be eaten, even relished – yet there still exists in this world combinations that are not edible, that make us vomit, that are bad, discordant, and repellent, oh, even satanic, and these the human organism rejects. And yet our first and foremost task is to relish, we must relish, relish, let the husband, wife, and children lie dying, let our heart be torn to shreds, as long as it's done tastefully, yes, tastefully!

Similarly to Welsch, Gombrowicz is critical towards this form of aesthetization of ethics. It may also be said that just as Welsch, he notices the meagerness and primitivism of superficial aesthetization. In *A Kind of Testament* this is how he comments on the motive of Modern Schoolgirl:

For example: the ideal of feminine beauty in *Ferdydurke*, its Venus, is the 'Modern Schoolgirl' with her fascinating calves (...). *Ferdydurke* is full

of such immature ideals, myths of inferior quality, such second-class beauty, cheap charms, doubtful allure... (Gombrowicz 2007: 62).

And thus: immaturity, tackiness, kitsch! At the same time, there is a certain small perfection, like a Christmas tree and snow caught in a glass, an ideally round sphere, soothing the head and the heart of a modern intellectual. This is where the ambivalence of both philosophers begins. Welsch, willingly or not, concedes that knowledge about wine glasses is not to be discredited and disdained today. Gombrowicz (2000: 105) similarly summarizes (in the character of Joey from *Ferdydurke*) his admiration and helplessness with respect to the phenomenon of aesthetization:

Sixteen years old, in a skirt, sweater, and sneakers, athletic looking, easygoing, smooth, limber, agile and impudent! The sight of her made my spirit and my face freeze in fear. I understood at a glance – here was a powerful presence, probably more powerful than Pimko himself, and equally absolute in her way (...).

By presenting such a suggestive portrait of the Modern Schoolgirl, Gombrowicz moves to the side of the visual culture and presents us with kitsch which is, in fact, an image that is beautiful with some overwhelming power. This kitsch is really charming and, what is worse, stylish, and it is much more dangerous as it seems to really promise the long-lost perfection.

Gombrowicz, so sensitive to the 'second-class' beauty, looks like a prophet of modern aesthetization present in the times of ruthless dominance of mass culture. It seems that the border of the two zones – Maturity and Immaturity – between which kitsch flows freely (according to the clear division made by Jarzębski<sup>15</sup>) is additionally washed by the boundless wave of popular culture. Let us take a look: easy, pleasant and attractive 'art of happiness' no longer has to be naive, and thus stand on the side of Immaturity and Youth. In mass culture, Youth becomes calculated Adulthood and Immaturity accepts the nature of perfect Form – a small, but in a certain sense perfect work of art, like Duchamp's ready-mades, copied images of Marilyn Monroe or Coca-Cola cans. This is the art of today, the times when the Polish word

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<sup>15</sup> The dichotomous division into the spheres of 'Form and chaos, Maturity and Immaturity, Superiority and Inferiority, Old Age and Youth' (Jarzębski 1996: 55-56).



'galeria' ('gallery') is commonly associated not with an exhibition of works of art, but a mole, a hypermarket paradise ('galeria handlowa'). The status of products of mass culture as kitsch raises doubts too. Here, I mean gadgets, technological wonders, signs of mass culture which – as Elżbieta Anna Sekuła (2008: 42) writes – are the expression of a modern stance accepting kitsch and have managed to undergo a metamorphosis 'from mediocrity and mass proliferation to professionalism and detailed perfectionism'. Let us notice that it was already anticipated by the 'gadgets' in Zuta Youngblood's room, which made up a peculiar and meaningful set: sneakers + apple + photograph of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers + bed with linen + cold shower + telephone. 'How modest yet how powerful!' (Gombrowicz 2000: 156) This is like a layout of Parky Patt from Philip Dick's (2010) novel, which was meant to relieve the troubled heads of cosmos conquerors: a collection of aesthetic dolls with which adults would play, having previously taken special drugs, just like children play with Barbie dolls. Is it still kitsch or is it modern art in the era of common aesthetization? Minimalism, simplification and aesthetics: this attracts the citizen in the times of late modernity, tired of multitude. Gadgets are like idols, objects cast in bronze desired by the Jews, for which we reject the God of great art... Because they are so perfect and shiny. They seem – much more convincingly than the Invisible – to promise wonders.

Jarzębski (1996: 59) claimed that brain-sick searches for hidden meanings and codes related to the character of Youngblood may be interpreted as Gombrowicz's mockery of avant-garde poetry. It seems that there is something more in it: fascination with form, signs whirling in the air, which only denote themselves; life on the surface, which is, however, beautiful and aesthetically refined. This sensitivity to form and signs in Gombrowicz's writings was accurately described in philosophical concepts of the post-modern era: for example Jean Baudrillard (1994) and his concept of *simulacrum* as an empty sign.

Gombrowicz succumbed to the overpowering aesthetics of mass culture - thus, he succumbed to kitsch. As opposed to Witkacy, faithfully defending his aristocratic tastes, considering radio the peak of barbarity, Gombrowicz at the end of his life acknowledged without embarrassment that he was a lover of cinema and television, that he liked 'almost all films' (Cataluccio, Illg 1991: 36). (I remember my great surprise when I was told that Czesław

Miłosz in his old age loved to watch the Polish television series *Złotopolscy*). It seems that the author of *Ferdydurke* was attracted by their predictability, style, unification, finiteness and craft; a ‘small perfection’ of film genres. Therefore, Gombrowicz succumbed to kitsch, but kitsch of a better quality, denoting not a stereotype, but an ‘icon of mass culture’, not tackiness (bad execution), but perfection. He succumbed to kitsch ransomed by the hard work of the film producers... but also Zuta with trembling locks, subjecting her body to a cold shower. It is a ready-made and simple kitsch, yet demanding toil and fortitude (like today’s fitness celebrities). Simplified and not too sophisticated intellectually, yet full of surprising wisdom, asceticism and discipline (let us notice: clichéd wisdom from the Internet, phrases like: ‘It is better to have less than more’ acquire value when they are supported by actual physical effort of a dieting celebrity - the saint of modern times).

Therefore, it is possible to create a typology of kitsch with respect to its aesthetic power: from mild kitsch, which may be envied just a bit, and which allows an intellectual to distance himself (how ‘nice’ is the fait of Catholics participating in a church fair; how beautifully are the guests dancing at the wedding party; what a sweet girl, Zosia, she will definitely make a good wife), up to powerful phenomena like ‘Zuta the Modern’ (though not her parents, who are funny just like other Gombrowicz’s characters). Kitsch may be just trashy, bad art, which may be mocked by an intellectual (a vulgar-looking girl, disco polo music, garish ‘monstrosities’), yet it may also be executed perfectly, enticingly and brilliantly. Just like the American culture, its westerns and musicals, its chewing gum, etc., Gombrowicz could ridicule this ‘weak kitsch’, but at the same time he was showing that we are becoming more and more helpless with respect to the overpowering, perfect beauty of mass culture products.

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## Summary

The authoress of the article continues the searches initiated by Jerzy Jarzębski and discusses the phenomenon of kitsch in the work of Witold Gombrowicz. The study is based on a content analysis of selected fragments of works by this author (especially the novel titled *Ferdydurke*) and it refers to certain concepts of modernity and postmodernity (W. Iser, R. Rorty, J. Baudrillard). The writer himself is treated as an original philosopher of modernity (and later postmodernity); on account of this, he was ahead of his time. The work presents the thesis that Gombrowicz may be attributed both the modernist sense of the category of kitsch and its parodical practices, as well as a peculiar tendency for kitsch and a tendency to play with kitsch. This tendency is analyzed in the article as an attitude corresponding to the postmodern condition, especially its characteristic phenomenon called the aesthetization of culture, which was mentioned, among other things, by Wolfgang Iser (culture of design, gadgets and superficial styling). In this sense, Gombrowicz's philosophy corresponds to the postmodern rehabilitation of kitsch.

**Keywords:** kitsch, aesthetization of culture, gadget, pop culture, styling of life, postmodernity, modernity, Witold Gombrowicz

# ‘SUBSEQUENT SPIRITUALITY’ AND EMOTIONAL KITSCH-SPHERES IN TWO LITERARY DEPICTIONS (IRZYKOWSKI – DEHNEL)

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The subject matter of this paper are phenomena related to a certain attitude to life, which is nowadays becoming increasingly common (in a broad meaning of this concept, also encompassing the sphere of human motivation, feelings and emotions) and which – in the simplest terms – may be characterized as a marriage of non-authenticity and imitationism. The subject matter determined in this mode will be discussed with a focus on the feelings of love (as particularly ‘acute’ and, perhaps, most mythologized) or rather their literary presentation, which seems to offer an accurate diagnosis of sensitivity typical for a consumer society, in the grips of obsession with money, subjected to the dictate of the mass media and giving in, under their impact, to the pressure of pop-culture ideals and notions. I find such diagnosis in Jacek Dehnel’s micro-novel entitled *The Private Tutor’s Love* (*Miłość korepetytora*, 2010) forming – along with three other stories – a volume with a telling title *Balzacienne* (*Balzakiana*) nominated for the Literary Nike Prize. It may be stated without great exaggeration that this collection offers exemplifications of several important aspects of Abraham Moles’ (1978) concepts. Moles is a researcher who emphasizes the universality of kitsch (i.e. who notices its presence in all realms of life, both individual and collective), at the same time considering the sphere of daily life its primary domain. According to this author, kitsch – the core of which has a psychological underlining and is manifested particularly clearly in human

attitude to the world of objects – is the aesthetics of middle-class affluence and a feature of every culture relying on possession.

Jacek Dehnel, making an actual artistic attempt at determining the condition of the Polish society after the political transformation of 1989, consciously refers to a distant tradition of realistic prose, established in the monumental 'La Comédie humaine' of Honoré de Balzac, even though the creative methods applied by him clearly go beyond such tradition<sup>1</sup>. In the ideological layer of his work, Balzac's aspects become most clearly apparent in scathing criticism which leads to the moral exposure of the society entangled in a world filled with objects, overwhelmed by the desire of possession and success<sup>2</sup> (the indicators of such success have been, obviously, modernized). As far as Dehnel's determinations in relation to the 'imitative nature' of individual feelings and emotions are concerned, as well as certain specific features of the narrative form, it is also possible to indicate a less obvious tradition in the context of this type of prose: the tradition formed by the sole work of Karol Irzykowski *The Hag* (*Pałuba*, 1903).

The diagnoses related to the problem of 'subsequent spirituality' and the cultural contexts to which they refer are different in these two cases; however, this does not exclude a deep kinship between the described phenomena. It is necessary to look for a common world-view and realms of artistic communion of these authors in the consistent questioning of the myth of 'virginity' (spontaneity) of human feelings and emotions, as well as 'derisory' exposure of their intermediation (this is the purpose of narrators' comments, irony, parody, satirical or grotesque exaggeration). In both cases, the derivative nature – either with respect to the representation of lofty ideas (Irzykowski) or banal pop-cultural clichés and schemes (Dehnel) – is related to the expansion of kitsch in the existential and customary realm, as it goes hand in hand with inauthentic stances of the characters and transformation of their feelings into fetishes.

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<sup>1</sup> About the positioning of the *Balzacien* between the tradition of realistic prose and post-modernist works see: Kwaśnik 2004.

<sup>2</sup> 'Balzac was one of the first novelists to diagnose the money ethic of his society, in which the pursuit of fortune had replaced religion or a moral code as the key adhesive of the social system'. Burt 2009: 271.

## II. FROM ROMANTIC IDEALS TO THE ‘SOUL WARDROBE’ AND ‘SUBSEQUENT WORLD OF PHENOMENA’ (KAROL IRZYKOWSKI’S *THE HAG*)

Already the first interpreters found the novel of the Young Polish critic insightful in exploring the motivation mechanisms, whereas the next decades solidified its position as an intriguing psychological treatise<sup>3</sup>. This was the main area where the significance of the work was seen; many critics have also indicated its precedence with respect to Freud’s psychoanalysis. The tradition of interpreting *The Hag* in the spirit of cultural criticism, initiated by Stanisław Brzozowski (1971), resurfaces in analogies which the researchers seek between Irzykowski’s work and interests of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sociology and cultural anthropology (Werner 1965).

It is only necessary to mention here that *The Hag* constitutes a settling of accounts with mental and emotional falsification of man whose inner world was warped under the impact of various mythologies. Irzykowski primarily faces the spiritual heritage of romanticism, with all of its ideological inflexibility and totality. *The Hag* objects to the naive schematization of reality, as well as the solidified, especially in literature, modes of explaining the secrets of emotionality. The Young Poland writer unmasks the operation of the intellectual factor at the core of human behavior, shoved to the subconscious sphere (neglected by romanticism and modernism), which saves our psychological pleasures from harm i.e. – quoting the original terminology – ‘represses’ thoughts from the embarrassing realms – the so called ‘bashful areas’ which, before reaching the conscience, have to be dressed in a decent ‘jacket’ in the ‘soul wardrobe’<sup>4</sup>. The novel includes numerous examples of almost instinctive calculation in the area allegedly reserved for outbursts of the heart. In particular, this refers to various actions of the protagonist, Piotr Strumieński, and his subsequent wives, Angelika and Ola. The characters more or less consciously strive for satisfaction from performing various, often tragic, roles imposed on them by the environment

<sup>3</sup> See: Topass 1927. Several years ago, H. Markiewicz (2004) recapitulated the history of reception of Irzykowski’s work.

<sup>4</sup> These issues are elaborated in Chapter IX of *The Hag* entitled *O punktach wstydliwych i o garderobie duszy (kontrabandzie)* (*On Embarrassing Points and the Soul Wardrobe [Contrabands]*)

or undertaken on their own initiative under the impact of fascination with certain ideas. Irzykowski proves that all feelings (including love, sadness and despair) practically do not occur 'in a sheer form'; they can only exist as substitutes of great passions extolled by poets, as degenerate and faded shapes in comparison to their originals, due to the fact that – as we can read in *The Hag* – 'above other human desires, hunger, love and self-preservation instinct, there is intellectual egoism, especially the one that is manifested in the willingness to create a comedy of one's own character' (Irzykowski 1981: 281). Both the plot in *The Hag* and several auto-thematic fragments contained in it prove that in actual life, paradoxically, the lofty ideal often plays the role of a 'fig leaf' for low urges, misdemeanors and ordinary human sins.

In particular, it is the love feelings that are presented in *The Hag* as a kind of game where spontaneity is subjugated to conventions (also linguistic) – a game that creates a secondary reality, in which the rules of real life cease to be binding. Almost all characters in the novel are enchanted by the word 'love', which constitutes a certain mini-plot of erotic capers. The long-term relationship of Ola and Piotr Strumieński is stigmatized by flirtation and experiment, which stresses the anti-romantic (lack of spontaneity) and anti-naturalistic (calculation above the 'blind instinct') aspect of their behavior, where words sound as if they were uttered by actors and deeds are accompanied by well-studied theatrical attitude. Appearances, along with naive and basically kitschy self-styling, are easily mocked by the narrative saturated with irony, the narrator's denunciation of facts that are coyly hidden by the characters, quoting of clichés uttered by them (after over one hundred years, Jacek Dehnel applies a similar strategy of embarrassing his own characters). For example, in certain fragments of *The Hag* which characterize the stance of Ola, second Ms. Strumieńska, the narrative sometimes changes from indirect speech to direct speech. This is the manner of manifesting the narrator's (implied author's) exceptional vigilance with respect to the words and their false meanings which make up the building material of 'turrets of nonsense.' In Irzykowski's novel – apart from interpositions – the function of ironic or even derisory commentary is often taken up by the inverted commas which perform a correcting role. This imposes intensified alertness with respect to the words which, indeed, 'make fun of themselves' just like in the fragment quoted below, characterizing Ola's naive reasoning:



Because she was no longer afraid of him [Strumieński – B.P.J.], she confessed to him: 'Initially, I was afraid of you, but now I am not' and further: 'Ola allowed Strumieński to peek behind the curtain (?) of her heart and recounted her penitence on account of Gasztold's suicide, so that Strumieński would think: »So they are even killing themselves (*pluralis*) for her; I was not capable of appreciating this treasure!«' (ibid.: 184).

The story of the relationship between Strumieński and Angelika is much more serious in its effects, whereas emotions related to it are extremely destructive, as it is accompanied by an idea originating from fascination with romanticism: an idea that strives to be a religion, and requires a great and complete sacrifice. It is manifested most clearly in the fate of Piotr's first wife. The woman, looking up to the ideal of Platonic love, is impatiently awaiting childbirth which, she hopes, will be related to tragic events (!), and when no such thing happens (she gives birth without complications), she decides to commit suicide and throws herself down the well. Angelika renounces life 'for the sake of symmetry', to 'round the reality up' and to bring it closer to her idealistic dreams.

*The Hag* puts emphasis on the inner incongruence of feelings such as love and suffering, the explicitness of which – as Irzykowski is trying to show us – is only a postulate. The novel reveals that even pain and suffering are not 'clear'; a weird pleasure is hidden in them, by their very existence colliding with the romantic idea of suffering till folly. Love in particular is shown as a feeling internally complex and contradictory, which combines contrasting elements (for example grandeur with absurdity, spirituality with sensuousness, altruism with egoism) and unites the beloved and disdained areas. However, the character of *The Hag*, having internalized the catalogue of 'words-postulates', 'words-monsters' with its entire semantic censorship, does not accept own feelings and emotions, doggedly striving to realize the clichés. The case is complex due to the fact that imprecise, single-sided words – terms are combined into various sequences, thus creating a separate 'subsequent world of phenomena', where errors lay claims to facts ('some words are rooted in the brain, solidified, surrounded with a certain melody, certain sphere of feelings and sub-verbal associations' [ibid.: 354]). The word – postulate reserves a certain area in the brain, where it stimulates other feelings so effectively that even if such feelings do not actually exist, they run rampant in thoughts as the actual phenomena. They may even exert honest

effects (as despair, tears and even suicide) due to the fact that man – having immersed himself in the subsequent life of the soul – loses the awareness of reproducing alien models. Irzykowski notices that this process has reached so far that certain words have already lost the relation to their genesis, ‘from tools, they have transformed into masters’ – now, notions and content are pieced to them and not the other way round. The most important diagnosis in *The Hag* in this respect, describing the linguistic phenomena with grave psychological consequences, is the so-called ‘theory of namelessness’ which is set forth in detail in the auto-thematic parts of the novel (see: Pałowska-Jądrzyk 2001).

Irzykowski’s innovative and, to some degree, eccentric novel shows that culture – as a sphere superimposed on reality – constitutes a tool for creating non-authenticity, which threatens the subjective identity of man, due to the fact that the attraction of personal, behavioral and emotional models it produces contradicts the natural human inclinations and longings, replacing them with schemes. This assumption underlies the procedures aimed at revising the theories, convictions and appearances solidified in the social awareness, which the novel tries to break apart or re-evaluate. Irzykowski strips the abuse in the above-listed fields bare by, *inter alia*, a disassembly of idealism, showing the imperfections of the language and de-constructing various literary conventions. *The Hag* is primarily a novel about the collapse of romantic ideals as well as an aesthetic and philosophical settling of accounts with modernism. It also attacks various mental simplifications (‘symmetries’), promoted in the society primarily by literature and fashionable schemes of experiencing and feeling compliant with the preferences of own epoch (*inter alia* shallow decadence originating from Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Without Dogma (Bez dogmatu)*, enthusiastically received by modernists). However, it should be remembered that the writer settles the accounts from the perspective of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of multi-faceted innovation of *The Hag*<sup>5</sup>, its relation with Young

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<sup>5</sup> Interpreters have emphasised the innovative nature of Irzykowski’s novel for a long time and multiplied the areas of dependence between *The Hag* and other trends (decadence, empirio-criticism, conventionalism, formism, authenticity, surrealism, existentialism) and names (Schopenhauer, Gide, Freud, Adler, Mach, Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Proust and Gombrowicz). *Notabene*, I wrote about

Poland remains particularly strong; the nature of this relation tends to be justly called ‘dependency via negation’ (Werner: 1965: 356).

The inauthentic behavior related to man’s emotional life at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not a completely new subject matter; the same problem appeared in literature earlier and came into being in one of its variations as Bovarism, originating from naturalism (see: A. Budrecka, *Introduction*, [in:] Irzykowski 1981: LVIII). *The Hag* is rather distinguished by its different approach to the issue of non-authenticity, and also its relation to the criticism of language, due to the fact that to speak means to conjure a secondary reality, rooted in *idées fixes* solidified in the language, as shown by Irzykowski. In this perspective, personality is no longer an integral and inviolable set of primeval predispositions and innate features, because it turns out that continually changing cultural forms that falsify not only behaviors, but also psychical processes, have their share in our inner life. Friedrich Nietzsche seems to sponsor Irzykowski’s revelations:

Subsequent justification of existence. Many ideas [and probably ‘at every moment, we only have these ideas for which we possess words that can express them in some approximation’ – note by B.P.J.] have entered the world as errors and fantasies but have become truths, because men have afterwards foisted upon them a substratum of reality (Nietzsche 1973: 36-37).

At the end of discussing *The Hag*, it is worth emphasizing once again that the exposing nature of the novel (with respect to various errors and delusions) is manifested not only in the motives and images, but very frequently results from the acts of the author implied in the text: a separate intellectual force, external with respect to the presented events, yet providing them with colors depending on its liking. The grotesque nature does not seem to be the necessary function of the presented reality here, and the effect of dissonance is rather created by the specific formation of the statement about the world. Shifting of parodist and grotesque accents from images to modes and means of presentation is very characteristic for Irzykowski’s novel and constitutes an indicator of the author’s ironic attitude to the characters,

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a certain overlooked aspect of innovation in Irzykowski’s novel with respect to the parodistic and grotesque trend in Poland in paper. See: Pawłowska-Jądrzyk 1995.

emphasizes his continuous presence, manifests criticism and subjectivism of judgments. The narrative of the *Balzacienne*s is similarly 'marked with derision'<sup>6</sup>.

### III. 'FEELING AS A QUOTATION': ABOUT EMOTIONS IN THE ERA OF POP-CULTURE (*THE PRIVATE TUTOR'S LOVE*)

In spite of a different native context, which is related to over one hundred years of distance that divides the publication of Irzykowski's *The Hag* and Dehnel's *The Private Tutor's Love*, it is possible to sketch several levels of comparison between these two works. Apart from minor elements which may constitute a literary allusion (the protagonist of *Balzacienne*s is called Angelika – just

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. three fragments presenting the character-creating strategies in *The Private Tutor's Love*:

'[Adrian Helsztyński] was wearing a long, dark-grey coat with velvet lapels (resembling Boss a little bit; second-hand clothes store at Chłodna Street, PLN 26.00), an ashen Japanese shawl made of raw silk (looked a bit like Kenzo; second-hand clothes store at Bracka Street, PLN 8.00) and graffiti Zegna suit underneath (sold on Allegro on the first day of Christmas, due to the fact that the owner failed to determine the minimum price and all the auction participants were digesting their Christmas breakfast) and a silver tie with a pin and a pearl (unearthed from a pile of Gypsy rubbish in the Koło flea market). He looked like the embodiment of vintage style luxury' (Dehnel 2010: 258).

'Sandra Kwiczół, apart from various weaknesses of the spirit (gambling, Sex and the City and hallucinogenic substances) also had a certain corporeal weakness: namely, she was small, extremely tiny. And, which often goes hand in hand with it, she loved tall men. You can imagine the feelings of this irascible person when she spotted a two-metre giant in various shades of grey and silver twenty steps ahead of her; she stood perplexed and everything inside of her was sighing and trembling, even the tiny lip gloss in her tiny bag (...)' (ibid.: 280).

'Angelika Włost's heart, soft as a white chocolate fudge exposed to July heat, opened for Adrian a path to everything that he had desired for years; it was like a philosopher's stone (even though it was not a heart made of stone - definitely not), which could bring him any sum of money, due to the fact that as the beloved and only son-in-law he could count not only for a princess as his wife, but also a half of the kingdom' (ibid.: 321).

like Piotr Strumieński’s first wife) and certain, previously mentioned, literary modes of ridiculing the characters’ lack of authenticity, the set of issues related to the problem of ‘subsequent spirituality’ gains a prominent place. In the case of *The Private Tutor’s Love*, this term denotes more or less passive reproduction of certain schemes of behaving, thinking and experiencing, promoted by the modern pop-culture by the characters. Briefly speaking, Dehnel draws, with a thick line, a satirical image of the Polish society after the system transformation, ruthlessly denudes the entanglement of his characters in re-sentiments, aspirations and ideals typical for the era of consumerism, which designate certain models of stances or behavior, but also – as may be surmised – generate the ‘kitsch-spheres of modern emotionality’<sup>7</sup>.

Perhaps the most important theme of *The Private Tutor’s Love* depicted, first and foremost, by the allegedly innocent actions and snobbish poses of the characters, is the lack of authenticity, pretending to be somebody better than one is in reality (whereas – in contrast to *The Hag* – here, we are primarily dealing with creation of an attractive façade for others). This issue is presented in a caricature mode already in the first scene of the novel: the main character, Adrian Helsztyński, having refused to get into a badly-looking cab, gets into a more presentable one, in order to – after an argument with the dispatcher – drive just several dozen meters further in order to get out at the door of a hotel on the other side of the street where he has a meeting scheduled with a potential customer. The ‘profession’ in which Adrian is engaged, is of a peculiar kind: he is a ‘tutor of good manners’ and sets forth the core of his activities during a conversation with Włos, a nouveau riche chairman of a poultry company and father of an apathetic twenty-year-old named Angelika, as ‘education of people to happiness’ (at other times Helsztyński presents himself as a ‘sculptor of class and good frame of mind’, a man who teaches the ‘art of camouflage: how to look as somebody much more affluent, more talented, more interesting and better educated than one is in reality’ [Dehnel 2010: 295-296]). Such offer falls on a fertile ground as the mother and father made up their minds a time ago: they want to make their only daughter a ‘socialite, who will appear as a celebrity in all issues

<sup>7</sup> Here, I refer to the title of the book Burszta, Sekuła (ed.) 2008.

of »Viva« and »Gala« at the side of best male candidates, stylized by best stylists and dressed up by best designers' (ibid.: 257).

Young Adrian Helsztyński – the charming offspring of an impoverished, yet 'noble' family, in spite of buying his clothes in second-hand stores 'looks like walking elegance' and effuses the 'impression of grandeur' around himself – finds his bearings in the environment that perceives the value of man in resourcefulness and external attributes. It has to be said that he comes across some exceptionally stubborn material, due to the fact that Włos' daughter has absolutely no passion or interest, but he is aided by a simple coincidence: he catches the attention of Sandra Kwiczół, Angelika's opponent from a group at Warsaw School of Economics and heiress of a different fortune and, 'in this conflict for power and success', this immediately makes him desired in the eyes of the chairman's daughter. The excerpt from the story describing the relations between the two girls is characterized not only by a satirical, but downright misogynistic virulence:

(...) the heiress of poultry fortune clashed here with the heiress of a network of Audi repair shops, each of them surrounded by a circle of ladies-in-waiting and a safe string of banknotes with high nominal values. They did to each other everything that young ladies baking in their anger are capable of doing: slander, disgusting gossip, claims and insults hidden among compliments were flying between them like bullets at Verdun, yet all of this was sugar-coated on the outside, so that a less perceptive observer would not have guessed that one would willingly drown the other in a glass of water (ibid.: 279-280).

The subsequent stages of the plot show how – in the course of time – along with Angelika's progress in the area of self-creation – what has initially resulted from a desire to humiliate Sandra Kwiczół becomes beginning of a change in Angelika's attitude to the world and the embers of her tumultuous passion for the handsome tutor. Angelika Włos(t)<sup>8</sup>,

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<sup>8</sup> Andżelika, following Adrian's advice, adds 't' to her surname and starts to write her name 'Angelika', which goes hand in hand with devising a family legend.

rolling indifferently in the nouveau riche affluence<sup>9</sup> and with Helsztyński’s assistance, making gradual progress on the path to success in the milieu, remains unaware of the existence of emotional competition for a long time. Meanwhile, Adrian is torn between the two women, drawing various benefits from his friendships. He maintains a furtive, yet satisfactory, erotic relationship with Daria Pieleszek, a banal girl he met on a bus; he also has to constantly refuse the advances of Lidia Dereczko – an elderly interior conservator, whom he owes a lot and in whose premises he resides free of charge, which, in the course of time, leads to more and more equivocal situations. Helsztyński shows some extraordinary adaptive skills: he not only works out an attractive image of a boy from a ‘respectable family’, but he maneuvers among favorable set-ups, smoothly dons new masks, making more or less detrimental moral concessions. (The relationship with Lidia Dereczko is summed up in the following manner: ‘It became clear for Adrian that even if he does not have to prostitute himself, yet by entering this charming apartment, full of old furniture and beautiful items, he is at the same time entering a certain scheme, the important part of which is showing affection and some type of melancholic courtship’ [ibid.: 273]). In effect, Helsztyński seems to lose bearing in his own feelings and at the end of the novel he faces a completely unexpected dilemma, the solving of which determines his further fate.

It may be said that Jacek Dehnel in *The Private Tutor’s Love* presents a caricature picture of the style of behaving, thinking and experiencing, which dominates the consumer society (possibly in particular in the post-communist society). This style is characterized by the ‘loss of the soul’ (James Hillman), intellectual and emotional amnesia, emptiness causing a need

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<sup>9</sup> The writer methodologically and with a significant dose of irony emphasises the trapping of his characters in a world of objects, their enslavement by the desire of possession and a predilection for celebrating kitsch. This refers both to the Włos family, the owners of a pretentious villa in Konstancin near Warszawa, equipped with ‘empire-style armchairs with golden swans’ and ‘an espresso machine worth as much as a car’ (Angelika’s room is described as ‘distended to excessive sizes by the ambition of her parents and the interior designer hired by them’), as well as Adrian Helsztyński who is racking his head on how to make the small apartment in a block of flats look like a palace. Cf. in this context: Moles 1978.

of immediate excitement, which leads to grotesque imitation of illuminations or enraptures, substituting true feelings. Kundera's declaration that in the era of mass media 'kitsch became our daily aesthetics and morality'<sup>10</sup>, as well as the spiritual post-modernist awareness of 'sinking into' clichés – images solidified in the collective awareness, various schemes and stereotypes – is most acutely expressed in the scene where Angelika confesses her love to Adrian during a walk along the Vistula promenade, modernized in a western mode:

They were standing next to each other and looking at pink reindeer, or possibly deer; nobody else was around, only the night-time Praga, illuminated guy wires of the Świętokrzyski Bridge and extensive areas behind their backs, where a power plant used to be and now some developer was re-making post-industrial interiors into lofts and erecting apartment buildings.

They sat on the plastic deer. First, he did it carefully (because he was afraid that the plastic might break under the weight of a two-meters guy) and then she followed suit. They laughed a bit, they pretended to gallop a bit, they gazed at the stars just like their horned steeds. And they sat. And they were silent. And they sat and talked. And they sat in silence. And they would have gotten up and turned back if it was not for some emotional wonder, some overthrow, some spiritual breakthrough which happened inside Angelika Włost under the impact of looking at the modern art in the form of three reindeer made of colored plastic. Angelika Włost, who was deeply reluctant to take any stance, to reveal any desire or urge, (...) felt that for the first time since a very, very long while she was actually desiring something. And if she was desiring, she was desiring deeply, without limitations, dramatically, with throwing arms around somebody, kissing in the rain, trips to romantic

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<sup>10</sup> 'Given the imperative necessity to please and thereby to gain the attention of the greatest number, the aesthetic of the mass media is inevitably that of kitsch; and as the mass media come to embrace and to infiltrate more and more of our life, kitsch becomes our everyday aesthetic and moral code. Up until recent times, modernism meant a nonconformist revolt against received ideas and kitsch. Today, modernity is fused with the enormous vitality of the mass media, and to be modern means a strenuous effort to be up-to-date, to conform, to conform even more thoroughly than the most conformist of all. Modernity has put on kitsch's clothing' (Kundera 1988: 162).



European capitals, nights and mornings in luxury hotels of Venice and Paris. (...)

(...) What happened next, the entire stream of words, oaths, beseeching, kisses, deep and shallow, moist and dry, the whole rolling and rubbing against each other is practically impossible to describe in its confusion and naivety. Did Angelika act desperately? Not really, she behaved like anybody whom love struck suddenly, like a sail on a windy lake; she did not even know, well, neither of them knew that these were only quotations: a quotation from wringing snakes, from snuggling leopards, quotations from countless films about love, sequences of kisses – faces of Gable and Leigh, Pitt and Jolie, Cruise and Kidman – words uttered by great poets more emphatically and more beautifully and now inaptly repeated in the darkness by the river bank, up to the most banal quotation: 'And you, do you love me?' (ibid: 318-320)<sup>11</sup>.

The scene of Miss Włost's paroxysm of affection to Helsztyński, located in a kitsch-like scenery with three amaranth reindeer made of illuminated plastic, leads to a fateful recognition. As far as the relationship between the novel's characters is concerned, the recognition pertains primarily to Adrian's becoming aware of his own feelings (the young man realizes that he loves the 'silly' and socially inapt Daria and cannot abandon this relationship at any price)<sup>12</sup> as well as revelation of the surprising truth about Angelika. The chairman's daughter turns out to be a very smart pupil

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<sup>11</sup> This is what Umberto Eco wrote about love quotations in the epoch of 'literature of exhaustion': 'For me, the postmodern attitude is that of a man who loves a woman who is intelligent and well-read: he knows that he cannot say today »I love you desperately« because he knows (and she knows that he knows) that that is a line out of Barbara Cartland. Yet there is a solution. He can say: »As Barbara Cartland would say, I love you desperately«. At this point, he has avoided the pretence of innocence, he has clearly affirmed that no one can speak in an innocent mode; but he has still told the woman what he wished to tell her – that he loves her, but in the age of lost innocence' (Rosso 1983: 2-3).

<sup>12</sup> And in this sense, this is truly a story about an honest feeling, confirming the banal truth that 'love is blind.' However, judging by the title of the story, something else should be expected (a different feeling or a different couple in love). Notabene, it is quite telling that a writer who methodically lays kitsch bare, chooses a melodramatic ending.

who, vigorously and without greater sentiment, is capable of ‘reminding the master of the rules of the game’ (ibid.: 325): the emerging star of gossip columns of most important Polish tabloids, deeply hurt in her pride, kills her former tutor, previously ending their relationship via an adequate and carefully calligraphed letter, which she sends in an elegant, ‘properly selected’ envelope.

The narrator sketches Angelika’s further fate briefly, yet evocatively:

Two years later, she became a real countess (candidate number three, Count Juliusz Bończa-Kętrzyński, Kętrzyński-Kociołek-Waligóra Law Firm), yet she took it with a grain of salt, frequently comparing herself to Gilberte Swann. It was considered charming. Her minor slip-ups were forgiven; in the course of time, there were fewer and fewer of them – she sometimes forgot about somebody’s birthday or shuffled a chair too loudly. Luckily, bad education of true countesses made similar mistakes almost unnoticeable. „Gala” had the exclusive rights for a photo-report from the wedding, the reception became a legend in the restaurant industry of the capital city and the bride’s bouquet was caught by the shortest bridesmaid, Sandra Kwiczol (ibid.: 326).

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Both *The Hag* and *The Private Tutor’s Love* present the issue of a ‘subsequent spirituality’ and the sphere of human emotions and feelings in the aspect of its derivative nature – as devoid of spontaneity, intermediated by various conventions and cultural schemes. Both writers – Irzykowski and Dehnel – using, *inter alia*, the privileges of omniscient narrative, irony and grotesque exaggeration, expose the false nature of utterances, actions, thoughts and emotions of characters created by them (notabene, in places they even question the authority of the narrator/ implied author)<sup>13</sup>. However,

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Hag* the narrator (implied author) presents a certain type of self-criticism in Chapter XIX entitled *Trio autora*. On the other hand, in *The Private Tutor’s Love*, the narrative is in places reminiscent of the ‘pop-cultural gibberish’ which reveals its self-irony, parody and inner dialogising (cf. remarks about ‘the multi-directional duo-voiced word’ in: Bakhtin 1984). This attitude to the ‘words of others’ is presented most clearly in the scene in which Adrian and Angelika meet

the cultural context of their artistic and intellectual practice is quite different, and divergent diagnoses are related to them.

In *The Hag*, the characters’ idealistic aspirations clash with the resistance of life and derisory warping, due to the fact that the nature of Reality is ‘non-thematic’ and man, by his nature, is forced to re-enact the ‘comedy’ of his own character. In the consumer world of the ‘Balzaciennes’, there is no place for grand ideals, moral dilemmas or in-depth introspection. The rank of man is determined by ‘the façade’ that is presented to the world, the ability to create appearances, the skill in manipulating others. Kitsch, with imitation and lack of authenticity at its core, conformist reproduction of verified schemes, spiritual exultation, is shown in this context both as the source of depravity, as well as its effect: in line with Herman Broch’s (1969) concept, this category goes beyond the frames of aestheticism, entering the realm of existential and ethical reflection<sup>14</sup>. The area of expansion for kitsch in the presented world in *The Hag* is primarily the inner life of an individual and imitations of ideas, experiences or stances related to it; on the other hand, in the *Balzaciennes*, it is the sphere of inter-human relations, marked by flashiness, appearances and struggle for dominance, and, obviously, material surroundings, which are related to the tendency to treat objects as fetishes, which characterizes the consumer culture. Irzykowski believes in Reality (which is clear in the idea of ‘the haggish element’), whereas distortions in the emotional sphere which he denounces, exposing the cheap self-styling of the characters, derive from man’s blind idealism, who wishes to live up to his lofty ideas. Dehnel’s characters do not have any ideals; they focus on

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in a café called Faux-pas (after Helsztyński tells the girl that to look as an interesting person if one is boring is the most difficult thing): ‘You hurt her, Shrek, you hurt her badly, you hit her in the abdomen, her weak spot, her soft fontanelle. Oh, Shrek, you went out on a limb; she could have shut herself in one moment like a scallop, like a lacquerware case, like a Bentley door, like a compartment in a cabinet, she could have forfeited any desire to humiliate Sandra »Ziggy« Kwiczoł, the heiress of Audi stores (...), she could have blown it off and could have even *buried it in the grave of her heart*’ (Dehnel 2010: 296).

<sup>14</sup> Broch (1969: 50-63) believed that the ‘golden age’ of kitsch was the 19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. the time of flourish of romanticism, expansion of middle-class and development of the industrial society.

creating appearances for the sake of others, for the purposes of a prosaically understood success and material benefit. They do not consort with real art, they thoughtlessly reproduce banal pop-cultural schemes, becoming morally lost (even though not always fully – as the tutor from the title, who pays with his life for waking up from the consumer amok). In this inanity and almost mechanical readiness to accept subsequent poses, there is no place for ‘inner heroism’ which, in spite of all, distinguishes the characters in *The Hag*. Thus, it may be said that Jacek Dehnel in *The Private Tutor’s Love* proposes a transformed, derisory and ironic variant of the ancient myth of Pygmalion and Galatea<sup>15</sup>. In the modern edition, this is no longer a story about a great feeling, but about great depravity.

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<sup>15</sup> Doesn’t Adrian Helsztyński call himself the ‘sculptor’ (of class and good frame of mind) and Angelika Włost is his, in a certain sense perfect, product?

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## Summary

The author of the article examines a phenomenon associated with a certain – today increasingly common – attitude in life that may be described, in most simple terms, as the marriage of non-authenticity with imitationism. The author focuses her attention on feelings of love (as particularly ‘acute’ and, at the same time, probably most mythologized), or rather on their literary depiction, which allows for an accurate diagnosis of the sensitivity typical of a consumer society obsessed with money, subject to the dictates of mass media and under pressure from the ideals and ideas of pop culture. A diagnosis of this kind comes in the form of Jacek Dehnel’s short story *Miłość korepetytora* (*The Private Tutor’s Love*) which, together with three other stories, comprises the volume *Balzakiana* (*Balzacienne*) (2008). The young Polish writer, attempting to diagnose the condition of the Polish society after the political transformation of 1989, makes a conscious reference to the distant tradition of realistic prose from the legacy of Honoré de Balzac.

As for the review of the sphere of individual feelings and emotions falsified by various stereotypes and abstract ideas, one can also look to a tradition closer to Dehnel: namely the only novel of Karol Irzykowski entitled *Pałuba (The Hag)* (1903). The author of the article shows some similarities between the Young Poland concept of 'successive-world phenomena' and the contemporary vision of determining the emotional sphere through pop culture templates with the underlying experience of romantic elation. References to the diagnoses of Abraham Moles, Milan Kundera and Hermann Broch allow for highlighting the issues of 'exaltation as a replacement of spirituality' and kitsch as 'our daily aesthetic and morality'.

**Keywords:** sensitivity in the era of pop culture, authenticity, exaltation, consumer culture, imaginative templates, existential kitsch

## KUNDERA'S STRUGGLE WITH KITSCH – ON *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS* OF BEING ONCE AGAIN

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Many controversies have arisen over the years around the Czech, and, since 1981, also French writer Milan Kundera. Their detailed analysis, or even a brief outline, would provide enough material for a separate, extensive paper. For the purposes of this essay, however, it is enough to state that Kundera has as many admirers of his talent as opponents, who admonish his work, and accuse the writer himself of preaching platitudes and inherent bias. Written in 1984, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* enjoys a special place in Kundera's oeuvre. First of all, the author intended the work to be a fierce polemic with a specific way of understanding kitsch. Secondly, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is one of the writer's two novels, which have been adapted for the silver screen. In this case, the reason for such an unspectacular marriage of literature and cinema was Kundera's total and absolute ban on all film and television adaptations.

The Czech writer has had some really bad experiences with transpositions of his works – both with translations and adaptations for other media. As described in his *Art of the Novel*, the verification of translations of *The Joke* was particularly traumatizing (Kundera 1988), prompting him to prepare a glossary of sorts. He wrote down sixty-three key words – or, as he described them, trap-words and his beloved words featured in his novels, which – if misunderstood – could lead to the misinterpretation of his books and, consequently, to bad translations. The letter 'T' features the term 'testament'. A word distinguished from others, because it does not refer to Kundera's prose as much as being a *memento* of sorts. Kundera (1988: 52) wrote:

TESTAMENT. Nowhere in the world nor in any form whatsoever may there occur the publication or reproduction of anything I ever wrote (or will write), except for the books of mine listed in the most recent Gallimard catalog. And no annotated editions. No adaptations.

Kundera's reluctance to critical publications results from his charming, yet a bit tiresome need to explain to the reader everything that the author considers necessary for the understanding of his artistic concept, and a bit of hysterical reluctance to leave this task to others, for example to critics. There were two film adaptations of his books, already mentioned above. The first one, from 1969, was a film version of *The Joke* directed by Jaromil Jireš (Kundera had a say in writing the script). The second, the famous Hollywood adaptation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* directed by Philip Kaufman in 1988, was the one which led the writer to ban any and all film adaptations. In the first Czech edition of the book, published in Brno in 2006, this ban becomes somewhat of a part of the novel itself – one of the first pages contains a statement: 'Any film, theatre and television adaptations are forbidden.'

As Maria Poprzęcka, an expert in kitsch, claims, works of art do not respond well to transpositions, or 'transferring from one mode of expression to another, from one medium to another' (Poprzęcka 1998: 220). The fault lies in the incorrectness of the language into which the work is transposed. This language 'results in an inadequate effect which can also be in bad taste' (Poprzęcka 1998: 220). It is not known whether it was this bad taste what Kundera pointed out when he claimed that the film adaptation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* did not have too much in common with the spirit of his novel *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, nor with the characters created by him<sup>1</sup>. The author's brief remark regarding the film meant that in his opinion only the surface layer of his novel had survived the transposition process, this lightness, manifested especially in the erotic sphere<sup>2</sup>. There is no doubt that, regardless of any personal likes or dislikes for the novel, its well-thought-out, seven-part structure, the sixth part of which being

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.csfd.cz/film/5026-nesnesitelná-lehkost-byti/zajimavosti/?type=film> [accessed: 14.02.2019].

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://iliteratura.cz/Clanek/20139/kundera-milan-nesnesitelná-lehkost-byti> [accessed: 14.02.2019].



the famous polyphonic passage on kitsch, which also serves as a keystone for the structure of the entire book and the key to its understanding, was transposed into a film telling a story of a difficult, but beautiful love in politically unfavorable times. Ironically, the novel, which was intended to be a passionate discussion with kitsch, a meta-reflection on the novel as the last bastion of the fight against it (Kundera 1988: 142), became popular thanks to the film, which reduced the novel to an almost kitschy story itself.

Kundera's voice in the discussion on kitsch has become one of both canonical and cult statements, which may not be omitted by any respectable study on this subject. In his understanding of kitsch, Kundera undoubtedly follows that of Hermann Broch, who in his famous essay *Notes on the Problem of Kitsch* (1950) defines this concept from a specifically psychological perspective – as an art being a reflection of a specific human being, who likes kitsch and wants to reproduce it, and for whom it constitutes a necessary mirror that counterfeits and beautifies the real image. For Kundera, kitsch, as an issue, is both existential and emotional in nature. The main characters of the novel – Tereza, Tomáš, Sabina and Franz, involved in complex emotional and erotic relationships, are constantly exposed to kitsch by the author. Here, Kundera's reflection once again touches upon Broch, who understood kitsch as an antithesis of art, its inherent evil, 'Antichrist' potential, capable of being activated at any moment (Broch 1969: 63). The author of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* seems to subject the protagonists to specific experiments, which aim – as he himself commented in *The Art of The Novel* – at grasping, in line with the idea of the existential novel, the essence of the unique code of their lives (Kundera 1988: 34). The author leaves us under no illusions about the 'realism' and 'authenticity' of the characters. For him, they are an 'experimental self', created to understand his own possible ways of life that never really happened (Kundera 1988: 35). The world they live in is somewhat of a test for them. This is the reality of a totalitarian state built on the foundation of kitsch. The entire long essay devoted to it is anticipated in the novel by reflections on Sabina's painting. The protagonist accidentally discovers the key to understanding the surrounding world. To understanding and demystifying it. Forced to adhere to the principles of socialist realism at the university, the painter decides to be stricter than her professors and paints pictures so realistic that they resemble color photography. A painting

showing the construction of the steelworks is such a picture from years ago. Sabina, recalling it, states:

Here is a painting I happened to drip red paint on. At first I was terribly upset, but then I started enjoying it. The trickle looked like a crack; it turned the building site into a battered old backdrop, a backdrop with a building site painted on it. I began playing with the crack, filling it out, wondering what might be visible behind it. And that's how I began my first cycle of paintings. I called it 'Behind the Scenes'. Of course, I couldn't show them to anybody. I'd have been kicked out of the Academy. On the surface, there was always an impeccably realistic world, but underneath, behind the backdrop's cracked canvas, lurked something different, something mysterious or abstract. After pausing for a moment, she added, 'On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth' (Kundera 1984: 63).

The theme of paintings created using the method of double exposure returns in the novel as a sort of a leitmotif. Sabina sees various things in this dual way, among others, Tomáš, her lover. Tomáš is like the image of a cynical Don Juan, but through the crack in the canvas, she can see the melancholic Tristan. This double exposition, which places an understandable lie in the foreground and the incomprehensible truth in the potential backdrop, is used in the novel primarily as a metaphor for the totalitarian reality. The drop of red paint should be understood as a crack that calls to make it wider and see what is hidden underneath. The widening of the crack, or gaining a metaphorical distance from reality, embodied by steelworks, makes it possible to see the falsehood, the decorative nature and theatricality of this reality. However, the person needs to want to notice this crack. This can only be done by those who sometimes doubt the sense of being given to a person, those who – as Broch (1969) would have it – are tempted only by some other, new quality of the surrounding world. Those are the people who do not share the conviction that they have found themselves in the most beautiful of worlds. The others – those who do not seek the cracks in reality – express a categorical agreement with being, believing unwaveringly that the world is good and was created well. It is in this context that the famous definition of kitsch was formulated by Kundera:

Behind all the European faiths, religious and political, we find the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good, and that we are therefore entitled to multiply. Let us call this basic faith a categorical agreement with being. (...) It follows, then, that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch. (...) Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence (Kundera 1984: 248).

The biggest problem for Sabina (who is the reader's guide to the world of kitsch presented in the novel) is not so much the ugliness of the communist world, as the mask of beauty it puts on. French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard (1988), wrote that a mask is a kind of an arrested dream. The communist kitsch gives this dream some characteristics of a nightmare. That is how Kundera himself saw it. In another part of the novel we find a description of Tereza's dream: A group of smiling and singing naked women walking around a pool, with a man, sitting in a basket hanging over the pool, shooting at anyone who stops singing. With every corpse that falls into the pool, others laugh and their smiles widen. Kundera refers to this dream numerous times, in different dimensions, to finally state:

The feeling Soviet kitsch evoked in Sabina strikes me as very much like the horror Tereza experienced in her dream of being marched around a swimming pool with a group of naked women and forced to sing cheerful songs with them while corpses floated just below the surface of the pool. Tereza could not address a single question, a single word, to any of the women; the only response she would have got was the next stanza of the current song. She could not even give any of them a secret wink; they would immediately have pointed her out to the man standing in the basket above the pool, and he would have shot her dead. Tereza's dream reveals the true function of kitsch: kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death (Kundera 1984: 253).

The analogy between Tereza's dream and the image of the May Day parade, which in the author's opinion serves as a model of communist kitsch, cannot be disregarded. The crowd dressed in white, red and blue shirts, small marching bands playing music, lips stretched in a feigned or truly

enthusiastic smile – all this, according to Kundera, is a great manifestation of agreement, but not for the communism at all. The novel reads:

The unwritten, unsung motto of the parade was not ‘Long live Communism!’ but ‘Long live life!’ The power and cunning of Communist politics lay in the fact that it appropriated this slogan. For it was this idiotic tautology (‘Long live life!’) which attracted people indifferent to the theses of Communism to the Communist parade (Kundera 1984: 249).

Thus, kitsch appears to be a way of encoding the reality – some specific, binding total message. It has its sender (the communist authorities) and recipient (the society), existing in a superior-subordinate relationship. Kitsch, giving a false sense of security through ritualism and repetition, is actually a tool of control. Kundera even writes about the kitsch inquisition, because only constant and pedantic care about its purity can guarantee total kitsch durability. Every display of individualism (because it is like spitting in the face of smiling brotherhood), doubts (there is no point in asking questions, if the answers are fixed in advance), irony (because everything here must be taken with deadly seriousness) and anything that undermines the holy decree of ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Kundera 1984: 252) is eliminated from social life in a more or less brutal manner. In this sense, kitsch undoubtedly fulfils a similar function as the Orwellian Newspeak. Like Newspeak, kitsch is intentional. It is not created by chance, but with the intention of making ‘something into something else’ – beautiful, touching, sublime. Sabina, enchanted with New York, even formulates a thesis that beauty, and thus real art, is born by accident, as if by mistake. On the other hand, kitsch consciously makes things beautiful and sublime. It makes them so not for the chosen ones, but for everyone. The idea of universality is also indispensable in the construction of kitsch (both in relation to the range and universality of symbols, which it appropriates). Kundera emphasizes that in the land of kitsch there is a dictatorship of the heart, not of reason, and defines the symbolic moment of its birth – tears.

The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch (Kundera 1984: 251).

The protagonists of the novel try to escape from reality. Tereza and Tomáš run away to the countryside (after Tomáš is socially degraded from being a surgeon to working as a window washer). Sabina betrays her successive 'little stabilizations', fleeing farther and farther to the west, through Switzerland, Paris, all the way to America (betrayal is for her a liberating withdrawal from the ranks, a journey into the unknown, freedom). Franz discovers his ridiculousness as a member of an elite peace corps made up of Western European intellectuals who, in a 'Great March' ridiculed by Kundera, travels to Cambodia in a fervent protest against the war.

One can, however, decode the reality of kitsch. The same intention and consciousness that bring it to life can end its life. 'When we realize that kitsch is a lie,' writes Kundera, 'it ceases to be kitsch'. As another expert on the subject, Abraham Moles (1978), emphasized: 'No one can be stuck in kitsch being aware of it'. For Kundera (1984: 256), however, the most important thing is that at the moment of a peculiar unmasking, disclosure, kitsch 'loses its authoritarian power and becomes as moving as any other human weakness'. Thus, kitsch is above all an existential category. It is part of human fate, we carry its potential through the presence of all 'soft spots' of our consciousness – unsatisfied desires, needs, dreams, fears, secret loves and passions. As Maria Poprzęcka (1998: 288) rightly points out, Kundera's 'total kitsch' no longer has much in common with art. The researcher states that:

If [kitsch] refers to culture, it is only because of its all-encompassing, total character. This 'German word, which penetrated all languages', with all the uncertainties, concerned mainly low, popular levels of artistic production. Now, by extending its scope immeasurably, it has also lost its original reference subject.

Rather, Kundera continues Broch's thought on kitsch as a system immanent in reality and in every human being. He sees it both in the great totalitarian regimes and on the other side of the barricade – in the so-called Great March. He points out its various types, determined by what is the great idea, the basis of existence, to which categorical consent is expressed. There

are, therefore, various kitsches: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, communist, fascist, democratic, feminist (Kundera 1984: 257).

The question is whether the protagonists of the *Unbearable Lightness of Being* finally manage to save their own lives, to protect them from being entangled in kitsch. However, since the whole novel is basically one great existential experimental laboratory, perhaps the question is simply wrongly formulated. Perhaps we should ask not 'if', but 'to what extent' they manage to save their lives. The answer would then be: 'As much as possible'. The idyll with a dog, which Tomáš and Tereza build around them in a distant Czech village, bears all the signs of kitsch, but the protagonists finally find peace. The crowning achievement of their turbulent relationship, just before the tragic accident, is their mature and conscious love. Sabina flees, wiping out all the traces behind her and renounces her Czechhood. The last thing we find out about her is that she wants to die under the sign of lightness. Her ashes are to be scattered in the wind. Franz – a dreamer who in the novel seems to be the least aware of his entanglement in a reality contaminated with kitsch, longing for a life of great risk, courage, danger and death – finally sees the absurdity of his ideas. Before he accidentally dies in a senseless peace mission to Cambodia, calculated for cheap effect, he parts with his wife and finds some kind of happiness at the side of a young glass-wearing student. The protagonists did what they could, within the limits of their, in fact, very limited possibilities. However, they did not manage to escape so cleanly. Kitsch seized them in a moment when they no longer had any opportunity to defend themselves. Their moment of transition to non-being takes place to its accompaniment. It is as if between being and oblivion, there was some kind of narrowing, which strips man from all the baggage of uncommonness and uniqueness. And this is the proper, bitter and sad epilogue of the whole novel. Kundera sums up:

What remains of the dying population of Cambodia? One large photograph of an American actress holding an Asian child in her arms. What remains of Tomáš? An inscription reading HE WANTED THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH. What remains of Beethoven? A frown, an improbable mane, and a sombre voice intoning 'Es muss sein!' What remains of Franz? An inscription reading A RETURN AFTER LONG WANDERINGS. And so on, and so forth. Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion (Kundera 1984: 208).

According to this interpretation, kitsch will be a peculiar equivalent of Gombrowicz's 'mug', that is, an imposed, unwanted form that determines our lives. Both kitsch and 'mug' are non-negotiable. This strong and spectacular chord ending the reflections on kitsch aroused anxiety in Kundera himself. In *The Art of the Novel* the author admitted:

In the course of writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I was a little uncomfortable at having made the word 'kitsch' one of the pillar-words of the novel. Indeed, even recently, the term was nearly unknown in France, or known only in a very impoverished sense. In the French version of Hermann Broch's celebrated essay, the word 'kitsch' is translated as 'junk art' (*art de pacotille*). A misinterpretation (Kundera 1988: 134).

So we are returning to the problem we started with – the problem of inadequate translation. From Czech to French, from novel to film. The Hollywood film adaptation of *Unbearable Lightness of Being* popularized both the book and the writer. It re-attributed the author to the work, so that he became in a way, the author of a single novel. Meanwhile, Kundera writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was a novelist who was already very experienced<sup>3</sup>. In the 1960s, his books enjoyed great popularity in the Czech Republic, especially *Žert* (*The Joke*), *Směšné lásky* (*Laughable Loves*) or *Život je jinde* (*Life Is Elsewhere*). *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was published for the first time in a French translation in 1984 in Paris. At that time, Kundera had been in exile for almost ten years. This book was not his first emigration novel. In 1978 *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*) was published in France, for which he was stripped of Czech citizenship. As a specialist in the field, Petr Bílek, points out, *The Book...* was the first attempt to reach the Western European intellectual reader. It received praise from several professors dealing with comparative literature. Thus, the response, compared to Kundera's earlier novels, was actually negligible.

Kundera's next novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, was planned as a bestseller – one consisting of three carefully selected ingredients. Kundera

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<sup>3</sup> This part of the paper owes much to Petr A. Bílek's deliberations recorded as part of the 'Mluvicí hlavy FUK' project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-z7fO04h4Ws> [accessed: 16.02.2019].

made the first and main element a love story. It accounts for approximately 75% of the total novel. It is the story of a couple which becomes a triangle, then a quadrilateral and finally two couples. The story of Tereza and Tomáš is told in two voices. Love, saturated with both sophisticated and unsophisticated eroticism applied in philosophical diction, is shown once from a female, once from a male perspective. The chapter on Tereza is titled *Soul and Body*, Tomáš – *Lightness and Weight*. This is how Kundera defines the main antinomies that trouble the protagonists. The relationship is based on Tereza's faithfulness and Tomáš's unfaithfulness. Tereza dismisses and evokes the 'crew of her soul from the deck of her body' time and again (Kundera 1984: 60), Tomáš would like to love Tereza without being disturbed by the aggressive stupidity of sex (Kundera 1984: 237). We learn that metaphors are dangerous, because love can be born from a single metaphor (Kundera 1984: 11). This is how the love between Tereza and Tomáš was born (Tomáš sees in Tereza a child who was abandoned by someone at the edge of his bedroom – like a little Moses [Kundera 1984: 11]). At the end of the novel, we firmly believe that 'what happens during the moment when love is born: the woman cannot resist the voice calling forth her terrified soul; the man cannot resist the woman whose soul thus responds to his voice' (Kundera 1984: 160). The love experienced by Tereza, Tomáš, Sabina and Franz is also enriched with an additional romance context. Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* appears in the novel as an intertextual evocation. The Russian author's novel, read by Tereza, is at the same time a sign of her belonging to a secret brotherhood of readers. Tereza carries it with her when she meets Tomáš for the first time. Kundera skillfully disturbed the black and white world of Tolstoy's romance (let us recall that in *Anna Karenina*, there is a couple of people who cheat – Anna and Vronsky – and an archetype of lovers – Kitty and Levin). The relations between Tereza and Tomáš, Tomáš and Sabina, and Sabina and Franz were stripped of the aura of unambiguity by Kundera. The weakness of the cuckolded Tereza is actually aggressive (Havel's 'power of the powerless' resounds in the background), and the cheating Tomáš is in fact a melancholic Tristan; Sabina's cheating is an expression of her individualism, and the cheating and cuckolded Franz is simply a dreamer.

The second building element of the best-selling novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are its political themes. According to Bilek, a certain encyclopedia of communism serves here as a backdrop to the story of love.



It was difficult to talk about the reality of the Warsaw Pact in the West. Each time such a story evoked the necessity of adding long and extensive footnotes, which only muddled the image of the presented situation. Making the Prague Spring of 1968 – the moment, when communism was supposed to be given a ‘human face’, which was ultimately terminated with a brutal normalization – the key point of the novel’s background made it possible to create a certain code of communism, a juxtaposition of keywords of the communist reality. The Western European reader did not have to check the facts in textbooks and encyclopedias. All the required knowledge was provided in a neat package with just enough information.

Finally, the third component – it was a novel for intellectuals, featuring considerations about kitsch, weight and lightness, about the idea of an eternal return, and about writing a novel lined with the teachings of Nietzsche and Parmenides. Philosophical passages were erudite enough to satisfy the egos of the intelligent reader reasonably well-versed in philosophy, while at the same time they are free of hermetic nomenclature, so as not to alienate those not in the know.

Does Kundera’s indignation (or even disgust) with the film adaptation of his novel gain new meaning and sense in this context? Perhaps *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Kaufman revealed certain existing subconsciousness of the novel? Maybe it was its mirror, like the one mentioned by Broch? Maybe this disappointment and indignation with the film were only a mask covering the anxiety of the author himself? Or maybe Kundera-writer, just like the protagonists of his novel, while exposed to kitsch, finds himself ‘trapped by reality’ and at best can only move away from kitsch – but just slightly. Make a crack. Nothing more.

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### Summary

This paper deals with the Kundera's most popular novel as a passionate dialogue with kitsch. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is based on the antinomy of lightness and heaviness, as well as kitsch and individuality. The narrator treats his characters as the experimental self and confronts them with the reality created on the cross-scheme of the aforementioned keywords. Kundera interprets the phenomenon of kitsch as a tool to create a totalitarian reality and enslave human beings, but also as something, that can be recognized and domesticated, and then comprises an inalienable part of a human being and its relation to the world. The essay also deals with the Kundera's famous aversion to adapting his novels for film. He forbade any further film adaptations of his work, having disliked the way *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was adapted by Philip Kaufman in 1988.

**Keywords:** Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, kitsch, testament, lie, mask, the 'human face' of socialism

## ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF KITSCH AND PERSUASION

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The attempt made in this text to reflect on the relations between kitsch and persuasion is motivated by the feeling that although these concepts belong to different orders (the former is an aesthetic category, while the latter is used in interdisciplinary analyses of the process of influencing the audience), there is often a significant co-existence of these concepts within a given work. The analysis of this interdependence – and its concrete cultural implementations – may result in a deeper understanding of both phenomena.

The relationship I am interested in has two facets: one marked by obviousness, the other by ambiguity. The former is connected with the presence of persuasion in kitsch (including the possibility of recognizing it as its basic building material), while the latter is connected with generating kitsch through persuasive transmissions. I will begin with the former.

Regardless of how we understand persuasion, it seems to be an indispensable component of kitsch. Its way of existence and purpose are connected with the pursuit of unambiguity, seduction leading to specific experiences. Kitsch deprives its recipient of individuality, and its action is aimed at achieving a specific effect. The unification inscribed in it is not only a side effect of seduction, but actually its expected result – the experience of community brings relief, deepens the state of being moved, the sense of familiarity.

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch (Kundera 1984: 251).

Making the audience similar, making them a homogeneous mass, is the basis of the 'kitsch experience' (Banach 1986: 52). The experience of relief and soothing inscribed in them results from the lack of individual responsibility, from the sense of security – reminiscent of the one experienced by a child under the care of loving parents:

In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme. The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories: the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, children running on the grass, the motherland betrayed, first love (Kundera 1984: 250-251).

Andrzej Banach (1986: 64), juxtaposing the aesthetic experience and kitsch, concludes:

The last feature of the kitsch aesthetic experience is its collectivity. In a pure aesthetic experience, a person wants to be alone. Even a whisper bothers them. In the kitsch experience, where the body has a big role, the person becomes a part of the whole, an element of the collective.

Kitsch is usually connected with the intention of a clear, expressive message (Wójcik 2000), leaving no room for reflection. It aims to organize the world, deprive the recipient of anxiety, move them. However, unlike the shocking, 'tumultuous' experience of *catharsis*, it is supposed to deepen or restore the state of comfort with the power of the tension-breaking solution. It includes 'intelligibility and clarity understood as an imperative of direct, undisturbed and immediate access to the recipient' (Citko 2000: 117). Abraham Moles (1978: 219) describes kitsch as 'totalitarianism without violence', Andrzej Banach (1986: 33) says that it is 'a very dangerous object, even an enemy,' calling it 'a work of deception', indicating that 'at the basis of its construction is the will to lead the good-natured recipient where the artist likes'. This can happen more or less clearly. Banach, while developing the theme of danger inscribed in kitsch, notes:

If kitsch seems dangerous to us, it is precisely because someone hidden outside the artist, or even the artist themselves, gives us a signal, and we, unaware of it, succumb to it. The mechanism of kitsch is the evocation of reflexes that seem inborn, inherited (ibid.: 147).

Thus, kitsch turns into a mysterious tool of control, preventing free and unrestrained interpretation of the reality by the recipient. Banach also calls attention to the automation of the kitsch process (ibid.: 147).

When considering the category I am interested in, it is often pointed out that although cheapness and technical mediocrity are fundamentally inscribed in kitsch, sometimes – and even mostly – we are dealing with a qualitatively different variant of kitsch. Considering the etymology of the word ‘kitsch’ from the point of view of its relationship with the word ‘sketch’, Banach concludes:

Unfortunately, the similarity between sketch and kitsch is exhausted in the sphere of sound. Apart from that, everything divides them. Today’s kitsch (...) is often perfectly finished, expensive, magnificent, appealing to the audience (ibid.: 10).

One of the basic criteria of kitsch turns out to have the status of alternative, optional and unnecessary. Although its mediocrity, temporality and imitativeness seem to be its basic features, in the end their lack does not deprive the object/work of its ‘kitsch’ identity. Paolo Sorrentino’s film *Youth*, analyzed by Maria Beszterda (2015) from the point of view of the dangerous closeness of pathos and sublimity and kitsch, can be regarded as an example of a work that suitably represents the quality described above. Although formal sophistication and originality are the opposite of the carelessness and mediocrity of mass productions, they do not automatically guarantee the status of a work of art. Katarzyna Citko (2000: 117) considers the ‘accumulation of non-functional effects and ornaments’ to be one of the essential features of kitsch’. The surplus in terms of aesthetic complexity of the work threatens with pretentiousness<sup>1</sup> – this remark indicates the necessity to go beyond

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Pretentiousness as a claim, asking for more than one should, taking on better appearances, calculating on overgrowth, pretending to be bigger, more perfect. We will find all these features in perfect condition in kitsch as its essential ingredient’ (Banach 1986: 78).

aesthetic criteria in the analysis and interpretation of kitsch to reflect on the function of the means used.

The observation indicating the alternative nature of the criteria for kitsch makes us think about the extent to which particular features assigned to it must be represented in a given object in order to be able to adequately define its identity as 'kitsch.'

Works that go beyond the aesthetic sphere, capturing kitsch in ethical categories, inspire reflection on the relations between kitsch and persuasion. In the introduction to the Polish-language edition of Saul Friedländer's *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, Paweł Śpiewak (2011: 10-11) makes a radical statement:

Kitsch (...) is sometimes described as bad art, shameless, degraded beauty, and it should be simply called a lie. If we do so, we will probably call it evil as well, and then it will turn out that what was considered to be a question of taste, aesthetics, and attitude towards beauty acquires an ethical character. These two approaches, aesthetic and ethical, are mixed up in numerous treatises on kitsch and turn out to be inseparable.

The above considerations do not boil down to stating that what is aesthetically of little value is unworthy of human cognition, or that the seemingly innocent 'trash' can be harmful. They also reflect on the particular potential of this 'bad art' leading to the shaping of mass imagination. The example of Nazi kitsch very clearly reveals the burden of this impact.

The second face of the relation between kitsch and persuasion, which I described as marked with ambiguity, reveals itself in the question about the possibility of 'creating' kitsch by persuasion, and thus the presence of this category – with a strictly aesthetic status – somehow independently of the aesthetic identity of the work. The above observation that it is impossible to treat purely formal reasons as determinants of a work's kitschiness (since kitsch – as I will try to point out further – may also appear in refined and original creations), leads to the statement that in an attempt to identify a work from the point of view of the presence of the category we are interested in, we are forced to analyze and interpret its elements in the context of the whole, to recognize this 'cheapness' on various levels. One may assume that there is a special bond between kitsch

and those texts of culture which deprive the viewer of their subjectivity and therefore consider them to be strictly programmed for specific experiences and conclusions. Due to this 'cheapness,' the conventionality – which does not quite openly aim at winning the viewer over – we intuitively perceive propaganda and biased works as kitsch.

Persuasion is a more general concept, indicating any kind of attempt to convince people to accept a particular way of understanding reality. Unlike works of a propagandistic nature, in works that we would be inclined to treat as persuasive (leaning towards using a more general, less defined category), we may be dealing with subtlety, ambiguity, artistic sophistication (Sasaki 2003: 4-5). At the same time, however, cultural texts of a persuasive nature – regardless of their formal complexity – are usually focused on the idea of a strictly defined influence on the viewer, which subordinates all elements of the work to itself, turning them into an artifact with a status close to a political manifesto. Such a message is usually devoid of directness, the 'convincing' inscribed in the persuasion is not done quite openly<sup>2</sup>. Of course, due to the generality of the meaning of this term, we will also encounter phenomena which, although described as persuasive, are not characterized by the features indicated above. In this discussion, I limit myself to one of the many ways of understanding persuasion, indicating its similarity to propaganda (see: Garpiel 2003: 37-41).

An example of a cultural text in which the categories we are interested in – kitsch and persuasion – are closely connected is the pop-culture film *God's Not Dead* (2014) directed by Harold Cronk. In this case, one could even speak of the propaganda character of the work, which does not change the direction of the analysis indicated here (since I treat propaganda as one of the varieties of persuasion). The film tells the story of a young student of an American

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<sup>2</sup> 'The observer of mass culture must, however, be interested in a specific kind of conative function: it does not externalise so much in all possible functions of the factors of expression whose task is to refer to the recipient, but rather in those particular factors which determine or attempt to determine the behaviour (mental or physical) of the recipient, and to do so in an indirect way, in a way concealed, as it were, not through direct prohibitions or orders. I would propose calling this particular variant of the conative function the persuasive function' (Barańczak 1983: 30).

university, a participant in a philosophy course. The instructor treats the statement ‘God is dead’ as a kind of starting point, a kind of condition for participation in the class, which each of the participants is to ‘sign’. The protagonist of the film, Josh, due to his personal convictions, is not ready to meet this expectation, which is why he is faced with a challenge – the condition to pass the course is to convince the rest of the students of the falsity of the claim propagated by the lecturer. The plot of the film focuses on Josh’s struggle – the inner struggle to stay faithful to his values and attempts to address the intellectual challenge. As one would expect from the first minutes of the film, these efforts bring the expected result – the ardent teacher suffers a defeat and the brave student triumphs.

The film *God’s Not Dead* is described by the distributor as ‘a fascinating philosophical dispute in the story about the search for answers to the most important question in the history of mankind’. This lofty, positive-value formulation raises some reservations. The reality presented in the film from the very beginning reveals a clear axiological trait – all the characters living in isolation from the Christian religion struggle with problems, are characterized by their selfishness and lack of sensitivity to others. There is, therefore, a clear opposition – the world of people who believe in Christ and the world of those who reject him. This is illustrated by the side plots of the film – including the story of a workaholic focused on ‘crushing’ her opponents with journalistic lampoons, her heartless partner who decides to break up with her upon learning about her illness, a brutal Muslim forcing his daughter to wear a headscarf and comply with the restrictive law that prevents her from functioning normally in society. All of these characters are practically caricatures and are based on certain patterns. An example is a scene in which the workaholic journalist, in response to the diagnosis, says ‘I don’t have time for cancer, I’m too busy’, or when her partner responds to a suggestion to visit his mother says, ‘I’ve already bought her a TV set’. The caricatured nature of these stereotypical images does not seem to be an intentional measure, since it does not cross the border beyond which the situations shown would provoke laughter. Rather, it is an attempt to reflect very bluntly the difficulties experienced by people living far from the world of moral and religious values.

The black-and-white nature of the world created in the film is most fully revealed in the juxtaposition of two main characters: the student



ready to make sacrifices, faithful to himself, and the cynical lecturer who imposes his convictions on others. Professor Radisson is a negative figure – he is characterized by his disrespect for the freedom of others, malice (he describes faith as ‘primitive superstition’), as well as a tendency to intimidate and treat his students dishonestly. From the first meeting of these characters, it is evident that the forces are unequal. The viewer is not able to sympathize with the lecturer and thus to take his ideas seriously. When it comes to the student gaining the advantage and the professor being forced to admit that he actually believes in the existence of God, but hates Him (because of personal childhood tragedy), the viewer accepts this solution without surprise. To put it bluntly, the scene of the student’s victory is kitschy: both because of the aesthetic means used in it (tear-jerking music, pathos-filled clichéd acting), as well as its obviousness and pretentiousness resulting from the juxtaposition.

The figure of Josh, who represents the values most strongly promoted in the work, is elevated. His actions are based on his conviction that only a real threat is a test of faith. The decision to fight for the right to one’s own convictions gains the rank of a radical and costly step in the film. As a result, the protagonist is abandoned by his girlfriend, threatened with the loss of social recognition and ‘academic suicide’. However, all these dangers are nothing in comparison to Josh’s belief that his actions are an expression of God’s desires.

The creators of the film *God’s Not Dead* had the ambition to show the persecution experienced by Christians: students do not have the right to freely express their faith, a girl brought up in an Orthodox Muslim family is brutally expelled from home when the fact that she practices Christianity comes to light. However, this issue is dealt with in a way that disregards the burden it contains. Banalization is achieved through conventionalization and the use of aesthetic means appropriate to pop-cultural messages (this is particularly evident in the scene of the girl being thrown out of a Muslim house, accompanied by a pop song with the phrase ‘Carry on!’ emphasized in the chorus). It would also be interesting from the point of view of reflection on the technical ‘cheapness’ of the film to analyze the scene preceding the ‘busting’ of the praying Christian woman by her Muslim brother: the camera following the subtle movements of the characters, the shot of the door and the twisting knob, contrasts causing a clear tension – all

these are conventional elements of horror films. This borrowing causes – through a kind of pretentiousness and inconsistency with the subject matter of the film – a comic effect, which seems to be not so much a deliberate action by the director as an unfortunate side effect.

The film is at the same time kitschy in terms of technique (artificial and stilted dialogue, incompetent acting, questionable directorial skills) and persuasive in a way that borders on propaganda (which is particularly strongly emphasized by a minor treatment blurring the line between fiction and reality – the film’s closing inscription ‘Join us and send a message to your friends’). However, it seems to reveal more than just the perfect coexistence of these two qualities. The kitschiness of the work reaches its extreme with a close intertwining with the procedures applied in order to ‘intercept’ the viewers, to reconcile them to the only correct, indisputable interpretation of the world, which is brought by Christianity, otherwise trivialized. The film does not have the character of a strictly evangelistic statement, but by creating a suggestive image of the believers of a certain religion – Christians – it strives to unify the image of the world, leaving the viewer without questions and doubts.

Similarly, conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of a work radically different aesthetically from *God’s Not Dead*, namely Małgorzata Szumowska’s 2015 film *Body/Ciało*. In this work, the phenomenon that interests me reveals itself very clearly. At first glance, on the basis of a superficial watching, it is difficult to consider Szumowska’s latest film as a kitsch work. *Body* is certainly not technically mediocre – this is no place for an in-depth analysis of its individual layers; however, an intuitive viewing, supported by the voices of critics, allows us to conclude that we are dealing with a sophisticated and skillfully constructed work. The impression of ‘cheapness’ characteristic of kitsch is revealed only by the suggestive ‘eloquence’ of the film and, as the traceable testimonies of its reception indicate, it fails to be of a universal character. In order to look at the meaning of the final scene, it is worth to briefly reconstruct the plot briefly and interpret it.

*Body* tells the story of an orphaned family – Janusz and his daughter, Olga, suffering in the aftermath of the death of their loved one – wife and mother. This experience becomes the source of serious identity problems for the protagonists. Although it is not entirely clear if the experience is the cause of the father struggling with alcohol and becoming jaded, or the daughter’s

bulimic and suicidal tendencies, we observe their intensification in this context. Moreover, they both remain unreconciled with the death and loss of the loved person. In the case of the girl, this manifests in her longing (which she discusses with her therapist), in the case of the father – anxieties connected with fear of the dead wife interfering with his daily life. Janusz tenses when he watches a curtain fluttering, he is frightened as he turns off a radio that suddenly ‘turned itself on’, he deliberately and fearfully reacts to a neighbor’s comments about loud music one of the household members allegedly heard. The film viewer does not see anything absurd in this anxiety, the series of small coincidences convincingly and coherently comes together into a picture of justified fear. Thus, the counterpoint for the worldview Janusz has built – rational, close to a cynically sardonic attitude – is the personally experienced fear, which on the one hand is an emotional reaction, and on the other the expression of doubts emerging on the intellectual level. In his daily existence, the protagonist has ‘both feet on the ground’, he is unmoved, and takes in news of the worst crimes – and even observes their traces – in an ostentatiously passionless way. The death of his wife changes this state of affairs – the uncertainty about the existence of life after death begins to creep into his world. This subject should be considered crucial for *Body/Ciało*, organizing its meanings, indirectly absorbing all the plots within it. The figure representing the spiritual world, rejected by the protagonist’s belief in the possibility of communing with the dead and life after death is Anna, Olga’s therapist and, as we find out later, a spiritualistic medium. Janusz initially reacts with reluctance to the woman, disrespecting her suggestions about how to take care of his daughter and above all the possibility of contacting his dead wife. With time, as his anxiety grows, his approach begins to change – he considers metaphysical issues, brings them up when talking to a friend, initiates a conversation with the therapist, and finally agrees to take part in a séance meant to contact his wife.

The scene of the séance is crucial for the dialogue developed in the film between skepticism towards metaphysics and the faith in its existence. The results of this experiment – as Janusz still perceives it in spite of everything – determine not only his attitude to the above-mentioned issue, but also the kind of diagnosis contained in the film – because we are dealing with leading the viewer through the complexities of the analyzed issue,

creating the appearance of dialogue of rival arguments. When the séance turns out to be a failure – there are no signs of the presence of the deceased, and the medium falls asleep and starts snoring (which comically deepens the kind of devaluation of the world Anna represents) – the emotional and axiological horizon of the film is also cleansed. The last scene shows the glowing faces of two characters who, under the influence of Anna's falling asleep, are freed from anxiety and longing, and we see freedom and happiness in their eyes for the first time. This is accompanied by specific aesthetic means – joyful rock music plays, the room is flooded with warm morning light. The change that appears in the scene is clear and gives a sense of soothing, resolution and closure. Due to the conventionality of the tricks used to signal the banishing of the anxieties that tormented the protagonists, the scene may be described as kitschy or at least marked by kitsch. Kitsch appears in it – and here we come to the key issue – not only as conventional aesthetics, but also as the result of the persuasion inscribed in the film. The impression of cheapness, a kind of dishonesty, the feeling that the viewer has not been treated seriously, is the result of receiving an unambiguous, ready-made answer to questions inscribed in the experience of interacting with a complicated problem. Various artistically complex conceptualizations of the issue of corporeality and spirituality turn out to be aimed only at the conclusion that devalues their complexity that leaves no room for any doubts. One could, of course, ask about the sense of the last shot of the film – the table at which the séance took place, seen from the outside. The sleeping woman is no longer there – has she fallen asleep and slid under the table? Has she been moved to her bed? Did she not exist at all? Or perhaps, in a direct paradox to the film's tone, she disappeared – as ghosts do – confirming her own ideas? This small shot allows us to see an element of openness in the structure of the film. It seems, however, that the weight of the kitschy resolution of the plot is not broken by this small trivial point, and it remains the 'last word' of the film.

The thesis indicating the possibility to identify as kitsch phenomena aesthetically different from the 'kitsch canon' and thus not representing the whole range of qualities associated with this category allows us to deepen our reflection on its complexity and situations when it goes beyond the purely aesthetic sphere. The directions of interpretation of selected cultural texts indicated in this text can be treated as an attempt to put into research practice

theories taking into account the two planes of the influence of kitsch, its particular dual nature.

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### Filmography

- Body/Ciało* (2015), directed by Małgorzata Szumowska.
- God's Not Dead* (2014), directed by Harold Cronk.

### Summary

The article concerns the problems of the relationship between kitsch and persuasion; it is an attempt to approach this relationship from two

perspectives – indicating the persuasive nature of kitsch as one of its characteristics, and signaling the possibility of recognizing that the category of kitsch is present as a consequence of giving the message a persuasive character. The presented statements are based on the analysis of two films – *God's Not Dead*, directed by Harold Cronk, and *Body/Ciało*, directed by Małgorzata Szumowska.

**Keywords:** persuasion, kitsch, manipulation, Harold Cronk, Małgorzata Szumowska

## SUPERHERO OF THE POLISH PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC ON THE EXAMPLE OF ANDRZEJ KONDRATIUK'S *HYDRO-PUZZLE*

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The mass culture of the Polish People's Republic – film, militia novels and comic books – are filled with heroes characterized by an accumulation of physical and mental capabilities developed to the degree that is simply impossible in real life. They solve extremely complicated cases, they can easily win any fights with their opponents and they always know what to say at any moment. In addition, they are guardians of public order, effectively standing against and fighting evil.

Such a general description shows that Polish superheroes are hardly different from the characters created at the same time (or slightly earlier) by foreign artists, especially American and British ones, who provided the audience with a ton of entertainment, while showing the stories and adventures of superheroes such as Superman, Batman, and James Bond. It is enough, however, to briefly, but thoroughly read *Captain Żbik* (*Kapitan Żbik*), any short story from the *Eve Calls 07* (*Ewa wzywa 07*) series or to watch a few Polish crime and spy films made in the 1950s and 1960s to note that the time in which these works were created, the political system and the requirements of censorship left a clear mark on them. The recipe for the Polish superhero, as well as the environment in which they worked, had to be special, particularly given that they were supposed to stand in opposition to Western models. But what were the differences? What configuration of 'superheroic' attributes brought the characters closer to the official ideal, and what characteristics made them bad – a personification of evil? Searching for answers to these questions is the main purpose of this article. Its scope will be also determined by such issues as superhero as a modern myth, Manichean division

of the world and the vision of the fight against evil present in the works using the figures of superheroes, as well as the propaganda image of Poland as a socialist paradise and Western Europe and America as a root of all evil.

The analysis of the superhero of the Polish People's Republic will be carried out on the example of As, the protagonist of *Hydro-puzzle* (*Hydrozagadka*), a television film from 1970 directed by Andrzej Kondratiuk – a particularly special protagonist, given that he was based on American superheroes. As, however, apart from imitating and parodying his colleagues from across the ocean, also serves as an excellent representative of the 'Polish superman'. The creators endowed him with many characteristics directly referring to other figures of the native mass culture, including the comic book hero Captain Żbik and Stanisław Kolicki, also known as Hans Kloss, Agent J-23 from the extremely popular *More Than Life at Stake* (*Stawka większa niż życie*) TV series. What is more, As is a living dictionary of well-known propaganda slogans of the 1960s. While the accumulation of such references makes this character heavily exaggerated, and thus grotesque, it also provides so many models according to which the ideal image of an officer, spy and a normal citizen was then shaped, that they would easily be enough for even a dozen or so 'serious' superheroes.

## WEST IS ALWAYS SUSPICIOUS

As is a super citizen presented in a distorting mirror. On the one hand, due to his resemblance to Western superheroes, he is an exceptional figure in Polish cinema; however, on the other hand, he also has all the necessary characteristics of a socialist superhero. Given this excess, the figure of As – unlike Captain Sowa, especially Captain Żbik or Hans Kloss – constantly reminds the viewer that he is only a part of the created world, not a living protagonist, but an ideogram that bears particular significance – 'a mythologised being, a personification of virtue or an entire set of various virtues. As an ideogram, and not a character, he appears with all its conventionality – the excessive number of symbols, which dominate over realism' (Szyłak 1998: 38). This difference may, however, serve to highlight similarities, since parody, like a magnifying glass, improves the clarity of the employed models and makes them easier to identify and discover.

One of the staples of the propaganda in the Polish People's Republic was a clear division of the world into the East and the West, and this division



was not only geographical and political, but also moral. In the comic book series about Captain Żbik, the most dangerous criminals, who participated in the most advanced and most widespread criminal plots, always came from the West, mainly from the Federal Republic of Germany. It was the source of the stream of illegal money flows, thanks to which the mafia or madmen tried to build a network of connections in Poland in order to make it easier for themselves to commit spectacular and profitable crimes:

the client always appears in the background, they never take part in the 'wet work', leaving it – and the associated risks – to Polish criminals. This overriding role of the Germans can be seen as an example of capitalist relations, which are implemented illegally (...) on the foundation of people's democracy. Besides, the payment offered to Poles for carrying out their bidding is clearly 'imperialist' in nature – most often they got payment in US dollars and a passport to escape to the West (Wycinek 2010: 119-120).

Comic books thus taught the readers how they should approach their western neighbours. When a German extends an offer of cooperation to a Polish scientist, and when he refuses, the man orders his murder (*I Call 0-21 [Wzywam 0-21]*), while another, the son of a former SS officer, orders to steal an icon in which he expects to find something even more valuable (*The Mystery of the Icon [Tajemnica ikony]*), and these are only few of the many examples, the reader gets a clear message that West Germany is the root of all evil – but never East Germany, it was always the Federal Republic of Germany – and people should be wary of it, make sure to pursue the perpetrators and eliminate them.

In this case, West Germany is an embodiment of (...) the Third Reich and all the negative values attributed to it. In this case, West Germany continues the fascist foreign policy, which aims at, among others, stealing both material and cultural goods from the Polish state, as well as valuable information and inventions – achievements of Polish engineers (ibid.: 119).

Therefore, an exemplary citizen of the socialist state must always stand in opposition to those, who have been deceived by the charms of the capitalist world – including everything that this world was normally associated with, for example splendour and wealth, excessive (and misunderstood) love of freedom and far-reaching demoralisation. 'Cards, vodka, filthy jokes,

pranks. (...) A mullet and sideburns – this is what identifies the Western culture’ which served as an inspiration to our beatniks, who, according to the officials, were hooligans that we had to deal with by: ‘subjecting them to contempt and scorn, and then chase them away’<sup>1</sup>.

This image of ‘inspirations’ with Western culture is also valid for the characters of *Hydro-puzzle*. The good ones stand up for their values (science, social welfare, health and safety regulations), while the bad ones have connections behind the Iron Curtain and are filled with false ideals of the Western world. ‘I read The Times and the Epoch. I only drink Ballantine’s. I smoke Winstons. I have Wintermans – foreign chocolate-flavoured cigars – for you’, lists Jurek, a womanizer, who also boasts his consumptionist lifestyle. Doctor Plama lives by a similar philosophy. ‘Well, my mother was a manicurist and a pedicurist. He was the only child, spoiled by his father, a banker, who sent him to Heidelberg, where he wasted his talent in casinos and brothels of Western Europe. For example, he bathed circus performers in champagne. A party animal, (...) or... how do you say it today? A playboy!’, said his former classmate, Professor Milczarek.

## GROTESQUE INCARNATION OF SUPERMAN

The opposite of the demonic Dr. Plama and Jurek, who lives for the worldly pleasures, is the impeccable As:

a bachelor who does not drink nor smoke, graduated school with straight A, an amateur athlete, finalist of cross-country races, vaccinated, never suffered from mumps, friendly, punctual, diligent, a great employee who smiled every day, active, physically and mentally fit. Such a multitude of positive traits in one person results in unusual power and energy. That’s why our hero is a true phenomenon! (fragment of the movie’s script quoted after: Łuczak 2004: 53).

It is a model of a socialist citizen who, thanks to the accumulation of carefully selected advantages, possessed superhuman skills. But, as Przemysław Dudziński (2012: 97) points out, ‘one may speculate that As’ superhuman skills are potentially available to everyone, since he is the final

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<sup>1</sup> *Camera Operator Peeped You (Operator was podpatrzył)* (1953), Polska Kronika Filmowa 17/53, WFDiF.

product of the system, which aims at shaping the ideal socialist man, the ultimate stage of the Marxist vision of human history’.

As easily overcomes gravity or pushes a train with attached cars. He also always has a slogan taken straight from a bulletin board or a propaganda text (‘Health and safety regulations are important, especially around trains!’). As a supercitizen, As serves as the personification of the socialist cliché. He lives by the rule that alcohol harms health, and thus he is an embodiment of teetotalism – alcohol is his total opposite, like two sides of the coin, which cannot exist separately (since alcohol could kill him, like kryptonite could kill the Superman). However, there is more to it than just common-sense approach to health and safety regulations. Walczak became As – he received the highest rank among agents – thanks to living perfectly in line with the socialist ideal. He cannot afford to deviate from the rules, because without upholding them constantly, he would go back to being an ordinary designer in one of Warsaw’s offices. Therefore, he remains vigilant in order to be able to do the right thing at any time. He also recommends others to do the same: ‘You were a victim of an evil conspiracy (...) I would advise you to remain vigilant in the future’. However, most importantly, he always stands up for the victim and brings the perpetrators to justice. He never hesitates to risk his life and, in the face of an upcoming catastrophe, he rams Dr. Plama’s underwater headquarters. Of course, he remembers to wear a helmet – the most important element of personal protective equipment, protecting his head.

However, in the early 1970s, when *Hydro-puzzle* premiered on the screens for the first time, ‘the Polish Superman’ played by Józef Nowak was already associated with the hero model before he did or said anything. His face, which is now much less recognisable, was widely known at the time, mainly from socialist realist films such as *Cellulose Souvenir (Pamiątka z celulozy)* and *Under the Phrygian Star (Pod gwiazdą frygijską)* by Jerzy Kawalerowicz. But even in real life, Nowak ‘did not really differ from the model of a perfect citizen parodied in *Hydro-puzzle* – he was a member of the Polish United Workers’ Party and the Voluntary Reserve of the Citizen’s Militia, and he received a Bronze Medal for his services for the defence of the country’ (ibid.: 89). After starring in *Hydro-puzzle*, he expanded his collection of trophies and awards by adding a golden ring won at the Military Song Festival and the Medal of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Polish People’s Republic

awarded for at least fifteen years of professional work and his involvement in social and political activity.

The fact that such a distinguished actor as Nowak played the role of a super-agent was a conscious decision made by the director:

*Hydro-puzzle* was supposed to be primarily a parody of socialist realist cinema, the more ridiculous and absurd that it was equally a skilful pastiche of American superhero comic books. (...) In both there could be no compassion to the ‘bad guys’, and it was strictly forbidden to present ‘police officers, judges, government officials in any way that could undermine respect for the authorities’ (ibid. 51).

Apart from the face that strongly connected the Polish superhero with Polish reality, his image is a product imported from the USA, or rather a deliberately incompetent copy of the American model.

On a daily basis, As lives a double life as Walczak, a modest designer working in one of Warsaw’s urban design offices. In the Polish People’s Republic, at that time it was a profession much more respected than journalism, which was Clark Kent’s job when he did not have anything to do as Superman.

It is also here that the film clearly parodies the contemporary reality. At the beginning of the 1970s, members of the workers’ and peasants’ alliance were no longer role models and propaganda heroes – that role was taken over by mid-level intelligent office workers, people such as Walczak and engineer Karwowski – the protagonist of the *Forty-Years-Old Man* (*Czterdziestolatek*) TV series, which serves as probably the best reflection of the atmosphere of that decade (ibid.: 88-89).

However, journalists, who enjoyed great popularity and trust in the USA, were pretty much meaningless at that time in Warsaw. Miss Jola’s proposal to write to a newspaper about the mysterious disappearance of water (“They’ll get it done”), was met with a swift response from one of her colleagues: ‘It won’t do anything, (...) that’s something that As should deal with’.

Apart from different professions, the situation of both heroes is almost identical, both in personal life and while ‘on duty’. Both of them, without their costumes, but wearing glasses with thick frames, are lost among the thousands of citizens, who are similar to them. In addition, they are

both in similar romantic relationships. One also cannot help but notice a visual similarity – as superheroes, both of them wear tight costumes with an emblem on their chest and cloak, a belt and high boots. However, the logo worn by As looks like it was cut out by a hardly ambitious student during Arts and Crafts classes. Similarly, the cloak ‘is short, reaching only to his waist, hanging there grotesquely, rather than flying majestically as a flag surrogate’ (ibid.: 88).

But he also has something that Superman does not have. The Polish superhero was additionally equipped with a bag, identical to that used by the communist police force. This gadget, worn on a strap that was slightly too long, constantly bumps on hero’s knees, which on the one hand makes him even more of a caricature, but on the other hand, it also makes him more similar to the militia, reminding people of the values parodied by the depicted character.

The grotesque nature of the character is complemented by ostentatiously ineffective scenes in which As uses his superpowers – for example, a jump from a high place played backwards or a moment of landing shown on the screen, which is supposed to suggest that As was in the air just a second before.

Instead of convincing with their realism, these scenes show incompetence, which, combined with the costume and the hero’s lines, carry additional meanings. As Dudziński wrote: ‘The director has simply included technical deficiencies in the film’s burlesque discourse’ (ibid.: 88).

## POLISH METROPOLIS

In *Hydro-puzzle*, the fictitious city of American Superman is replaced by super-modern Warsaw, shown ‘as a civilization of development, progress and the peak of innovation’ (Rakowski 2010: 188). The very first panoramic shot shows that the film takes place in a very busy metropolis with wide streets and towering skyscrapers. The latter also serve as a background for dialogue scenes. The protagonists spend their time in large offices, where they are protected from the sun by blinds, or sit outside, under umbrellas, where they cool down eating ice cream. As Tomasz Rakowski noted: ‘Their life is a kind of *high-life* of the Polish People’s Republic, taking place at tables outside’ (ibid.: 188).

From the very first seconds of the film this majesty is accompanied by an ironic tone, already signalled at the beginning by the film's soundtrack – the creators used the post-war song *Warsaw Day* (*Warszawski dzień*), published just fifteen years earlier by the State Song and Dance Ensemble to praise the residents of Warsaw devoting themselves to the reconstruction of the capital. 'This is one of the first signs showing that the satirical discourse of *Hydro-puzzle* would refer to two different periods in the history of the Polish People's Republic – the socialist realism, which was still fresh in the collective memory, as well as the contemporary times – the beginning of Gierek's »second Poland«' (Dudziński 2012: 88).

The institute – an enormous, glazed building full of nooks and crannies and long halls – was the gem of this ultra-modern world. Its employees, who were supposed to get Walczak, and who – interestingly enough – resembled secret service agents, rather than scientists, drive around in a Citroen DS, a technological wonder at the time, a symbol of luxury and innovation. They are dressed in black suits, and one of them, the most active one, wears tinted glasses. Apart from the dangerous ambiguity of these three 'colleagues', as Professor Milczarek describes them:

The atmosphere at the laboratory (...) fills everybody with enthusiasm. There, one can see scientists working incessantly on the 'water process', constantly pipetting, titrating, looking at flasks containing watery substances. This image shows the city as a well-oiled machine and it is, of course, a typical image of fulfilled socialism (...) (Rakowski 2010: 188).

However, the machine does not work properly. Several housing estates are running out of water, especially their upper floors. In the Polish People's Republic similar difficulties were not a surreal nightmare, they were rather an inseparable element of living in the city, which – as Rakowski notes – resulted from building housing estates with 'complexes of horrible blocks of flats' on the outskirts of cities at that time, but close to large industrial centres:

Heavy industry – steelworks, rolling mills, blast furnaces and industrial complexes – needed enormous amounts of water (!) to function on a daily basis. They used it during steel smelting process, as well as for cooling the red-hot slags and elements, taking up all its reserves, including drinking water,

as well as exhausting flood reservoirs. (...) [I]n a block of flats, water could be gone at any time – it was well-known at the time. It just disappeared ‘somewhere’ and then all hell was unleashed (ibid.: 191).

But in the ultra-modern Warsaw presented in *Hydro-puzzle*, in this perfectly constructed machine where people lived, worked and enjoyed their free time, such an occurrence did not result from any ill-considered decisions or deficiencies. The naive residents of the city, trying to come up with a reason, are lost – they think that the plumbers are to blame or that the pumps, filters or pressure stations do not work as intended.

Meanwhile, the lack of water in taps is the result of an imperialist conspiracy of the Maharaja of Kawur, who allied with Dr. Plama, which means that the authorities are not responsible in any way for the situation. Back in the day, this was also a normal occurrence. If not the foreign enemies of the Polish People's Republic, the so-called ‘objective difficulties’ were the cause of blackouts in the winter, lack of meat in stores, missed train and tram timetables, as well as keys not matching their respective locks in newly built cooperative flats (Łuczak 2014: 56).

‘The root of all evil needs to be found at source, doing it any other way would be absurd’, notes Professor Milczarek. Even an electron brain could not deal with this task and after entering the data it ‘spat out a big question mark’. Only a super-agent could deal with such mystery. ‘Thus, As appears to be the guardian of the development and power of technology, which in the modern myth still threaten to get out of control or fall into the hands of a bad demiurge’ (ibid.: 188).

## THE STRUGGLE OF GOOD AND EVIL

In the simple, clearly divided world of *Hydro-puzzle*, the demonic Dr. Plama – a brilliant criminal, who is depraved by his western lifestyle, who will do any evil deed, provided that it is sophisticated enough – is the opponent of the super-agent, who works for the benefit of all the people. Admittedly, Plama agrees to stab the sailor (because he did not like talkative people), and even organises a dance party at a fire station, during which Liliput was supposed to get rid of him. However, when the Maharaja proposes to decapitate or poison As, the doctor firmly refuses: ‘Forgive me, my lord, but these are primitive methods, they do not stand the test of time’.

The prince receives a similar answer when he asked whether Plama would kill Liliput: 'I am a business man and I don't like wet work'.

Plama, like an impassive and romantic dandy, in the face of deadly danger admires the circumstances in which the final clash with the super-agent is to take place: 'The drama will take place among the wild elements. I like it. Outstanding synchronisation'. 'You are a devil', said the Maharaja. 'An aesthetician, first and foremost' Plama quipped in response. It is precisely this disturbing sense of beauty and drama, devoid of any ethical foundation at the same time, that makes him notice that 'the murder in the fire station has no spectacular qualities'.

Entertainment, next to wealth, is one of the basic values most appreciated and sought after by both the doctor and the Maharaja. This serves as a complete reversal of As' code of conduct – the hero values 'good of the people and public peace', while not being interested in profit at all. He is therefore incorruptible, as Dr. Plama informs the Maharaja. 'Is that Batman?' the prince asked. 'Worse, if we go by the international nomenclature, it's the Superman. He is very dangerous' he hears in response.

The difference between these characters is very telling. Batman is an ordinary man using various inventions, while Superman has superhuman powers. In this case, however, this is not the most important thing. Batman's motives are personal, he is a vigilante who pursues murderers who killed his parents, and he brings criminals to justice along the way. On the other hand, Superman:

is more noble than him. (...) His foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. Kent, instilled in him great respect for the traditional American values of work, family, law and order. He fights to make all these important principles a reality in the giant American model city of Metropolis, using all his supernatural abilities. A similar system of values – but proper to the exemplary citizen of the socialist state, who observes all regulations, even health and safety at work – is characteristic of As, who drinks only orange soda and considers alcohol to be the greatest poison of all (ibid.: 52).

Both Superman and As uphold public order, which is their only interest. Each of them is 'beautiful, modest and helpful; their lives are dedicated to fighting the forces of evil, and the police have tireless allies in them' (Eco 1995: 17). However, ordinary criminals are not enough for the superhero



to use his abilities to the full extent. Dr. Plama, an unscrupulous genius, turns out to be a worthy opponent in a duel with As. His broad knowledge and genius are evidenced primarily by the plan to evaporate all water on a global scale. Plama intends to bring a lake to the boil and transport the vaporised water to the desert country of Kawur using a nuclear stack. He is so crafty that he takes advantage of the advice of the weather forecaster Wicherek, who – having no idea about the whole plot (and therefore not asking for any money in return) – unwittingly takes part in the machinations of the bad guy. ‘The clouds that have flown over your country must be liquefied. For this purpose, we may install a network of tethered balloons in the desert. Each balloon will carry a refrigerator. Cooling clouds down will cause them to release rain’, Plama explained to the Maharaja who financed the whole operation. When the prince wanted to know the details, Plama gave him a school textbook: *Seventh Grade Physics*. The plan is so simple, yet brilliant! What a mind. The next Pascal and Machiavelli. You are a genius!’ the Maharaja explained in a surge of enthusiasm and signs the contract, forgoing an in-depth analysis of the documents.

But it is not only the partner in crime who learns about the genius of the charismatic Doctor Plama. Professor Milczarek also admits that Plama is an extremely dangerous adversary. Talking about his student days, he admonishes his wild lifestyle and then states: ‘However, he graduated with honours. He’s absolutely intelligent. Well, I was young at the time, he fascinated me, I envied him, and today I’m pursuing a criminal’, said the professor, thus giving the viewers a parable. It clearly shows that the Western lifestyle is a simple way to commit various transgressions, or even a crime. On the other hand, working diligently and submitting to the right idea is a way to a real scientific career (and not only, because Professor Milczarek’s story is universal in its nature) and, ultimately, a triumph over the false hero, who lives pompously, but meets a sad demise. ‘These two life stories have a colossal educational value, especially for youth’, As concluded.

## GOOD ALWAYS WINS

Professor Milczarek’s reflections lead to the discovery that Dr. Plama is not only a bad guy, who needs to be eliminated to once and for all restore order in the temporarily disrupted socialist paradise: ‘By the way, this Plama

implemented my idea, only the other way around. This is very interesting from a metaphysical point of view. The positive charge attracts the negative one. The negative has its own positive. Black and white. Good against evil'. As Maciej Łuczak (2004: 55) noted:

Good and evil are, to put it in a language of philosophical discourse, ontological categories. When As – the brilliant, invincible embodiment of all the virtues – will have no more opponents, he will once again become Jan Walczak, an ordinary designer. Young people will not have positive and negative heroes, they will lose their moral compasses, and without axiological hints, the whole world will plunge into total chaos.

Therefore, Dr. Plama as the personification of all evil can – even must – be defeated, but only within the framework of a given story. His plan threatened a perfectly functioning city – such things happen even in the best of the worlds. However, the order was restored, because the crisis, since it had already occurred, had to be resolved sooner or later, after a good amount of antics and adventures, of course. Ultimately, the good has won – according to the principle of constructing a consolation novel, described by Umberto Eco:

The crisis cannot be revealed if no solution is proposed promptly, one may not arouse the reader's indignation at the sight of social scourges, if the intervention of a healing factor is not provoked soon after, and if the confused recipient is not avenged, along with the victims. In such a case, the novel becomes a gratification machine, since gratification must occur before the end of the novel and can never be left up to the reader, like deeply 'revolutionary' problem novels do (Eco 2008: 21-22).

Doctor and Maharaja were ultimately defeated, but they do not intend to undergo re-education and become good people like Liliput and the sailor. It is important that As, the invincible guardian of order and peace, remains alert and always ready to fight evil that suddenly pops up, especially since he never has time to rest. Dr. Plama and Maharaja, the bad guys of *Hydro-puzzle*, are perfectly aware of this constant clash of opposing elements, as well as the obligatory triumph of good. After the explosion that occurred when As collided with the underwater bunker, both criminals barely lived.

‘This time it didn’t work, but maybe next time...?’, Plama asked. ‘It will not work either’, said the Maharaja, laughing.

This exchange precludes any doubts – the characters are only symbols, elements of a mythical story about the eternal fight between good and evil. The viewer – just like comic book reader, described by Jerzy Szyłak (1998: 40) – has:

the opportunity to touch the world of miracle – marked with quotation marks, presented in a distanced way, but presented in a situation where the real myth only evokes a shrug. The high culture, dominated by existential pessimism, the sense of the absurdity of life and the world, is opposed by the comic book [or film, in this case – T.K.], which shows image in which the world made sense, although naive, but naive in a conscious and exaggerated way, which made it possible both to distance oneself from such a vision, and to find an alibi for being interested in similar stories.

In the case of *Hydro-puzzle*, the exaggeration mentioned by Szyłak was doubled by the filmmakers. At the surface level, this is suggested by a simplified, superhero convention, in which there is no room for complex personalities and morally ambiguous situations. At the deeper level, this simple world is additionally exaggerated, because the myth of Superman was changed by satire and grotesque, which was as much directed against the communist model of a hero, as against the superhero convention taken over from the West.

## CONCLUSIONS

As the above analysis shows, the Polish (socialist) hero has a different consciousness and values than his American counterpart, but they can both deal just as fine with any situation, whether it is by using strength and craftiness, or brilliant intelligence. The socialist hero also serves as the guardian of peace and public order. But by embodying the official ideal of a citizen of one of the countries of the Soviet bloc, such a hero gains some special features distinguishing him from his counterparts from beyond the Iron Curtain. This is necessary because said hero is tasked with defending a system that, according to censorship officers and propaganda, stands in opposition to Western chaos, evil, corruption and consumerist lifestyle. In such a world, money, comfort, luxury goods and trips abroad (with

the exception of trips to socialist countries) are always suspicious, and it is rather a criminal, a thief or a spy who will benefit from such pleasures, while a super citizen, modest and always conscious of all temptations that can only bring him to ruin, will remain alert and insensitive to the whispers of false imperialist ideals.

The Polish superhero will never stoop so low and become a vigilante with personal motives like Batman, he will never seek justice to take revenge on his oppressors, because that would mean that he is not a superhero. He will also never care about his salary, because he will find the energy to work in work itself, as well as in the sense of a well-fulfilled duty.

The superhero of the Polish People's Republic remains a special phenomenon, especially given the backdrop of Western mass culture of the second half of the 20th century. These days, such character is almost exotic, particularly from the point of view of the young audience – a character closely connected with the system that collapsed in 1989 and the accompanying ideology. He is, therefore, first of all a symbol of his era, but he still remains a 'living' hero, constantly rediscovered anew by audiences, who only use different accents when decoding meanings.

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## Summary

In my essay I try to depict the superheroes from Polish People's Republic and how they served as embodiments of the ideal vision of a proper citizen, as advocated by the communist authorities. I also trace the differences between them and their Western counterparts, such as Superman or Batman, based on the example of Andrzej Kondratiuk's *Hydro-puzzle*. First of all, the social order they upheld and tried to maintain was presented by propaganda as a total antithesis of the Western world – consumptionist, filled with depravation – the root of all imaginable evil. In spite of that, *Hydro-puzzle* was not only a grotesque parody of American superhero films but also a mocking critique of the communist reality.

**Keywords:** *Hydro-puzzle*, superhero, propaganda, Polish People's Republic, grotesque



## A HETEROGENEOUS CHARACTER – OPERA, CIRCUS AND KITSCH IN FILIP BAJON’S FILM *ARIA FOR AN ATHLETE*

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*Aria for an Athlete* (*Aria dla atlety*, 1979, dir. Filip Bajon) is the life story of Władysław Góralewicz – a wrestler who went from being a circus strongman fighting for the enjoyment of the audience to become a real champion. At the same time, Bajon uses his film to introduce the viewer to reflections on the meaning of art and its relationship with kitsch. The main character moves within two spectacles that remain polar opposites – the opera and the circus. While the status of the former is firmly established and allows it to be assigned to the sphere of elite art, the status of the latter is highly questionable – the circus is classified as a phenomenon from the area of mass culture. However, Bajon is not interested in the differences between these spectacles, but focuses primarily on the web of inseparable links between them. He does not establish a rigid borderline between the categories of kitsch and art, either, since – in his view – it often becomes blurred. The director notes that each form of art goes through a kitsch phase, and at the same time, something that comes from kitsch can become a starter for art.

Trying to take a closer look at the connections between the opera and the circus, as well as art and kitsch, I will focus primarily on the construction of the three protagonists of the film. I have the impression that their mutual relations reflect the complicated relations between the above-mentioned forms of spectacles, as well as between art and kitsch. Góralewicz, Max the clown and the tenor Baptisto Messalini are, on the one hand, carriers of the characteristics of the worlds to which they belong, and on the other

hand, elements of their construction tend towards a cultural space that is completely alien to them.

## DECLINE

In their analyses, the film's interpreters (Basiaga 1979; Kłoporowski 1979; Ochalski 1979; Zwaniecki 1979; Kornatowska 1990, Nurczyńska-Fidelska 2003) paid close attention to the way in which the filmmaker decided to create a picture of *fin de siècle*, the era of decadence. Bajon's artistic decisions are indeed worthy of interest in this aspect. However, what I would like to look at the beginning of this text is the issue of the decline – an important idea for the construction of the protagonists and also for the whole film, which we watch from the perspective of the end of life experience. The feeling of an approaching end is constitutive for the decadent worldview, but it also plays an important role in the relationship between art and kitsch.

The film begins with a scene in which Góralewicz writes a letter to the editor of a newspaper, wanting to interest him in the idea of handing over to the opera a collection of sculptures which are his reminders of the triumphs he enjoyed in the arenas around the world. It is 1937. Góralewicz is a very old man, summarizing his life at the end of it. The gift for the opera is an important element of his life balance, it becomes a form of paying homage to the art that has attracted him throughout his life. Góralewicz wants to transfer the collection during the benefit performance by tenor Baptisto Messalini – a person who had played an important (though not necessarily positive) role in the life of the wrestler, becoming a kind of embodiment of the opera. The benefit shows that the tenor – just like the wrestler – is at the end of his life and also reassuming his own achievements.

The decline and the end of life are the existential context for the key considerations contained in the film. However, it is not only the protagonists who are 'at the end'. In the interview with the newspaper editor, who, intrigued by the letter, comes to see Góralewicz, the wrestler twice repeats: 'Opera died tonight'. The power of this statement is all the stronger because it does not result directly from the circumstances of the ongoing conversation, but rather it is a reflection made in the context of reflections on the past. The editor's visit becomes the springboard for the wrestler's story about his life and the era in which he has lived. Artur Hutnikiewicz calls the complicated



time of *fin de siècle* an era clearly declining and predisposed to extinction (see: Hutnikiewicz 1994: 27). The scholar characterizes this period as, on the one hand, a time of great achievements and grandeur, but on the other, he also points out the emerging impotence, exhaustion and fatigue, causing this era 'to be questioned as a system, as a certain social, political and moral order, as a certain theosophy, concept, vision and program of life' (ibid.: 14). Teresa Walas (1986: 44), on the other hand, defining the characteristic elements of the decadent worldview, mentions the 'idea of the decline' as one of the main themes undertaken at the turn of the century and links the sense of decadence with a specifically understood evolutionism that combines creative and destructive elements and adds that this evolution must be 'fulfilled, and the fulfillment means a decline and an end towards which humanity, social formation, race and civilization are heading' (ibid.: 45). Perhaps Góralewicz noticed such exhaustion and fatigue, as well as the way to inevitable death, in the recollections of the time of his youth? By its very nature, opera – the source of the values that guided those times – died with illusions and youthful naivety.

Marek Basiaga (1979: 29) suggests that the sentence 'Opera died tonight' should be read literally. The researcher notes that 'As the culmination form of bourgeois culture, opera was giving way to other forms of spectacle. The words about its death are here, in a way, a literal formula for it leaving the first ranks; this role is taken over by the cinema.'

The moment when we meet Góralewicz – the beginning of 1937 – is also a decline. Soon a war will break out, the experience of which will re-value the entire culture and social relations in Europe. I have the impression that Bajon has included in his motion picture a premonition of the approaching catastrophe, the approaching end of the current world. The first frames of the film gradually reveal a chaotic room, as if deserted in a hurry. Off camera, we can hear the rattling of a typewriter and Góralewicz's voice reading his letter to the editor. The layer of image and sound designed in this way allows us to guess that the presented space is the editorial office of a newspaper. But why is the room deserted? Perhaps this is what it will look like in a few months, when only bomber air raids will be heard? The camera shows the view outside the window: a neon sign that reads 'Paradise' above the entrance. Is it the Cinema A cut. Now we approach a similar neon sign, but this time it is on the stage. Off camera, before we see the tenor, we can

hear the aria 'Pazzo son guardate' from act three of Giacomo Puccini's aria *Manon Lescaut*. The camera tilts down a bit and we see a singer dressed in a red dressing gown and a shaggy wig. The man is singing to an empty room. A group of dancers dressed in tailcoats appears behind his back. The only spectator of this scene is Góralewicz, who watches leaning against the door. 'Opera died tonight', he later sums up what he saw. 'It died, reduced to a vaudeville piece sung in a bathrobe in a cinema hall'.

This is the key statement, the formula proclaiming the twilight of the known shape of the world on all possible levels. It means the end of the era, the end of life, the death of high art, which, with its last breath, one last desperate aria, tries to win itself a tiny place in the space annexed by mass spectacles.

Andrzej Oseka writes about kitsch in the introduction to the Polish edition of the monograph by Abraham Moles (1978: 6): 'Thus, kitsch would be an imitation of art, its simplified, absurdly vulgarized copy. The downfall phase of any style would inevitably tend towards kitsch from the moment when newly created works are only a pale imitation of the prototypes'. Moles himself, trying to answer the question of what kitsch is, explains that this concept is related above all to the period in which a new style is born, a new aesthetic is created. Kitsch is combined with 'stylelessness', with a certain luxury built over traditional functions, and also with a certain, though not too great, dose of naivety' (Moles 1978: 13). The year 1900, which is the peak moment of the development of bourgeois culture, is important in Moles' reflections on the 'genesis of the kitsch system' (ibid.: 137).

The idea of decadence, clearly displayed in the *Aria for an Athlete*, gives the director the opportunity to introduce the category of kitsch to the artistic discourse in order to check how it is shaped in relation to art. It is also significant how strongly emphasized the beginning of the year 1900 was by the artist – on the first day of that year, Góralewicz will fight one of his fights and then, for the first time, will find delight in opera singing. At the level of meaning, it is the first important confrontation of art and kitsch – the opera aria with the wrestling fight. The day before, for the first time in his life, Góralewicz will face the new vision of the world, the 'kitsch system' in a brutal way. It is New Year's Eve 1899; the wrestler arrives in Charlottenburg. Góralewicz, dressed in a tailcoat, goes out into the streets of the city in search of the Adler hotel. His guide is an old man wearing

a light-colored top hat and a checked jacket. This outfit is reminiscent of a dandy, but at the same time the physiognomy of the old, toothless man appears at odds with the original association. The guide leads the wrestler into the night streets: ‘The world is ending, the comet is coming, the 19<sup>th</sup> century is almost over. (...) Follow me, I will show you... *Etwas wunderbarlich*. Only this night, at the Two Dragons, only for the mad, only for the mad’. In the distance, an animal tamer in a costume resembling an owl appears on the street and blindly snaps his whip. Out of the brothels, whose stairs run straight into the observed street, come prostitutes. Two wrestlers – one wearing an Austrian helmet and the other wearing a Chinese red cap – fight each other like roosters. Armed with a saber, a man in a white gala uniform grapples with a wrestler holding an axe in his hand. The whole bizarre scene is accompanied by the animal tamer’s laughter and poignant music. ‘I can’t look at it. Tell me when it’s over’, Góralewicz says to his guide.

In an interview with *Kino*, the director explains the scene:

(...) when I was making the sequence of Góralewicz’s coming to Charlottenburg, I knew that it would be a sequence about emptiness, about a man in an empty city, and I tried to guide it in such a way that things would become clear and expressive. Not because Góralewicz himself would talk about his alienation, but by showing a man who cannot cross the border of alienation that is created around him. I am not thinking here of metaphysics, but of the alienation of a man in a particular culture, which he does not know and which he cannot ‘domesticate’, accept, which he does not understand and, therefore, cannot enter into it (Mruklik 1979).

Both the old man and the world to which he introduces the wrestler are a lie, they try to be a parody of dandyism and the circus<sup>1</sup>. However, a parody is a form of repetition that requires ironic and critical distance, thanks to which differences and not similarities become visible<sup>2</sup>. The old man in the top hat takes himself seriously. He superficially uses elements that have become conventions, thus creating a kitsch space. The new world,

<sup>1</sup> The combination of these two aesthetics – dandyism and the circus – is not accidental: both are based on masks, so they remain at a symbolic level. See: Sznajderman 2014.

<sup>2</sup> I use this understanding of parody after: Hutcheon 1986.

the world of a new era, into which Góralewicz is introduced, is the world in which kitsch has spread.

The declining world created by Bajon is 'looked after' by two cinema artists. As Maria Kornatowska (1990: 223) notes:

The spiritual and artistic patrons of *Aria for an Athlete* were two masters of the screen spectacle, poets of the 'twilight of the idols' and decadence – Federico Fellini and Luchino Visconti. The opposition of two forms of the old performing arts: the plebeian circus (Fellini!) and the courtly melodrama (Visconti!) had a clear sense. Góralewicz was a wanderer, like all circus people, the opera building was a fixed point, standing like a distant home for a tired wanderer.

And at the same time:

Signs of crisis and disintegration in the womb of this effusive world are visible from the very beginning, from the first scenes. One could say that Góralewicz broke into a palace, which tempts and attracts with numerous beauties, but imperceptibly is collapsing into ruin (ibid.: 223).

## THE CIRCUS SPACE AND MAX THE CLOWN

Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska (2003), similarly to the above-mentioned Kornatowska, describes the space of the circus in *Aria for an Athlete* through the prism of Fellini's films. According to the researcher, Fellini's films are both a source of inspiration and a declaration of Bajon's artistic identity. The director introduces his protagonist to a circus filled with 'figures of clowns, acrobats, strongmen, 'freaks' created by the nature' (ibid.: 70). It is a travelling circus for the common people, the same as the viewer could observe, for example, in *La Strada*. Zampanò's strongman shows were based on ripping apart chains, the main attraction of Siedelmayer's circus, where Góralewicz goes, are the fake wrestler fights. The owner of the circus, in order to make a profit, enters makes a deal with bookies. According to Bogdan Danowicz, such manipulations were a common occurrence in circuses that performed in the provinces. Victory was not determined by skill, but by name, money or clear instructions from the owner. It is significant that the audience naively and stubbornly believed in the reality of the fights (Danowicz 1984). Siedelmayer is aware of this faith and that

is why he instructs Góralewicz: ‘You can’t finish the fight after *ein* minute because they have paid for ten minutes and they won’t want to lose bets after one minute’.

The circus director prepared a life story for each of his performers because ‘everyone must have their own story’. He tells these stories each time he enters a town – in this way he opens up his world to the viewers. What is striking about these stories is their absurdity and cultural incoherence. One can see in them a peculiarly transformed myth of the werewolf, which in Siedelmayer’s version is a woman. The smallest man in the world is stylized not so much to resemble the dwarfs painted by Diego Velázquez, but the artist himself, who makes a long journey like Odysseus. The king of Greenland brings to mind the biblical Samson, whose fate has strangely intertwined with that of Lot’s wife. The androgynous figure resembles a mythical centaur. According to the classification proposed by Paweł Beylin (1975), these figures, as well as their stories, are an example of market kitsch, which processes patterns derived from both mythology or broadly understood high culture, as well as from folklore for its own needs. The idea of creating ‘one’s own history’ comes from Romantic artists who started the act of creation from themselves. However, the Romantic artists wanted to be authentic, while Siedelmayer, both in setting up fights and in inventing stories, which he imposes on the circus performers as their own, perpetrates a fraud. Thus, he is a creator of art which Maria Poprzęcka (1998: 224) – transferring reflections on kitsch from the space of aesthetics to the ground of ethics – calls evil:

The evil inherent in this art is, therefore, falsehood above all else. It is a denial not of art, but of truth. Much is said about the fact that bad art serves to deceive people and that they want to be deceived. This is only right in relation to the compensatory function of art. No one though agrees to falsehood. Kitsch customers take it seriously and ‘really’. For them kitsch really is art.

In opposition to the circus spectacle, the rules of which are defined by kitsch, Bajon created a different kind of circus, closely connected with the everyday life of people who create it with their hard work, but also with poverty and longing for a better existence. This circus is described in Wolfram’s *Aria to the Evening Star* in act III of Richard Wagner’s opera

*Tannhäuser*, sung by Popov. Faithful to his friendship with Tannhäuser, Wolfram conceals his love for Elisabeth. The *Aria to the Evening Star* is the expression of his love and longing. Tannhäuser, on the other hand, despite the fact that his love for Elisabeth is mutual, cannot free himself from the sinful love for Venus. The possessive goddess, deaf to the knight's requests, does not want to free him from her influence. An analogous motif – the intertwining of longing for something great with the search for love and indifference of the goddess – is present in Baudelaire's *The Fool and Venus*, whose protagonist is a jester, and in *The Old Mountebank*. Just as Tannhäuser, entangled in impure love, meets with a general condemnation, so the jester, condemned *ex natura* for his lechery, is excluded from the *familia Christi* (Baudelaire 2008: 13).

Baudelaire's jester combines the figures of Tannhäuser and Wolfram, but by singing his song, Popov transfers their fate to that of his companions. Cyklop and Bolcio – Góralewicz's closest friends – wish to break free from the world of Siedelmayer and dream of starting their own circus. However, they are not given the opportunity to make this dream come true. The former dies, completely blind, in a shelter for the homeless, the latter loses his life as a result of another reckless bet. Their story reflects the fate of the mountebank – 'stooped, frail, decrepit, a ruin of a man' (ibid.: 2008) who, in complete loneliness, lives out his last days in extreme poverty. This tragic figure complements the picture of the circus as a source of entertainment, mass art, but also bad art, kitsch.

The wrestler is not a figure who is fundamentally connected with the circus. It is rather the clowns, tightrope walkers and animal tamers who make up the basic cast of the circus shows. So, too, must a clown appear in Bajon's film. The figure of Max the clown has no direct influence on the main narrative, but it is because he appears outside of the plot and the spectacle that he seems to me particularly significant and multidimensional – in a way, embodying the definition of the circus in Bajon's approach.

Max the Clown carries mystery and longing within him, just like Wolfram's song conceals mystery and longing. He carries sadness – completely opposed to his profession – like the jugglers from *Paris Spleen* or Gelsomin from *La Strada*. He silently watches and listens to Góralewicz's conversations with Abs, Bolcio and Cyklop. It is significant that Max does not resemble a circus clown. He is dressed as Pierrot – in a black skullcap and

a loose white outfit with red diamonds. According to Monika Sznajderman (2014: 25), the clown's costume is a symbolic element of the chaos from which the clown was created: 'The earliest model of a jester's costume stood out with a multitude of irregularly arranged patches of various colors. This trait of the outfit corresponded exactly to the original nature of clown and harlequin: trickster, amorphous, chaotic'. The researcher adds that when the jester's costume begins to be dominated by geometric and arranged shapes and his behavior takes on balance, subtlety and sophistication, then 'we are already witnessing the symbolic process of the emergence of the cosmos from chaos, the process of crystallization of the cosmic order; the sealing of the ongoing act of creation of the world in miniature' (ibid.: 26-27). Thus, the symbolic world that Max brings with him is a world of orderly chaos – a world from which culture and civilization emerge. However, the clown's creation is burdened with ambiguity: 'for it can mean creativity ascending to the heights of genius, expressed by the image so liked by the Romanticists of a tightrope walker jumping up into the sky, or creativity understood as negotiating with the powers of the underworld and opposing God's intentions' (ibid.: 34). In our case, creation rebelling against God is the art of evil – it is kitsch.

Max's appearance refers to *commedia dell'arte*, which, after all, has in its history tawdry fair periods and times of rubbing against kitsch. At the same time, as Margot Berthold (1991: 451) notes: '*Commedia dell'arte* is the source of a nutritious ferment. Whenever theatre, at any latitude, becomes mired, until it loses its breath, in a tangle of well-worn conventions, this timeless form of stage play always comes to its aid and has a reliable stimulating effect'. *Commedia dell'arte* is, as it were, the core of acting – improvised on the spot, deprived of literary rigor, it becomes a space of actor's freedom.

Improvised comedy was born in the 16th century and survived as a theatrical genre until the early 19th century. Max, whose father is Jean Gaspard Debureau, is brought to life in his new, changed form in the first half of the 19th century. He is thus the one who, on the one hand, says goodbye to his home environment (the world of *commedia dell'arte*) and, on the other hand, welcomes the upcoming new spectacle – film. The degree of improvisation – which the burlesque actor learned from an actor of Italian comedy – was similar in both shows (see: Skrzypczak 2009). And just like *commedia dell'arte*, the film had to rise from the level of tawdry kitsch.

Bajon reminds us of this stage, weaving into the picture a recurring motif of the cheap 'Paradise' neon sign, stylizing Góralewicz's narcotic visions like silent cinema, or introducing a scene with Breikopf making films solely because of the high chance of earning money. However, at a certain point in its history, the film transformed from cheap entertainment into a narrative spectacle, the primary aim of which is no longer to entertain and amaze the viewer, but to drag him into a diegesis.

Just like the spectacles Max helps to create – the circus, *commedia dell'arte*, film – his status is ambiguous. Karolina Charewicz-Jakubowska (2010: 45-46) characterizes the figure of the Pierrot thusly:

The Pierrot of the mid-19th century combines the features given to him by Debureau and the physiognomy of Gilles from paintings by Jean-Antoine Watteau, who was rediscovered at that time. The ephemeral figure is filled with innocence and dreamlike detachment from the surrounding world; the Pierrot figure becomes an alienated, peripheral figure, interpreted as the mask behind which the artist hides – 'a tired, melancholic soul, caught in the trap of the world of economic greed'. The loss of innocence is the price that Pierrot pays for entering the period of intensive industrialization and urbanization of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The mask remains, the face still freezes in mimic expressions, but they hide new emotions.

Behind this mask there is already a Pierrot of the *fin de siècle* with the characteristics of a drunkard and a sadist who deliberately breaks cultural, social and political norms. Max does not reach this border, he decides to remain in the 19th century. He tries to escape from the world – or, according to his nature, remains on its outskirts – and becomes a porter at the Adler Hotel – the very place where the opera world was having fun on New Year's Eve in 1899.

How does Góralewicz find himself in this dual world – of tawdriness and kitsch on the one hand, and of high culture on the other? The wrestler seems to function somewhere on the borderline. He does not want to agree to the arrangement proposed by the director. He wins a fixed fight and recites a fragment of Friedrich Schiller's *The Glove* to surprised spectators, shouting the line about a lion entering the arena. This fragment takes on a new meaning – the story of the knight and the lady and its unexpected ending is no longer the most important, the arena and the lion that will fight



in it are important. It is Góralewicz who is the lion and the recited verses of the romantic piece become a kind of announcement of his further fate. High art is supposed to define his existence.

The wrestler collects sculptures throughout his life. It is significant that these are sculptures of one figure – Atlas holding the Earth. However, their aesthetic value does not matter much. Bajon emphasized in an interview (Mruklik 1979) that it was important for him where his protagonist got the first of them – Góralewicz stole it from George Hitzler's luxury car. According to the director, this is a deed that testifies to the protagonist's attempt to cross the border of the world he did not belong to but which he missed. Hitzler himself calls it 'the great world': the world of women in black gowns, opium, strength and... opera. Thus, to some extent, it is also the world of high art. Góralewicz, longing for this world, trying to cross its border, rubs against kitsch – this is how his collecting passion could be seen<sup>3</sup>. The huge amount of the accumulated objects mercilessly exposes the protagonist's loneliness and futile attempts to prove himself that he can do everything.

This evidence and the desire for high art to shape his life brings him closer to that of a contemporary artist and leaves him on the borderline. Sznajderman (2014: 217), writing about the relations between clowns and artists, notes:

A contemporary artist, just like a romantic juggler-artist, becomes the master of his imaginary worlds – he becomes a magician, another God. However, while a divine being, he is also just a circus prestidigitator, who pulls his worlds like a rabbit from the sleeve in order to replace them with new ones, with the belief that the only sense of the world is the multiplication of all possible combinations.

## THE WORLD OF OPERA AND THE KITSCH OF THE TENOR BAPTISTO MESSALINI

'The opera died tonight,' said a girl on the first day of the year 1900 to the tenor Messalini sitting in the circus arena in Charlottenburg. The same words were repeated several decades later by Góralewicz. On that day, however,

<sup>3</sup> I am thinking here of the 'kitsch attitude' which A. Moles (1978: 40) distinguished among the types of relations between humans and their surrounding.

on the first of January 1900, the opera was born for him. He heard an opera aria for the first time and became enchanted by it<sup>4</sup>.

The group from Westman's circus announces the death of the opera in a symbolic moment – on the day of the end of the era, the end of the century<sup>5</sup>. Another thing is that the opera tenor sits together with them in the audience. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the moment when opera in the form of a musical drama achieved its goal. The achievements of Modest Mussorgsky, Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi brought this art to the top of its ability to influence the viewer: the content and musical form blend into one perfect work. Meanwhile, in the film, this great world of opera has come to enjoy such a low-brow spectacle as wrestling fights!

In reaction to the sentence uttered by the girl, Messalini stands up and starts singing the aria 'Vesti la giubba' from Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. Its protagonist, Canio, who is the head of a troupe of actors playing the *commedia dell'arte*, has just learned that his wife is cheating on him. Furious and desperate, however, he must prepare to play a comic role. The aria describes his situation: he is a clown, an actor who has to go on stage despite being tormented by his feelings. Canio in his aria is sincere. Messalini entered a game with those in the audience. His performance of the dramatic 'Ridi Pagliaccio' made it sound grotesque, false, it was calculated to achieve a certain calculated effect, a dilettante experience – like kitsch. But at the same time the aria sung in such a way – this specific aria – reveals his nature, the nature of a jester. All the more so because in his film, Bajon tells him to sing another aria: *La donna è mobile* from Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Rigoletto*, in which the title character is the duke's hideous jester, hated by everyone. Messalini wants to draw Cecylia's attention and seduce her with his singing. Just like in Westman's circus, here too, the tenor treats truth and art as objects – he imitates it, uses ready-made clichés, wants to produce an effect without any content inside.

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<sup>4</sup> The patron of this part of the film – as Nurczyńska-Fidelska (2003) rightly points out – is Visconti.

<sup>5</sup> Researchers do not agree on the date of the 'death of the opera'. Mladen Dolar (2002) shifts this moment a few years forward – to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – although he accepts the general assumption that the last great operas were created around 1900.

In the circus space, Siedelmayer is the bearer of kitsch attributes. The opera is marked with kitsch by Messalini – a poser, a show off who hangs his photographs on the wall, and for fear of hoarse voice ties wears a white fur stole around his neck; a clown that becomes the alter ego of Max, the good Pierrot. Considering this relation from the perspective of the jester's birth myth, we can see the process, characteristic for each artistic era, of returning to its origins in the duality of 'Max the clown – Messalini the singer'. As Sznajderman (2014: 26) writes:

As soon as the representatives of the next generation of jugglers gradually gained genteelness, and their costume – elegance and harmony, there immediately appeared next to them figures referring anew to the mythical first period through their costume, clumsiness, roughness and churlish behavior.

It is no coincidence that this tenor wears a white fur stole – the clown is a figure from the borderland of nature and nurture<sup>6</sup>, and while Max the Pierrot remains closer to nurture in his dual being, Messalini tends towards nature.

The arias sung by Messalini fit into my reflections on the spectacles, the birth of which was accompanied by a clown, a Pierrot. By incorporating this unclear figure into its structure, opera itself takes on an aesthetically ambiguous character. Opera – elite art – reveals its fascination with the circus – mass art – and flirts with it. This dualism is also visible in case of its reception. Mladen Dolar (2002) reminds us that contemptuous statements about the opera were particularly frequent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They created then almost a separate genre of literature. Opera works aroused extreme emotions – they became 'cursed works' only to enter the canon of the most outstanding cultural achievements years later. In the film, Bajon evokes two works that caused scandals on the day of their premieres. In the scene of the fight between Góralewicz and Abs, a musical motif from Verdi's *La Traviata* appears – the toast 'Libyamo, ne'lieti calici' from the beginning of the opera. The second piece is more subtly marked. In the scene where, after a fight in Westman's circus, Góralewicz ends up in

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<sup>6</sup> The remains of this dualism are, for example, rooster crests appearing in the clothes of clown figures.

the Adler Hotel, the protagonist browses through a book. This is *Salome*, the edition of Oscar Wilde's drama, with Aubrey Beardsley's drawings. When Richard Strauss saw the staging, he decided that the drama was an excellent material for an opera.

Just as Siedelmayer introduces the circus into the space of kitsch and Max the clown elevates it into the area of art, so does Messalini the tenor degenerate the beauty of the opera to the level of kitsch, while the one who liberates it is Góralewicz.

'Everyone talked about me being 'a mountain of meat', and somehow nobody noticed my good manners', says Góralewicz to the editor when his story comes to the preparation to go out in search of the Adler Hotel in Charlottenburg. Indeed, against the background of the poor dosshouse, his tailcoat looks chic. When Westman announces his fight with Władysław Prochaski, he refers to the wrestler as an 'artist-athlete'. The dualism of nature versus nurture is visible in the character of Góralewicz<sup>7</sup>. His physical strength and his profession belong to nature. The element of nurture, on the other hand, is his faith in the opera. The strong tension between the two elements can be seen in the fight against Prochaski. Góralewicz listens, enchanted, to the aria sung by Messalini, and at the same time fights, but he no longer wants a physical victory over his opponent, but to bring the fight to an end as soon as possible and be able to listen to the aria in peace. The 'mountain of meat' was defeated by the opera. The protagonist openly admits this love, as well as his faith in the opera, in his conversation with the editor. This feeling turns out to be stronger than the bitterness about being cheated on by his wife.

In the context of the description of Góralewicz's nature, as well as his relation to the opera, the last battle that Góralewicz fights with the older Abs is important. Abs fights very brutally, wrestling freestyle. Góralewicz, dressed in the tailcoat which he wore to the opera performance, adheres to classical rules. It is only when he is in danger of failure that he takes on the rules imposed by his opponent and wins. The tailcoat, combined with the brutal, violent clash with Abs emphasizes the dual nature of the film's protagonist. Góralewicz leaves the ring, straightening his ripped clothes.

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<sup>7</sup> The conflict of nature versus nurture, which in the case of Góralewicz will become even more pronounced during the fight against Abs, is characteristic of the decadent view of the world. See: Walas 1986: 63.

The picture is complemented by Cavaradossi's aria *E lucevan le stelle* from Puccini's *Tosca*. The protagonist sings, waiting for the execution that will take place in a moment. In his mind's eye, he sees his happy life to date and the figure of his beloved Tosca, a singer.

Góralewicz is similarly condemned – he broke the rules in which he believed, the element of nature won with the element of nurture. Ragged and bloody, he heads towards the opera. Suddenly, what he sees changes everything. Góralewicz walks through a large fountain located opposite the opera house, immerses himself in water and gazes at the Pegasus on top of the building. Off camera, we hear the last lines of the aria.

The opera cleansed Góralewicz, but he also allowed the opera to return to its rightful place, in a way. The element of nurture did not disappear in Góralewicz. The waters through which he passed and which cleansed him are the waters of Hippocrene, the legendary spring of the muses. Pegasus, who so caught his eye, is a symbol of immortality, but also of poetic inspiration. On the other hand, Góralewicz's faith in the opera meant that its embodiment was no longer the kitsch Messalini – the opera now took the form of Tosca.

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Beylin (1975: 214-215) notes that in terms of aesthetics, kitsch is subject to the same rules as art:

The informative role of art, which (...) underlies its aesthetic value, also affects the whole problem of kitsch. But kitsch is by no means a simple reversal of art. Its relation towards works considered valuable is much more complicated. Kitsch is not a simple reversal of art due to the fact that it belongs to the world of art itself. (...) Kitsch, if we disregard valuation, after all, performs all the functions of a work of art, for many viewers it is simply art<sup>8</sup>.

According to the scholar, kitsch is an important argument used in artistic disputes, and thus becomes an internal problem of art. It is, therefore, not possible to apply aesthetic criteria to separate the pure features of kitsch

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<sup>8</sup> Abraham Moles (1978: 13-14) sees the inseparability of art and kitsch in a similar way.

from the pure features of a work of art not being kitsch. What then remains for the artist?

Maria Kornatowska (1990: 225), analyzing Bajon's film, writes:

Bajon likes to juggle quotations, reminiscences and associations. Here are the wandering jugglers from *La Strada* (1954), here is the beach from *Death in Venice* (1971), a crazy banquet from *Sweet Life* (1960). Here is a unique setting of the camera, an unusual movement (the famous vertical shot from *Citizen Kane*, repeated by the director entering the professional ranks), here is an unparalleled composition of the frame, the concept of decoration, lighting, makeup. Fellini and Visconti created a pattern of brilliant kitsch on the screen. In Bajon's notion, it defines the essence of cinema, its soul – artificiality and kitsch.

The director himself, telling the story of his experience in making the film, admits that he always had a feeling of balancing on the edge. In his opinion, the poetics of kitsch is an element of art, as long as the artist sensitively avoids what is unacceptable in a work of art (Mruklik 1979). The director did not allow this to happen, if only because of the specific construction of the protagonists, whom he allowed to function both in the world of kitsch and in the world of art. Max the Clown ennobles the circus kitsch, but also brings with him the duality of the nature of *commedia dell'arte* and film. Góralewicz, the artist-wrestler, although he comes from the world of the circus, longs for the opera. Messalini the singer, who by virtue of his profession should be a creator of high art, liberates kitsch. Bearing traits of both of these worlds, the characters become multidimensional, ambiguous, create a space in which kitsch and art illuminate each other again. This allows us to find values that are not visible when we apply only aesthetic criteria specific to a given field of art (see: Poprzęcka 1998).

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## Summary

Analysing Filip Bajon's film *Aria for an Athlete*, the author focuses on the relationship between opera and circus, paying attention primarily to their interrelationship and not the differences. According to the author, the category common to both types of performance is kitsch. Any kind of art has in its history a phase of kitsch, yet what is derived from the kitsch can become the beginning of art. While describing the coexistence of opera and circus, the author makes a study of three characters in the film: Władysław Góralewicz, Max the clown and the tenor Baptisto Messalini. In her opinion,

these representatives of the world of circus and the opera, respectively, have a number of attributes that allow to assigning them the culture which is alien to them. Max, a circus clown, elevates kitsch, but also shows a duality of nature of both *commedia dell'arte* and film, Góralewicz, the artist-wrestler rooted in the circus, longs for the opera, the singer Messalini, whose profession is to create culture, brings kitsch to life.

**Keywords:** Filip Bajon, circus, clown, opera, wrestling, decadence, parody, kitsch



# ‘MY ART IS THE DAUGHTER OF BAROQUE AND PSYCHEDELIA’ – THE ART OF GUILLERMO PÉREZ-VILLALTA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PHENOMENON OF KITSCH

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‘Kitsch is a concept burdened with an exceptional load of normativity (as the most clear definition of an object demanding negative assessment) and situating itself in an aesthetic discourse in the position of the main adversary of high art’ – observes Jacek Rogucki (2004/2005: 38). In this article, however, I will attempt to prove that kitsch – or at least its elements – may become the material for works that are highly recognized and constitute a unique hallmark of a respected artist.

Guillermo Pérez-Villalta is almost completely unknown in art history in Poland<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it seems only reasonable to make his silhouette more familiar, as in his native country, Spain, he is highly valued and ranked among the most recognized contemporary painters. His work has been the subject of numerous studies and scholarly treatises (Kanelliadou 2004; Jurado 2014), articles in the press and even blog entries<sup>2</sup>. He is described as

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<sup>1</sup> His name appears only in the catalogue of the exhibition *Spanish Art of the 80's and 90's from the collection of the Queen Sophia National Art Centre*, presented in the Zachęta National Gallery of Art on 17 May – 1 July 2001; he is also one of the characters of the monograph by Weronika Bryl-Roman (2008), devoted to, as the title suggests, a broader artistic and cultural phenomenon.

<sup>2</sup> See: *¿Con la venia de mi ego?, La Metamorfosis de Pérez-Villalta expo CAC Málaga*, <http://jlmartinezhens.blogspot.com/2011/08/aunque-estoy-trabajando-todavia-estas.html> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

a defender of beauty<sup>3</sup>, an artist defying current trends in art<sup>4</sup>, giving art a new dimension (Palomo 2011); his passion for tradition and predisposition for ornamentation is emphasized<sup>5</sup>, his creative versatility is also stressed – after all, he is not only a painter, but also an architect, book illustrator<sup>6</sup>, sculptor and designer of theatrical scenery (Leahy 2008) – and his oeuvre is highly valued, to the extent that his works are sometimes compared to the paintings in the Sistine Chapel<sup>7</sup>.

Pérez-Villalta himself emphasizes his passion for all branches of art. In one of the interviews, he admits that he is more of an insatiable art lover than an artist. He declares: ‘I am an art devourer, I am interested in all artistic disciplines: painting as well as architecture, sculpture and craftsmanship’.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘[Pérez-Villalta is] the defender of beauty, understood as a bonus and profit, but also an element necessary for life’; *Las Metamorfosis y otras mitologías de Guillermo Pérez-Villalta*, <http://malakao.es/exposiciones/Las/Metamorfosis/y/otras/mitologias/de/Guillermo/Perez/Villalta/17062011/> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

<sup>4</sup> ‘Guillermo Pérez-Villalta likes to defy current trends. And it is not just a pose, simply, the idea of presenting a world in which rocailles and arabesques are beautiful, is close to him’ (Molina 2011).

<sup>5</sup> ‘He is an artist faithful to tradition, who also tends to use colourful, gaudy ornamentation and exuberance, which encourages optimism, although it may also arouse nostalgia for the ideal past’.

<http://malakao.es/exposiciones/Las/Metamorfosis/y/otras/mitologias/de/Guillermo/Perez/Villalta/17062011/> [accessed: 22.05.2019]. I will return to the issue of the artist’s fascination with ornamentation in the further part of the article.

<sup>6</sup> He illustrated, inter alia, the *Odyssey* and *Gulliver’s Travels*. *Viajes de Gulliver* was published by Galaxia Gutenberg in 2006 in Barcelona. Illustrations for the *Odyssey* were created in 1989 and arranged in two series: the first includes thirty-six drawings made with graphite, paints, watercolour and tempera on paper, the second includes twenty-three etchings of 34.5 × 24.5 cm in size. For more information on this subject, see: V. Kanelliadou, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> The Andalusian Sistine (*La Sixtina Andaluza*) refers to the frescoes created by Villalta on the ceiling of the Andalusian Pavilion (Pabellón de Andalucía) built for Expo 1992 in Seville. *Guillermo Pérez Villalta y los trabajos de Hércules en el Pabellón de Andalucía*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqTAPbMnflY> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

He even says, half-jokingly, that when visiting museums, he often pays more attention to works of art other than paintings, such as furniture or porcelain, and claims that when visiting the Vatican, we may discover more charm and beauty in the grotesque decorations than in the large paintings (Leahy 2008).

Pérez-Villalta is also the author of numerous publications. He writes the texts for the catalogues of his monographic exhibitions, he is also engaged in essayistic work, in which he discusses the process of creating a work of art, iconoclasm and the interdependence between *sacrum* and *profanum* (see: Pérez-Villalta 2006, 2006a, 2011).

A question therefore arises: is it possible to use the concept of kitsch when talking about such a versatile and recognized artist<sup>8</sup>? Undoubtedly, one of the answers may be the fact that the painter himself declares his fascination with the phenomenon of kitsch, referring, among other things, to Walt Disney’s work, from which he draws inspiration: ‘I owe a huge debt to Walt Disney’s films. Cartoons were a symbol of childhood for my generation. The aesthetics of the first animated drawings that we watched on television or saw reproduced in comic books has remained a part of our imagination’ (Ángeles 2008).

Another argument in favor of analyzing the Spanish artist’s work in terms of kitsch is the eclecticism of his works. Pérez-Villalta himself compares it to a salad with a new, alluring taste, more tempting than orthodoxy, which he considers as the opposite of imagination (see: *Arquitecturas Encontradas* 2009). Jaume Vidal Oliveras, on the other hand, while writing about Pérez-Villalta’s paintings, states: ‘His world is a collage combining various elements: antiquity and contemporaneity, great tradition and kitsch, decorativeness and creative thought’ (Oliveras 2004).

In order to demonstrate the link between Pérez-Villalta’s work and kitsch even more clearly, one should refer to the beginnings of the artist’s activity, which are closely related to the socio-cultural movement which appeared in Spain after the death of general Franco, the so-called *Madrid movida* (*movida madrileña*).

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<sup>8</sup> Sometimes, in the context of his work, the term ‘kamp’ is also used, however, I believe that in the case of Pérez-Villalta, it would be worth to limit its use to paintings that can be interpreted as a visual sign of the artist’s sexual orientation. Therefore, I do not refer to this aesthetic category in this article.

The *movida*, sometimes associated with the world of drugs<sup>9</sup>, has been analyzed in several very extensive publications in Spain (not to mention the shorter ones)<sup>10</sup>. The authors tried to define its timeframe and character from the perspective of approximately twenty years after it came to an end and analyze the achievements of this turbulent period, which is sometimes referred to as ‘the time of freedom’ (*tiempos de libertad*) or ‘the colorful years’ (*los años pintados*)<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore, I would like to briefly introduce this socio-cultural movement, with a particular emphasis on the figure of Guillermo Pérez-Villalta.

It is generally accepted that the *movida* began around the mid-1970s and came to a gradual end at the end of the 1980s<sup>12</sup>, although some artists and critics who discuss the movement claim it began in the late 1970s, referring, for example, to the changes taking place in poetry and music or the quasi-performative activity of Pedro Almodóvar<sup>13</sup>. Other researchers point out that the echoes of the *movida* were still visible in 1992 during the events which took place in connection with the World Exhibition in Seville, the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America and the Olympic Games in Barcelona (*La Movida* 2007). Yet providing

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. the opinions of the participants of the movement – Palomes Chamorro and Albert García Alixa (*La Movida* 2007: 20). Pérez-Villalta, who has probably tried various drugs himself, writes about the use of drugs by the *movida* artists, but he sees them as the reason of failure of some of his friends. See: Gallero 1991: 308-309.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the items cited in earlier footnotes, see, inter alia, R. Cervera 2002; Bryl-Roman 2008.

<sup>11</sup> The terms come from the titles of exhibitions that presented the art of that period, respectively: *Tiempos de libertad* (2005) and: *Los años pintados* (2001).

<sup>12</sup> For example, Pedro Almodóvar believes that the term ‘*movida*’ should only cover the years 1977-1982 (see: Bryl-Roman 2008: 17-18). On the other hand, Héctor Fouce Rodríguez, a researcher of subcultures, is of the opinion that the *movida* presented the features of a subculture only in the years 1977-1983, while 1983 marks a caesura when the movement transformed from an underground movement into an open one, thus beginning the era of its decadence. Since 1985, the activities of the *movida* artists have been clearly commercialised. What is more, left-wing politicians try to use the movement for their own purposes.

<sup>13</sup> These are the dates proposed by e.g. Fernando Huici (*La Movida* 2007).

the accurate timeframe of this movement seems impossible, as individual artists initiated and completed their artistic ventures at different times<sup>14</sup>.

Apart from Pérez-Villalta, the *movida* was co-created by such artists as Pedro Almodóvar<sup>15</sup>, the guitarist and vocalist of a punk-dadaist group Kaka de Luxe, Olvido Gara (Alaska), photographers Barbara Allende (Ouka Leele), Albert García Alix, Miguel Trillo and Pablo Pérez Minguez, creator of comic books and painter Carlos Sánchez Pérez (Ceesepe), painter José Morera Ortiz (El Hortelano), Enrique Naya and Juan Carrero (Costus group), the TV journalist Paloma Chamorro<sup>16</sup> and many others<sup>17</sup>.

The catalogue of the exhibition *Movida, 20 years later*, which, by the way, was opened with the presentation of one of the most famous paintings by Villalta – *Grupo de personas en un atrio o la alegoría del arte y la vida o del presente y el futuro*<sup>18</sup> – includes the opinions of people directly involved in the cultural ferment in Madrid, as well as those who could observe it at that time. Analyzing these statements it is clear that the time of the *movida* was a period of spontaneous artistic creation of an inter- and multidisciplinary character, a time of spontaneous formation of bands that grouped various artists in order to carry out individual projects, a time when the political situation was conducive to unrestricted freedom of behavior, while at the same time freeing oneself from the need to support any specific ideology.

<sup>14</sup> Blanca Sanchez states: 'Fechar La Movida e casi imposible' (*La Movida* 2007: 42).

<sup>15</sup> Both artists often cooperated at that time. Almodóvar currently owns several Villalta's paintings, e.g.: *Danae recibia la lluvia de oro*, *Dionisos encuentra a Ariadna en Naxos* and *Ninfa y Satiro*.

<sup>16</sup> Considered a charismatic journalist, Chamorro ran a series of programmes entitled 'La Edad de Oro' ('The Golden Age') from 1983, to which she invited the leading representatives of the *movida*. Her frequent guest was also Guillermo Pérez-Villalta. For more information on Paloma Chamorro's activities, see: *La Movida* 2007; Gallero 1991; Bryl-Roman 2008.

<sup>17</sup> In the above mentioned monograph *Sólo se vive una vez*, the author conducted interviews with several dozen people who were, to a varying extent, connected with the movement. See: Gallero 1991.

<sup>18</sup> I discuss this painting in more detail in the following part of the article.

Above all, however, it was a time of laughter and fun, treated as an absolute priority.

In this context, the statement by Blanca Sanchez seems to be particularly significant:

The main features of the *movida* were: spontaneity, a desire for artistic expression – regardless of whether it paid off or not, whether it had a future and whether it served anything – and freedom, which until then had not existed and had seemed impossible. Moreover, individualism, which manifested itself in a political situation that allowed us to experience previously unknown freedom. Above all, the *movida* was characterized by interdisciplinarity, the interpenetration of various fields of culture, which fascinated everyone. Some were interested in music, others in comics, fashion, exhibitions or jewellery. And not only did we have everything at our fingertips – we created it. We reached out to ugliness and kitsch, had fun on the Mediterranean Sea and went to London and New York, discovering a bigger and more interesting world. And we laughed, laughed, laughed (*La Movida* 2007: 19-20).

Pérez-Villalta himself recalls these years in the following way: ‘In Madrid, which at the beginning of the 1970s was a city of cultural misery, there appeared a small group of people who decided to create their own artistic environment and later consolidated themselves around the Amadís Gallery’ (Gallero 1991: 310). Mercedes Buades Lallemand recalls an anecdote about how Pérez-Villalta painted a three-by-four-meter swimming pool and invited thirty artists and their friends to pretend to be swimming in it. Lallemand describes this as a spontaneous and wonderful happening (*La Movida* 2007: 40).

There is no doubt that the event described above (as well as the films by Almodóvar<sup>19</sup> or Ouka Leele’s colorful photographs of people in wigs

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<sup>19</sup> Ewelina Mędrala (2005) writes about Almodóvar’s fascination with kitsch: ‘We have no doubt that films such as *Robocop* or *Terminator* are examples of lowbrow, kitschy films, which do not convey any message at all, except for showing us a possible attack of cyborgs or other hybrids of technology on ordinary mortals. However, would we be inclined to attach the kitsch stereotype to e.g. films by the famous Almodóvar? Many of us associate his work with very good or even the best kind of cinematography... And yet. Almost every film by this director is based on the template of a melodrama, a melodrama with the main

made of lemons, syringes and gypsum turtles) can be interpreted as kitsch in the categories proposed by Abraham Moles (1978). In these works and activities one can easily notice the desire for fun, pastiche, eclecticism, lack of moderation or the use of various elements in a way incompatible with their intended purpose. At the same time, it is difficult not to feel a certain fascination when dealing with them – not only as forms of a game with the recipient, but also as testimonies of a specific psychological and cultural reaction that took place in Spain after the fall of the extreme right-wing dictatorship of Franco.

Although the *movida* was a musical movement at its source, the visual arts were also of great importance for the movement as a whole. Pérez-Villalta himself stresses the importance of music – especially pop music – for his work (Gallero 1991: 307), saying that it has made a major contribution to contemporary culture as a whole, which has not, however, been adequately reflected in fine arts (*Procesos* 2007: 17).

Pérez-Villalta’s paintings from the 1970s were also influenced by music that was popular in Madrid at that time. As Marcin Lachowski (2005: 177) observes: ‘The avant-garde is realized through participation in reality, and conditioned by a specific opening of the work of art to the present day’. It is therefore no surprise that Fernando Francés concluded that Pérez-Villalta achieved this openness by situating his art in the space between pop art and figuration, a space that tried to become a mirror for a generation of ‘great artistic convulsions’ (*Tiempos de libertad* 2005: 14).

The dependence of Pérez-Villalta’s work on pop music and aesthetics is most clearly visible in two of his paintings, considered to be a kind of painting document: *A Group of People in an Atrium or an Allegory of Art and Life or Present and Future* (*Grupo de personas en un atrio o la alegoría del arte y la vida o del presente y el futuro*) from 1975<sup>20</sup> and *The Stage, Characters*

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role of the mother. Almodóvar does not hide his fascination with this genre, he is well aware that this is a kind of kitsch. He also knows that in the majority of his best-known films he has used well-known tricks, which in combination with his undoubted genius brought him fame and money, which seems most important in the era of consumerism’.

<sup>20</sup> Acrylic on canvas, dimensions: 193 x 373 cm, Museo de Reina Sofia, Madryt.

*Leaving a Rock Concert (Escena, personajes en la salida de un concierto rock)* from 1979<sup>21</sup>.

The first painting is a group portrait of Pérez-Villalta's friends from Madrid, shaped in the form of a triptych, including a self-portrait of the artist. The painting presents, among others: Luis Gordillo, Carlos Alcolea, Juan Antonio Aguirre, Luis Pérez-Minguez, Mercedes Buades, Chema Cobo and Fernando Huici. Each of the characters is clearly defined by the position occupied, the studied gestures and the numerous symbolic references to the type of artistic activity practiced, captured on canvas<sup>22</sup>.

This is how Ignacio Gómez de Liaño described the painting:

The characters seem to be withdrawn or smiling politely, or they allow themselves to throw careless glances at their colleagues or valuable objects in their surroundings. They pose for posterity, but also in front of the others. All of them, united by the magic of art, found themselves under the cover of a simple, light, capricious and colorful building, wonderfully and charmingly opening up to the magnificent tropical gardens. Among them is also the artist himself. A subtle self-portrait depicts him sitting in a comfortable pose, with his chin reflexively resting on his hand, near a waterfall and a pot with magnificent flowers, stubbornly staring at the viewer or into some imaginary mirror in which the image of the people around him is reflected (I. Gómez de Liaño, *Guillermo Pérez-Villalta. Exposiciones*, cited after: Bryl-Roman 2008: 142).

The painting strikes the viewer with the static, almost hieratic posing of figures, each of whom, as it seems, 'had his own *movida*' by then, although the work was to be a testimony to the existence of a certain artistic community, captured in one, unique moment, which could turn into an important historical moment<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Acrylic on canvas, dimensions : 250 x 180 cm, Museo de Reina Sofia, Madryt, <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/escena-personajes-salida-concierto-rock> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://museoreinasofia.es> [accessed: 14.05.2019].

<sup>23</sup> However, it should be noted that this sense of individuality of each of the persons depicted could already have accompanied Pérez-Villalta at that time, as in an interview with José Luis Gallero (1991: 56) he mentioned, with some



The second of the discussed paintings is different both in style and expression. It depicts the characters from the musical world of the *movida*, with whom the painter was closely related. These include, among others: Alaska, Bernardo Bonizzi, Manolo Campoamor, Carlos Berlanga and Herminio Molero. It is believed that this large-format work was inspired by a concert at the Ateneo Club in Madrid, which Perez-Villalta attended, during which Kaka de Luxe, the Zombies and Zumbettes performed (Gallero 1991: 376). According to Fernando Huici, this painting is the most vivid and best known testimony to Pérez-Villalta’s fascination with psychedelia and pop music, which the critic perceives as ‘generational factors’ shaping the perception of reality in that era (*La Movida* 2007: 40).

In contrast to the first of the discussed paintings, the *Stage...* strikes the viewer with vivid movements of the characters, who are bent in slightly unnatural positions. It also draws attention to the fact that – as opposed to the people depicted in the atrium – these characters enter into various interaction with each other, touching each other and directing their gaze towards one another.

Another element that distinguishes the two paintings is the way in which the architecture is presented. The atrium in the *Group of People...* is very clear in terms of the arrangement of horizontal and vertical lines, and is also saturated with light. The urban alley in the *Stage...* seems somewhat disconcerting due to the crossing of diagonal lines, a clearly disturbed perspective and the crowding of buildings pushing against each other, which trap the figures in a peculiar urban labyrinth. Instead of static, we have dynamism – both in the sphere of portrait and architectural background, which seems to force the characters to take twisted positions and make violent movements.

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regret: ‘We were never a group that could be promoted outside. All efforts made to this end were done in vain, because everyone wanted to promote themselves. We were not a group, because the shadow of someone else could dim an individual’s glow. Never before was the sky so thirsty for stars, so the only thing we should have done was to paint, mature and support each other. It’s probably stupid, but I still think that with a little more friendship everything would have been better and much more joyful’.

The expression of this painting was compared with the impact of the paintings by Pontormo and Ross Fiorentino (see: Gallero 1991). The painter himself, while writing about his impressions from the concert, which inspired the creation of the above mentioned work, reminisced: 'The guitar reminded me of the figures painted by Fiorentino, while the group of girls passing by was like a *figura serpentinata* shown in a bold abstract. Bodies in tight costumes, as if they were taken out from the *Deposition* by Pontormo, were moving along a small stage' (*La Movida* 2007: 188).

This account of impressions should not come as a surprise, since – as Alonso Molina observes – Pérez-Villalta's work was characterized in the 1970s by a predisposition to use the attainment of Mannerism, treated as a way of expanding and enriching the formal means of expression. Of all the figurative painters in Madrid, Pérez-Villalta showed the greatest tendency to use quotations, paraphrases and elements taken from various traditions, creating a permanent amalgam with *capriccio* features and revealing the painter's passion for excess and weirdness. There is also humor, which leads to initiating games with the recipient, as well as a tendency to raise the rank of kitsch and to reach for various elements of popular culture (see: *Tiempos de libertad* 2005).

Also in recent years the aesthetics of kitsch has remained close to Pérez-Villalta. This is manifested, inter alia, in his love of ornamentation from various traditions. First of all, a fascination with Arabian culture in the form in which it is observed on the Iberian Peninsula – after all, Villalta was born in Tarifa, in Andalusia, and spent his childhood in La Linea de la Concepción in the province of Cadiz and in Malaga. The fact that during the first years of his life he was surrounded by objects of architecture and art being a testimony to the cultural encounter between East and West, strongly influenced his perception of ornamentation. In an interview, he once said that ornamentation attracted him since early childhood and added that the need for decorativeness, which he feels strongly about, is related to his childhood experience of playing on floors covered with geometrically patterned tiles and long hours of gazing at friezes arranged from *azulejos*<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> See: Guillermo Pérez-Villalta „Soy un pintor geométrico, lo único, es que todo revestido”, <http://myartdiary.com/guillermo-perez-villalta>

Pérez-Villalta is also fascinated by Italian grotesque – its hybrid characters, flaccid and winding lines and a wide range of colours. He also declares himself to be a follower and continuator of the Mannerist tradition with his passion for sophisticated aesthetics.

All the above elements, combined with a fascination with Disney style animated films, are present in his paintings created in 2006, described by the artist himself as ‘imaginary landscapes with stories’ (*paisajes imaginarios con historias*). I would like to focus on four of them: *Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert*<sup>25</sup>, *Escape to Egypt*, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*<sup>26</sup> and *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*. They form pairs because two of them depict scenes that take place during the day, and two are nocturnes.

The painting *Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert* evokes associations with Cappadocia from tourist brochures, although the opalescent green-yellow balls placed on top of the rocks (or dunes) are undoubtedly fantastic. Above the sand-yellow landscape, the artist stretches a peach-red sky with sharp, thin lines reflecting slim and curved woody ferns. The huge disproportion in size between people and plants is noteworthy – Hagar is smaller than the leaf of a giant tree.

*The Escape to Egypt* includes signs which allow to associate the landscape presented in the painting with Egypt – in the background there are buildings resembling step pyramids, but they seem unfinished or ruined and abandoned. In the yellow-brown desert we see the carefully painted silhouettes of Joseph and Mary and Jesus riding on the donkey. The horizon line has been placed very low, about one-sixth of the height of the painting, counting from the lower edge. The rest of the space is occupied by the sky, playing with violets, roses, blues and mint greenery, against the background of which the artist drew a fantastic, grotesque-rocaille ornament. Its sophisticated, thin lines are crowned with flaccid palms, flowers reminiscent

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-cac-malaga-pintor-arte-metamorfosis/ [accessed: 22.05.2019]. Pérez-Villalta also speaks extensively on the subject of in the article *Artifice* in the magazine „Arte y Parte” (2006, No. 63).

<sup>25</sup> <http://cacmalaga.eu/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Agar-e-Ismael-en-el-desierto.jpg> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.superstock.com/stock-photography/guillermo%20perez-Villalta#id=12450593> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

of brugmansias (commonly known as angel's trumpets) and shapes bent like late gothic flames, which may evoke associations with exotic lamps.

The other two paintings – *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* and *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* – have a lot in common. First of all, they are nocturnes and depict topics iconographically related, though opposite in terms of content. Both depict a strong source of artificial light – in the first painting, the light falls from a pear-shaped and conically topped open tent. This tent brings to mind exotic fairy tales about fabulously rich and mysterious rulers, which in some simplification could refer to Holofernes. In the second painting, the almost monochromatic scene, rendered in various shades of navy and lighter tone of blue, is brightened up – and contrasted with – an intensely glowing golden lamp, which can be purchased in any Arabian marketplace.

With respect to the visual plane, the two landscapes are similar in the accuracy and great precision in rendering the silhouettes of the women and the heads of the men they are holding. This detail in presenting the image of a small (eight or ten centimeters high) human figure is contrasted with the decorative vegetation – definitely simplified and schematic. With some effort, it might be possible to identify some plants by having a closer look at their leaves as e.g. ferns, alocasia, codiaeum or lupins, but it seems that their picturesque shapes and the possibility to add a certain mysteriousness to the presented scene was most important for the artist.

What is most striking, however, is the feeling that these landscapes seem multi-layered – because some of their elements give the impression of being added to the painting onto already fully formed scenes. For example, in the painting presenting Judith, the palm trees and other plants look like a cut-out applied to the painting. The viewer of the painting with Salome, on the other hand, feels as if he were stuck in a cave, looking outside, or as if he had put an irregularly and fantastically shaped frame in a deep purple shade of violet onto the painting. In this arrangement, the lamp is closest to the viewer and looks like a bijou hanging from the edge of the painting.

The above measures resemble playing with contemporary digital photography, where you can insert a previously prepared frame, a decorative element or a comic bubble with an inscription onto the photo. Such an association would easily fit into the aesthetics of kitsch, the fascination with which Pérez-Villalta openly admits, contrasting it – or perhaps

juxtaposing it – with the elegance of drawing and passion for ancient literary classics<sup>27</sup>.

In the light of the above analyses, it is worth considering whether Pérez-Villalta’s work is important and significant, or maybe just a postmodern effective collage, and the artist himself no-one else but an opportunist, taking advantage of pale and plebeian tastes? According to Hermann Broch: ‘The kitsch system can be deceptively reminiscent of art, especially if it is used by such masters as Wagner, French playwrights like Sardou, or to take an example from painting, like Dalí’ (Broch 1998: 115)<sup>28</sup>. Developing Broch’s thought, Danuta Mikeska (2008: 33) adds: ‘Kitsch is produced by ‘radical esthetics’ seeking a beautiful effect, but not permanent, pure beauty, which appears only where the artist’s work is subordinated to the superior, ethical idea of good – in the Platonic sense. While kitsch requires its followers: ‘to work beautifully’ (in the sense: to achieve the effect), art prioritises the ethical slogan: ‘work for the sake of good’. Pérez-Villalta is often described as a ‘painter of beauty’ (*el pintor de la belleza*), and he himself points to this category as one of the most important in his work

At the same time, in one of the interviews, he mentions that he deeply regrets the fact that the contemporary painter is no longer a thinker and cannot be attributed the position of a priest – in the sense of a priest of art, but also someone who, if only by creating religious paintings, has contact with transcendence<sup>29</sup>. Should this regret be seen as a calculated effect, or can it be interpreted as an attempt to look for a deeper artistic experience?

The art of Guillermo Pérez-Villalta is undoubtedly ‘the daughter of Baroque and psychedelicism’ (Garcia 2008), but also the effect of intellectual reflection, perfect composition and complex symbolism. Is it a kitsch-like

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<sup>27</sup> ‘For Pérez-Villalta, the use of kitsch ‘bears the traces of provocation’, but it is in this type of aesthetics that the two planes of his artistic inspirations meet – the world of Walt Disney’s films and the work of Salvador Dalí’ (Oliveras 2004).

<sup>28</sup> The reference to Salvador Dalí’s work at this point is very symptomatic, as Pérez-Villalta admits that the language of his work is deeply connected with surrealism and speaks of Dalí as a great artist, one of those whose paintings give him the most aesthetic joy (see: Ángeles 2008).

<sup>29</sup> *Entrevista a Guillermo Pérez-Villalta, Pinturas 2008-2010*, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=6O89q3tZNsw> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

radical aestheticism or a surrealist phantasm of cold Mannerism, or maybe it is simply aimed at confronting the achievements of the great masters, going beyond the boundaries of the category of popular art – a deeply personal creativity? I do not undertake to resolve this issue.

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## Summary

The aim of this paper is to present the silhouette of Guillermo Pérez-Villalta, one of the most important contemporary artists in Spain, in the context of the idea of kitsch. The key question for one who would like to study Pérez-Villalta's paintings is the problem of the coexistence of the negatively regarded component of kitsch and the real respect for the painter who is one of the most important figures of art in his country. What may seem even more peculiar is the fact that Pérez-Villalta himself declares a really positive attitude to kitsch – he even talks about his fascination with the phenomenon. This fascination may have its origins in the ideas represented by the socio-cultural movement from the 1970s-1980s – *la movida madrileña*. Pérez-Villalta was one of the co-founders of this movement. The *movida* was all about fun, laughter, colours and kitsch. Villalta painted two very important pictures at that time – *Grupo de personas en un atrio o la alegoría del arte y la vida o del presente y el futuro* (1975) and *Escena, personajes en la salida de un concierto rock* (1979), trying to depict the relationships between the members of the *movida* movement. Even now it is easy to find elements of kitsch in Pérez-Villalta's paintings which does not in any way deny his originality and high position among contemporary Spanish most venerated artists.

**Keywords:** kitsch, Guillermo Pérez-Villalta, contemporary art, Spanish art, *movida madrileña*, landscape



## NOTES ON KITSCH IN ARCHITECTURE. AN ILLUSION OR AN ERSATZ OF HAPPINESS?

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‘Architecture is filled with kitsch!’ – claimed Kurt W. Forster, an expert and a critic of architecture in an interview I conducted with him (Stec 2005: 75). At that time, eleven years ago, the notion of kitsch appeared in architecture journals predominantly in relation to controversial projects – a variety of amusement parks and shopping malls. Earlier still, in the 1980s and 1990s in Poland, the subject was considered in the context of postmodern architecture. Nowadays, the concept of kitsch is mostly present in relation to the issue of authenticity in architecture. It can, therefore, be asserted that kitsch is one more term in the vocabulary of architectural criticism and that from time to time it recurs in discussions – in its subsequent interpretations – along with phenomena it is allegedly typical of. Originally, however, kitsch did not concern architecture at all.

It is a known fact that the term ‘kitsch’ was introduced circa 1870 in the milieu of Munich painters to refer to paintings they considered tacky and worthless. Those paintings had their authors and buyers behind them, i.e. real people with their attitudes, it was only later that the notion of kitsch migrated to other fields of artistic activity subsequently travelling to aesthetics, philosophy and psychology. Such career of sorts of the notion indicates that the phenomenon has since the moment of its recognition engrossed art and film critics, psychologists and the artists themselves, provoking them to provide their respective reinterpretations of it. Nevertheless, the original meaning of the work ‘kitsch’ seems to have prevailed, while all the various philosophical accounts and artistic interpretations of kitsch do not as much alter its meaning, as specify the range of phenomena it encompasses, identifying various causes of its origination, mechanisms of its operation, as

well as the effect it has on the life of people, society and art, while in the case of architecture – also on the architectural, urban and landscape space.

At this juncture, a question arises whether the concept of architectural kitsch should be distinguished as a separate entity or whether it suffices to merely locate it within the wider discourse on kitsch and its various manifestations throughout human life and activity? Certainly, the general profile of kitsch may also be applied within architecture. However, it is not difficult to observe that the field-specific kitsch of architecture has to be a reflection of the physical, temporary and spatial scale of architectural creations in how they relate to the physical dimensions of a human body and the lifespan of human life, as well as directly to the practical function of architecture itself. The scale of a work of architecture differs from that of a painting, sculpture, piece of literature or music. The notion of kitsch, at the moment of its origination, concerned objects of much smaller size than an average architectural object and it is still predominantly used for describing trinkets, artifacts, cheap landscape art, something that can easily be put away to a wardrobe and hence removed from view. The physical dimension of architecture makes this impossible, what is more – it entails a large scale of psychological, cultural and sociological consequences for its users and similar influence on its surroundings.

## ILLUSION

In my reflections on kitsch in architecture, I would like to refer to one more opinion presented by K.W. Forster in the already cited interview; one in which he described kitsch as an illusion, thus touching upon the contemporarily discussed issue of authenticity. Forster declared:

In my opinion this notion [kitsch – B.S.] refers to the illusion that everything is great and lovely. It involves pretending that the world is like a fairy-tale, that a wife loves her husband and vice versa, that the children are well-behaved and otherwise marvelous and that such idyll exists in everyday life, whereas it simply is not true. As a desire or an illusion, such thinking can be easily transferred into an architectural form, full of dreaminess and naïveté. Such buildings are created either by or for people who do not sport the courage to look at the world realistically and see it maturely for what it really is in its complexity accessible for our perception (ibid.: 75).

It can, therefore, be noted that Forster refers to kitsch regarded as the attitude a person has towards reality, a transpiring allusion to the thought of Theodor Adorno (1972). Thus, kitsch becomes inseparable from human valuation and does not exist in itself, outside the experienced consciousness and evaluations made by people, so – for instance – nature is devoid of it. None of the natural phenomena and elements constitute kitsch and that includes sunsets and deer in rut; they may, however, become kitsch when they become a subject of human creations or emotions, i.e. when they correspond to a specific human attitude towards them.

Deriving the concept of kitsch in architecture from a psychological and not aesthetic phenomenon (as the origin of the notion would suggest), Forster emphasizes the reason for its existence. Thereby, he notes that an evaluative assessment of a work architecture as kitsch requires an insight into the wider context of its operation: the attitude and motivation of the ordering party, the life situation of its users, its location, purpose, architectural functionality, etc. As the reason for kitsch in architecture, he identifies the illusion inherent in the naive, wishful thinking of people, an illusion which is subsequently embodied in the form of a building – devoid of any reference to the real life of its users and the real implications of its location. These may comprise borrowings from the favorite historic architectural style of the investor or from a different location, presumably of more allure than the local space might hold. As a result of such illusion, the building created ends up being seen as unauthentic and incongruous with its spatial and temporal surroundings. The question remains though if such building has to be considered kitsch?

## ARCHITECTURAL SCALE OF ILLUSION

A reflection on evaluative assessment of an architectural work as kitsch with illusion as the basic criterion leads one to the aforementioned issue of the architectural scale, as well as to the functionality of architecture, i.e. its primary function. Due to the already indicated characteristics and purposes of architecture, no illusion can supplant the real fulfilment of the basic necessities<sup>1</sup> of the users; therefore, instances of it prove ephemeral (seen

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<sup>1</sup> Włodzimierz Szewczuk (434: 1998) defines a necessity (both generally and in relation to each individual) as ‘a state emerging when the optimum living conditions

either as the rationale behind its specific form or as a mirage of usability within the field of ‘playfulness’). Consolidation of an illusion within its temporal and physical surroundings, if at all attainable, leads to a situation when a work of architecture constitutes a replica of reality and is unable to meet the users’ needs.

It is easy to define kitsch as illusion when it occurs outside of architecture; most of all due to the short-term influence it exerts over people. As the notion originally pertained most of all to objects in the size of a small painting, their relation with people was limited both spatially and temporally. To this day, such items, even of a relatively large size, accompany a person only during the moment they are being perceived. They do not touch a person’s real needs and constitute a mere addition to the realities of their existence, within the domain of dreams and desires. Were we to extend the notion of kitsch to cover human behavior, it would be noticeable that the sense of affectation (classified as kitsch by Hermann Broch [1969]), or ‘one’s getting emotional about one’s getting emotional’ (considered kitsch by Ludwig Geisz [cf. Baumann 2005]) only lasts for an instant. In the scale which could be referred to as the traditional temporal scale of kitsch, its role consists of that very illusory creation – the pretence, an attempt to deceive oneself and others, the mix up of the real with the unreal. It is of no major significance whether such kitsch-illusion is created and perceived as a joke or as a serious development as it does not enter the domain of a person’s real needs and does not pledge to fulfill them. It constitutes kitsch and its role as such is indeed illusion.

Similar is the basis of existence for the kitsch-illusion in architecture, one that could be referred to as (unconscious or programmed) kitsch in architecture, seen in buildings which people visit only occasionally and for periods of time short enough for the buildings not to enter into the domain of basic necessities of life. The spatial scale of architecture renders users of such buildings subjects to illusory forms, which they usually accept, much like they would a stage setting for a theatrical performance in which they would be both actors and spectators at the same time. However, even assuming the role of actors, they would notice that the illusion is separate from

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of an organism are disrupted, thereby initiating its activity directed at achieving something that more or less reverts the conditions to the previous optimum’.

reality, isolated from it as a mere domain of illusion. It may stimulate their behavior and sensations for a short moment, it may lead to the experience of a 'false *catharsis*', described by Adorno (1972), or to the state of being oblivious to reality, obstinately grey and problem-ridden. Such a kitsch-illusion may assume the scale of a building (Colosseo in Europa-Park, arch. Svenja Reich, Chemnitz 2004), or of a park (Piazza d'Italia, arch. Charles Moore, New Orleans 1974), or even of an entire city (Las Vegas). In terms of its influence on people, thus understood kitsch in architecture does not differ from its instances in painting or sculpture, as it functions within the temporal scale typical for the latter disciplines (i.e. occasional and temporary). However, it is different in terms of its impact on the landscape – it becomes established as a replica, i.e. kitsch of an architectural scale.

I believe that in what he said, Forster had touched upon, whether mainly or peripherally, such aspect of illusion that leads to the emergence not as much of kitsch in architecture as of architectural kitsch – a life-long self-deception pertaining to a home or landscape inhabited by a person. What becomes of an illusion in its architectural sense when one attempts to introduce it in order to supplant the real functionality of a home? Forster observes that the form of a house is oftentimes intended to reflect the various desires of the investors: it is to express a will to live in a different (as oppose to the actual) time or place, or of having a higher social status – in terms of wealth, prestige, affiliation to a certain social stratum, etc. Such sort of illusion is by its very nature architectural, it may only surface at the level of architecture as it requires its own location and space, the duration of construction works and settling in, a large financial effort and a lasting effect on the landscape. That is the manner in which '(...) buildings are created either by or for people who do not sport the courage to look at the world realistically and see it maturely for what it is in its complexity accessible for our perception' (Stec 2005: 75). Against their sheer scale, a photograph of two family members smiling at each other, though in reality at odds, or a reprint of a Venetian landscape hanging on a wall seem completely innocent as displays of kitsch.

The Polish reality of the 1970s and 1980s provided very fertile grounds for dreaming of aesthetics different to that pervasive in the era – distant both historically and geographically. In those days, however, few had the opportunity to build their dream homes: 'a brand-new antique manor

house,' a highlander-style cottage near Warsaw, an 'Australian' or a 'Spanish' villa in Lesser Poland. During the period of transformation more and more Poles would start to travel and identify their dreams of a better life with forms of houses typical for alien landscapes, whether Mediterranean, Scandinavian or American. Then again, must such formal borrowings in architecture be regarded as kitsch?

Not necessarily, it seems. In the case of buildings that do not by definition constitute 'the domain of illusion', its 'permanent establishment' proves rather problematic, and so is its transference into the real time and space of architecture within which people fulfill their basic needs. It is also difficult to 'translate' such an illusion into the physical dimensions of a building as its particular functions require particular and very real dimensions in space (an illusionistic painting of a room will not add to the floor area, nor will an illusion of a terrace enable one to get some fresh air). Ultimately, the needs vital for people are only met by reality. In that sense, the architecture that enables people to fulfill these functions has to be real, regardless of its form. The laws of physics also apply as real. An illusion, therefore, may pertain mostly to decoration: the wall-lining, ornaments that do not serve any structural or constructional purposes, as well as the spatial disposition of the building and the atmosphere of the architecture.

It is clear that illusion, as a dream and desire of the investor, oftentimes constituting the reason behind the formal borrowings, seldom remains an illusion, i.e. a replica of a real, operational function of a house. Whereas, if the borrowed forms fulfill the functions required by the basic needs of the user and stimulate their life in reality, what would their illusory nature consist in? On that account, even if the original cause for creation of such forms was an illusion, their usability for meeting the real needs of a person makes the now 'embodied' illusion disappear. However, in order for such 'embodiment' to occur, the illusion has to meet some real needs of a person, i.e. the need for beauty, which cannot be replaced with an empty effect of prettiness nor a piece of information about it. A form which in reality organizes and meets the basic needs of a person is no longer an illusion, hence it cannot be kitsch as defined above either.

However, when illusion in architecture continues to be a useless replica of reality, isolated from performing any functions pertaining to the users' needs, it does constitute architectural kitsch, deepening a person's sense

of impossibility to fulfill not only one's dreams, but even one's real needs. Ultimately, such rendition of the notion of kitsch ends up as information of a failure to fulfill rather than of fulfillment, even partial, as is the case of the so-called 'ersatz happiness'.

One could, therefore, put forth a hypothesis that the illusion in architecture, due to the latter's functional nature, as well as its temporal and spatial scale, may, but does not have to, lead to the emergence of architectural kitsch. Illusion which does not perform any architectural function associated with satiating basic needs of its users leads to the creation of a pointless replica, an actual equivalent to architectural kitsch. It proves easy to recognize as it arouses sadness and irritation in people, being a piercing testament of the scale of their frustration (it works as the information of a deficiency). Conversely, an illusion does not lead to the emergence of architectural kitsch when it has merely served as the rationale for creating a work of architecture, but later disappears in the executed (though by way of a borrowing) form which proves architecturally useful (e.g. as a veritable stage decoration or an object of aesthetic value). As a result, ornament does not have to constitute kitsch as long as it transforms an illusion into an 'ersatz of happiness'.

## **AN ERSATZ OF HAPPINESS DOES NOT HAVE TO BE KITSCH**

An ersatz of happiness founded upon a dream or a desire of the ordering person does not have to be shoddy and built of poor quality materials. There are many instances of dreams incorporated into architectural forms which are regarded as an expression of lofty aspirations or of positive snobbery. Affluent burghers had for a long time aspired to match the living conditions enjoyed by the aristocracy. Their desire, stemming from their admiration for a specific architectural form or for foreign cultures, could become a source of inspiration and bear the fruit of eclecticism, not entirely dismissible in terms of its aesthetic value. For instance, a former royal residence – the Brighton Pavilion of George IV – is one such dream, a striking allusion to Indo-Saracenic architecture (as an amalgam of the Gothic Revival with the style of the Mogul Empire), still it has been executed with masterful artistry. And even though it looks alien in the context of the local architecture, it is reminiscent of nineteenth century India, a country where many British architects were employed. The interior design of the Pavilion is a mixture

of East Indian, Chinese and Islamic elements. Despite the inauthenticity of the palace's architecture in the context of the local townscape of Brighton, one cannot but appreciate the sheer craftsmanship and artistry of John Nash, the architect responsible for its final reconstruction. Thanks to those qualities, and partly to the history of England's colonial policies, the residence is never considered kitsch, but simply a mere eccentricity or a curiosity.

This example proves that simple inauthenticity of style does not suffice to identify a work of architecture as kitsch. The latter has to be accompanied by a characteristic rendering impossible any real use of the form derived from illusion. In the case of borrowings or ornaments such exclusion results predominantly from a failure to ensure two functions of architecture: the one associated with the need for beauty (aesthetic) and the need for a deep-seated, multi-sensory experience of architecture (i.e. that a work of architecture should ooze a fitting 'atmosphere'). Both functions remain unfulfilled with shoddy, mediocre quality craftsmanship of the ornament made with second-rate materials. Only in this manner does an illusion become kitsch: an ersatz of the dreamed-of reality turns out to be only an imitation of its image, providing nothing more than the information of a failure in attaining what it refers to, being an empty token thereof. A deliberate decision to surround oneself with such replicas indicates a person's morbid predilection for their own affectation and inertia, making one isolated from the actual opportunities offered by the real world. In the scale of architecture such replica ought to be eliminated by the real life surrounding it. Should it remain in force, it may be come to be regarded as a form of architectural pathology deforming the landscape and the lives of its users.

Different sensations altogether are aroused in people by 'an ersatz of happiness', i.e. a form built upon an illusion (a dream or a desire), but one created masterfully (in terms of its craftsmanship and sheer artistry). Regardless of the extent of its 'inauthenticity', if beautiful – it does affect people with its own beauty and not the reflected allure of another object. Thus, it becomes itself an 'ersatz of happiness' which, though a progeny of an illusion, escapes such attribution thanks to its own beauty. No longer is this to be considered kitsch either.

This reflection draws upon the concept of kitsch expounded in the works of Hermann Broch (1969), which he developed in the 1950s. According



to him, genuine art exudes beauty, an expression of the truth and goodness, as a result of hard work, whereas in the case of kitsch the objective is supplanted by the effect of beauty, which Broch calls a decoration, an ornament. Beauty, in the Platonic sense, exists as an idea – it is in principle an unattainable model, residing outside of the system of art, the latter merely striving towards it. The ‘openness’ of the system, coincidental with the never-ending path towards beauty understood as the process of perception of art (i.e. the experience of it) ensures the inexhaustible potential of a work of art and its inherent attractiveness (on multiple occasions, for it does not function as a short-lasting piece of information, but as a source of harmony). Kitsch, on the other hand, turns that abstract ideal of beauty into its limited and easy to digest copy. Hence the conclusion that whereas true art cannot deplete beauty as its source, kitsch depletes it extremely quickly, a phenomenon easy to recognize in the scale of architecture.

## ORNAMENT IN ARCHITECTURE

The conceptualization of kitsch put forth by Broch is well attuned to the modernist idea of architecture, according to which ornaments and decorations are treated as untrue (not serving any structural or constructional purposes) elements of a building, and therefore a replica of sorts – regardless of the quality of their craftsmanship. Today it seems rather difficult to acknowledge such a mercilessly clear-cut distinction.

Even the subsequent, post-modernist approach to ornament as an intentionally jocular citation of a different historical form seems nowadays a closed chapter in the history of architectural thought. Postmodernism itself has not as much changed the definition of ornament, as re-sanctioned its presence in architecture and elevated it to the status of a stylistic differentiator and a medium of the desired narrative. The post-modern ornament, however, does not introduce illusion into architecture for it does not imitate, but rather mocks a foreign, usually historical form; it should more precisely be understood as an ‘illusion of an illusion,’ which helps dismiss the charge of it being kitsch, as the latter is characterized by the ease of perception for an average, mass user of architecture. Therefore, it cannot be founded on a sophisticated intellectual inter-play.

Having experienced the eras of modernism and post-modernism, some of their manifestations still present in architecture, the contemporary

architectural critique distances itself from identifying the architectural kitsch with ornaments. The thought currents of today, while advocating authenticity and denouncing illusion as the source of kitsch, advance a more in-depth analysis of the ornament and decoration in terms of their inherent potential of enriching the multi-sensory experience of architecture. It is principally the result of the present-day emphasis on the atmosphere of architecture as one of its basic functions. That, in turn, requires a change in the attitude towards ornament, as its 'usability' most of the time consists in this very atmosphere-creating function. Hence, the ornament as such is no longer laden with negative value that it used to be for the modernists (who saw in it an element belonging neither to constructional nor structural aspects of architecture), instead it is regarded with its roots in the category of atmosphere, thus entailing both the value of beauty, as well as people's multi-sensory experience of architecture.

The fact that the concept of kitsch is no longer applied in the context of ornament may be illustrated by a specific instance of architectural kitsch within the domain of the so-called 'minimalist-architecture'. In modern day single-family housing, loans from forms distant in time and space are seldom used as a means of fulfilling a dream or a desire, a more often chosen option is opting for one of the many styles existing in today's Poland. Minimalist forms quickly came to be recognized as indicators of prestige, wealth and luxury and as signs of the membership in a socially informal elite group of intellectuals (whereas the objective of early minimalism was rather to curb the excess and make it more moderate, restrained and unassuming in its simple forms). Although it has to be contended that in this case it is once again the craftsmanship that decides whether a particular realization may be considered an instance of kitsch, still the very existence of such examples proves that illusion and inauthenticity may also be manifested through a total rejection of ornament and decoration.

## CONCLUSION

Architecture may be seen as a good field within which to establish/evaluate criteria for the identification of kitsch and its differentiation from non-kitsch. The process is facilitated by architecture's scale – both in its temporary and spatial magnitude – as well as by its necessity to fulfill the basic needs of its users. Illusion in architecture is considered kitsch, if in the executed

form it remains nothing more than illusion – a replica of reality isolated from any need-fulfilling functions. Such illusion-kitsch deepens our sense of deficiency and the sorrow resulting from the inability to make a dream come true. What kitsch does, therefore, is to detach people from reality.

At the same time, illusion as a reason behind the creation of a specific work of architecture may evaporate in the finished form, if the latter is architecturally functional and usable. One of people's specific needs which can and should be fulfilled by architecture is the need for beauty and a deep-seated (both physical and intellectual) experience of reality. For the above reason, illusion 'embodied' in a beautiful architectural form ceases to exist as illusion due to its sheer beauty; it is no longer a source of kitsch – being instead converted into an 'ersatz of happiness', able to enrich one's contact with reality, rather than divert from it, as it occurs in the case of kitsch.

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### Summary

The article deals with kitsch in architecture. The term 'kitsch', which originally referred to images, is nowadays also used in the evaluation of architecture, especially in terms of its authenticity. This entails the consideration of the physical scale associated with an important function of architecture, to wit fulfilling the users' needs. As a starting point for the reflection serves the thought of Kurt W. Forster, identifying kitsch, including its architectural iteration, as an illusion of a better life inherent in people's dreams and desires, which may at the same time be the cause of various architectural borrowings.

It is claimed that in architecture, due to its scale and utility, an illusion cannot supplant genuine fulfillment of the user's basic needs, therefore, it can only exist for a relatively short time either leading to the emergence of its form, or it may be solidified against reality as a useless replica, serving no function meeting the needs of its users. Such sort of kitsch can be discovered in those works of architecture in which people spend too short a time for them to require kitsch to answer their basic needs.

A prolonged experience of architectural kitsch deepens a person's feeling of sadness and irritation resulting from a sense of failure to fulfill one's dreams or even real needs. Whereas, if an illusion only serves as a cause for the creation of a work of architecture – later disappearing when its form is executed, though based upon borrowings it remains useful (for instance regarded as a theatre decoration, meeting the need for beauty and/or a multi-sensory experience of architecture) – it can no longer be classified as architectural kitsch, i.e. as an illusion. Accordingly, ornament may also escape being seen as kitsch, if it helps convert an illusion into an ersatz of happiness.

**Keywords:** reality, illusion, beauty, kitsch, architecture, architectural scale, building, ornament

## LIFE AS KITSCH. NOTES ABOUT BIO ART

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### BIO ART VS. KITSCH

Bio art has existed approximately since the late 1980s. Initially it was identified mainly with ‘genetic art’, which reduced itself to the visualization of DNA by means of traditional techniques, such as painting or graphic art, and images made with the use of genetic algorithms and genetic programming. Gradually, however, artists began to use tools specific to molecular biology and genetic engineering as means of expression. In the course of time, they paid less attention to computer software and focused on the creation of physical biological objects: genetically modified cells, strains of bacteria, tissues or complex organisms. Today bio art is associated with this type of activity – with the adaptation of solutions offered by biotechnological sciences for the purpose of creating living works of art. These activities are the subject-matter of a discussion where most opinions emphasize the importance of such experiments for fundamental findings on what life is and for understanding the status of the creatures created by means of technology that have not existed in nature so far. Post-human discourses, such as aesthetics of care, non-anthropocentric aesthetics or ‘zoe-aesthetics’ postulated by Monika Bakke (2012), are only a few examples of such reflections. In what sense, however, can works fundamentally reduced to the semantic scope of the term ‘kitsch’ serve as a basis for such discussions? It might seem that, from the moment of entering specialized laboratories and using specific technologies in the creation process, artists have all means at their disposal to problematize the phenomenon of life or issues concerning its manipulation or the patenting of genetic codes by large corporations. To what extent, however, are such topics brought up in works in which we come across colorful butterflies, ornamental flowers

or a fluorescent rabbit? Clement Greenberg (1961: 10) wrote that ‘kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times’. Since kitsch represents what is spurious in our life, can we use it for making general statements concerning the fundamentals of life? Can kitschy artifacts serve as the starting point for a serious discussion on fundamental questions? Can living objects that often bring back the memory of phantasms and products created by popular culture tell us something about life? What can we learn about life from an art that is only a manifestation of bad taste at first glance? What does kitsch tell us about life? Before reflecting upon these questions, let us define the semantic scope of this concept.

## WHAT IS KITSCH?

Most researchers agree that the word ‘kitsch’ is derived from the German expression *etwas verkitschen*, which means ‘to knock off cheaply’ (Kulka 1988). This term is connected with aesthetic judgment and the category of taste, at the same time having a clearly pejorative or rather devaluing connotation. Kitsch refers to a cultural product that is deliberately tailored to mass tastes. It means ‘both an art of happiness and an expression of bad taste’ (Riout 2014: 583). Paul Maltby (2012: 53) thinks that kitsch is ‘a contentious and problematic concept. First, it is ineluctably judgmental: once identified as kitsch, a work of art is instantly devalued, the taste of its admirers disparaged and derided. Second, the concept is exclusionary and classist: as a label, kitsch often serves to stigmatize art that does not conform to an aesthetic canon as determined by elite arbiters of taste’. However, Maltby (ibid.: 54), quoting Irving Howe’s *Notes on Mass Culture*, also notices that kitsch is useful because it makes it easier to recognize consumable types of art that ensure ‘amusement without insight, and pleasure without disturbance’. Tomas Kulka (1988: 18) suggests that ‘kitsch isn’t simply an artistic failure – a work which has somehow gone wrong. There is something special about kitsch which sets it apart from the rest of bad art’. Where does this uniqueness of kitsch lie? Is it some kind of formatting artistic phenomena to the status of products intended for consumption? Kitsch is considered to be a phenomenon that emerged along with the formation of mass society

in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The increasing amount of spare time played a significant role in the creation of products that can be assigned to this category. At that time, a need arose in mass societies to participate in a culture that provides easy entertainment and does not require recipients to be educated or particularly competent. Clement Greenberg (1961: 10) considered kitsch to be a product of the industrial revolution and a result of the settlement of large numbers of peasants in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois. 'Ersatz culture' was supposed to address the consumption needs of the masses that were unable to understand urban culture and, at the same time, had lost their interest in folk culture deriving from the place of their origin. In Greenberg's view, the strengthening of mass culture labeled as kitsch and the withdrawal of the ruling elites from the support of the avant-garde movement was a harbinger of the collapse of the culture shaping sensitivity, reflection and refinement.

Hermann Broch (2002: 195) interpreted the phenomenon of kitsch in the same manner. He thought that kitsch is an expression of 'radical evil' that leads to the destruction of the system of values. In his opinion, the power of kitsch lies in 'the confusion of the ethical category with the aesthetic category'. According to Broch, kitsch is supposed to give such pleasure that does not require intellectual effort or commitment from the recipient. Kitsch as such cannot be the material of a good work of art – a multi-level work whose form refers to a significant problem. Kitsch was also criticized by Walter Benjamin, who completely excluded this phenomenon from the field of art. Perceiving it as a separate phenomenon that is completely different from artistic activity, he negated the possibility of existence of 'kitschy art'. According to the findings of Winifred Menninghaus (2009: 41), a researcher dealing with this subject area in the German philosopher's writings, kitsch was treated by Benjamin as a practical object (in contrast to the 'selflessness' of art) that causes the absence of critical distance between it and the observer: 'kitsch offers instantaneous emotional gratification without intellectual effort, without the requirement of distance, without sublimation'. It is worth noticing here that such opinions and remarks concerning kitsch were popular among theoreticians roughly till the 1950s. The tendencies that emerged subsequently in the artistic world transformed kitsch and its perception by critics. Denys Riout (2014: 539) thinks that kitsch changed as a result of pop art, which blurred even further the values established by the avant-garde,

and as a result of ‘camp’, which was a sort of aesthetics promoting things in bad taste as amusing. Riout indicates that from that time on, artists not only created works that could be described in terms of kitsch, but they also deliberately combined elements pleasing the recipient’s eye with revolting motifs. This was how kitsch changed its image. It was no longer perceived only as an indication of bad taste, but also as the deliberate exploitation of motifs identified with bad taste, which also served as a starting point for an analysis of complex problems and critical insight. This type of activity based on the aware and deliberate use of kitsch is defined as post-kitsch by Maria Poprzęcka (1998). Works within its scope can be attractive for the broad audience: both for the spectator who perceives only the outer layer of the project – an aspect of visual trumpery that brings pleasure and for the educated spectator who recognizes other senses and meanings beneath the façade of gloss.

## THE FLUORESCENT RABBIT

Let us come back to the question asked at the beginning of these deliberations: can a project that fits within the semantic scope of ‘kitsch’ be the basis for a discussion concerning life? We will try to answer this question by considering the case that I regard as the most emblematic for bio art: the fluorescent rabbit called Alba. *GFP Bunny* by Eduardo Kac is an example of transgenic art – a certain tendency distinguished by Kac within the scope of bio art. As the artist himself says: ‘it is a new art form based on the use of genetic engineering techniques to transfer synthetic genes to an organism or to transfer natural genetic material from one species into another, to create unique living beings’ (Kac 1998). Alba came into being in 2000. It was created in close co-operation between the artist and scientists working for the INRA (Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique) in Jouy-en-Josas, France. It was the only one of many scientific institutions capable of carrying out such action at that time which agreed to help the artist accomplish his goal. The creation of a transgenic animal was based on direct interference in the genome. This operation resulted in the creation of a hybrid creature – an albino rabbit into whose zygote a synthetic mutation of the fluorescence gene that is naturally present in *Aequorea victoria*



jellyfish was injected. Being a double mutant<sup>1</sup>, Alba apparently does not differ from other pigmentless rabbits, but it emits an intense bright green light in adequate conditions – after irradiation with rays of specific frequency. If the ultimate goal of the project were to create a nice-looking domesticated miniature rabbit that additionally emits a green afterglow like in fairy tales, this project could be regarded as a glorification of kitsch. However, the artist indicates that the creation of a new creature by way of genetic modifications was only the starting point of this processual project. Kac notes that his work ‘comprises the creation of a green fluorescent rabbit, the public dialogue generated by the project, and the social integration of the rabbit’ (Kac 2003: 97). The second part of the project started when the news about the birth of the creature was made public. It encompassed all reactions concerning the creation of Alba: a public debate, an open protest against such practices, controversies and the censoring of the project by the then director of the INRA, who refused to release the fluorescent pet from the laboratory. The last event pushed the second phase of the project in an unexpected direction, resulting in protests of defenders of artistic activity of the pioneer of bio art and delaying the last stage of the project that was to include transferring the animal to the property of its creator, integrating it with the new environment, experiencing daily interactions with it and, most of all, taking responsible care of it. It is worth noting that *GFP Bunny* has never been shown in public. The transgenic rabbit was finally transported to the artist’s house, but it has never been exhibited as a living artifact at a gallery. The exhibition strategy of the project covered the presentation of photographs, posters, the documentation of laboratory works, as well as public debates and discussions, which eventually took place in Alba’s absence.

Here I would like to look at arguments used by opponents and critics of the project, hoping that they will allow us to determine how kitsch is defined and how it manifests itself in Kac’s project.

One of the reasons for the harsh criticism directed at the work was its alleged ‘decadence’ expressed by endowing a white rabbit with an utterly

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<sup>1</sup> Alba is not only the result of the modification based on the injection of the fluorescence gene into the rabbit’s zygote, because albino rabbits themselves are a recessive natural mutation deliberately multiplied by people.

useless capability that is specific to a certain species of jellyfish, in which the occurrence of this kind of protein is functionally justified. Thus, the Brazilian artist's work was reduced to the level of a meaningless and visually attractive gadget, to the level of surface and superficiality and regarded as a tasteless experiment that goes as far as to use a living creature to the fulfillment of an contemptible base goal. Steve Tomasula (2002: 143), when undertaking this issue and referring to other works based on experiments with genes, ironically presents another aspect concerning the alleged uselessness of such projects from the perspective of research: 'Alba, like Davis's Venus<sup>2</sup>, like other works of genetic art, will not be used to research cancer or any other medical condition. And since they are 'useless', they are seen as 'decadent' – as decadent as the ornamental, i.e. non-pragmatic, goldfish and flowers destroyed by the Red Guard during Mao's Cultural Revolution'. Assuming that the author of these works is not a supporter of the rule of a communist dictator, we can feel that the accusation concerning uselessness seems absurd to him and he regards it as a consequence of ignorance, commenting upon the work abstracted from the broader context presented by the artist and, finally, the trivialization of problems brought up by the work and its reduction to the inadequate definition of *objet d'art*, according to which the essence and the ultimate goal of Kac's actions was the creation of a fluorescent mascot – a useless ornament.

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<sup>2</sup> Tomasula writes here about the project by Joe Davis, which also fits into the paradigm of bio art. *Microvenus* is a simple graphic symbol resembling the intercrossed letters 'Y' and 'I'. It is a Germanic rune symbolizing life and schematically drawn female genitals. Davis's project assumed the placement of this sign in the genome of a bacterium, its multiplication as a result of the reproduction of microorganisms, and then sending into space so that a sign of human intelligence could reach extraterrestrial creatures. The fulfillment of this intention involved the translation of graphic information into biological information; the run was initially digitized and then translated into a chain of 28 DNA nucleotides. Synthetic molecules with coded information were put in *E. coli* bacteria – a strain responsible for proper digestion, which was used for NASA research because of their resistance to extreme weather conditions. The bacteria quickly proliferated in the laboratory beaker; millions of cells came into being, each of which contained the identical picture entitled *Microvenus*.

As we know, Alba's birth was only the starting point of the project, whereas Kac (2003: 98) in his proposed conception of transgenic art firmly rejects the creation of finished artifacts that have no development potential: 'As a transgenic artist, I am not interested in the creation of genetic objects, but on the invention of transgenic social subjects. In other words, what is important is the completely integrated process of creating the bunny, bringing her to society at large, and providing her with a loving, caring, and nurturing environment in which she can grow safe and healthy'. Kac counts on working out an aesthetics emphasizing social rather formal aspects of life. The creation of a fluorescent creature is supposed to be the beginning of a long process initiating a debate concerning the limits of genetic manipulation, art and good taste. The green rabbit is not supposed to be a value itself – a strange finished artifact, but an inspiration to reflect upon difference, on artistic ethics, on the attitude of recipients to genetically modified organisms. The artist also frequently stresses the need to take special care of these exceptional creatures and to integrate them with other unmodified creatures. In spite of this artistic explication of the project, many critical voices were heard, indicating that it is 'ornamental', which means superficial – it is difficult to look for senses and meanings intended by the artist under the layer of iced pop-culture decorativeness.

The issue of ornamentality that recurs in the most recent artistic practices was developed in an interesting manner by Gunalan Nadarajan (2007: 43), who also skillfully defends the 'fluorescent rabbit'. Although Nadarajan agrees that we currently observe a shift towards ornaments and decorativeness in art – particularly the one that uses biotechnological manipulations, he also notices that it is a kind of subversive action. He suggests that artists deliver a critical evaluation of these processes using the same methods that are applied in 'ornamental biotechnology', which means the 'scientific research into, manipulation and creation of life forms for ornamental purposes'. Nadarajan establishes a special category of 'parergonal aesthetics', where 'where the ornament is deployed in order to unsettle notions of essentiality and functionality with reference to natural entities' (ibid.: 51). Although, in his view, *GFP Bunny* is a purely ornamental phenomenon, this is by no means tantamount to the semantic poorness of the work: 'It is fascinating to consider the broad aims and implications of the work when the primary

gesture and the most readily apparent aspect of the work is its fluorescence – an ornamental feature’ (ibid.: 52).

Parergonal aesthetics suspends the hierarchization and division of life aspects into more and less important ones – into those that justify biotechnological inquiries (e.g., solutions concerning human health) and into those that do not have such potential (the construction of a beautiful creature). ‘Why is it that dogs aren’t yet blue with red spots, and that horses don’t yet radiate phosphorescent colors over the nocturnal shadows of the land?’, asks Vilem Flusser (1988: 9). Nadarajan would probably answer that this happens because the ornament ceased to be empty and futile when it became a deliberately used tool of criticism that can provoke a debate dealing with fundamental issues (as in the case of Alba).

Here we reach the point in which our considerations assume a paradoxical direction. It turns out that a group of theoreticians uses critical opinions and accusations of decadence, uselessness and the use of semantically empty ornaments for deriving a line of defense of the project that refers to significant issues, such as the status of genetically modified organisms, their integration with the environment and the world of people and artistic ethics. Therefore, if we decided to describe the *GFP Bunny* project by means of the category of kitsch, we would be more inclined to adopt the interpretation proposed by Riout and Poprzęcka. In this context, Kac’s decision to create a fluorescent ‘pet’ would be a fully conscious and deliberate action aimed at arousing the interest of a large group of recipients not necessarily educated in the field of art not only in the creature itself, but also the subject area concerning transgenic creatures. Another argument for such perception of the work would be Kac’s resignation from the public presentation of the creature in the gallery space, where it could be exposed to stress concerning the presence of visitors. Maybe Alba, which has not been seen by anyone except the artist, his family and the personnel of the French laboratory responsible for its creation, was really supposed to be a serious project confirming the responsibility of researchers and artists and the possibilities concerning the use of biotechnology?

We can draw such conclusions about the project on the basis of opinions of its defenders responding to accusations concerning ‘decadence’, ornamentality and uselessness. Let us consider, however, with which image of biotechnology does *GFP Bunny* confront its recipients.

Undoubtedly, the series of lectures, workshops and public discussions that made up the exhibition strategy of the work can be regarded as socially useful. The creation of a nice-looking transgenic 'pet' accustoms people to genetic engineering, molecular biology and other branches of biological technologies that are usually perceived as hermetic fields using a difficult jargon that can be understood only by persons directly involved in it. This creates a space for a dialogue concerning current large-scale research and experiments that are not fully clear, comprehensible and obvious, thereby often serving as a basis for the reproduction of myths, prejudices and false presumptions. We must note, however, that the image of biotechnology offered by the project is a utopian vision of infinite possibilities. An average person learns that at this moment humanity possesses unlimited possibilities of manipulating nature and that such manipulation can bring forth nice-looking pet animals in which the interference in the genome did not result in complications, diseases or any other consequences decreasing the quality of the animal's life. Photographs and posters presenting a frequently reproduced image of a jumping green rabbit say nothing about dangers arising from the use of biological technologies, unsuccessful experiments, laboratory aberrations and the suffering of creatures in which interferences in the genome resulted in serious mutations excluding normal existence. There is another significant issue that the artist fails to not address. When interfering in the genome on the molecular level, we can never predict exactly the ultimate expression of modifications in the complex organism. Kac (2003: 100) states that he 'decided to proceed with the project because it became clear that it was safe'. But how could he be sure? If such presumption was based on earlier manipulations with genomes of other living creatures, maybe it was necessary to address those experiments, their results and consequences, even if this led to the disclosure of potential hazards connected with such activities and abnormalities resulting from them? We must also remember that rabbits, along with rats and mice, are popular experimental animals on which pharmaceutical products are tested, including gene therapies, cosmetics and other chemical components ultimately intended for people.

Does the fluorescent rabbit tell us anything about these issues? Do we learn what happens behind the closed doors of research institutes and specialized laboratories? Does the project allow for reflection on the fate of living testers, which is marked by pain and fear? Unfortunately, in the case

of this project, we stop at the conclusion that laboratory animals are fine, modifications of their genes bring a visually spectacular effect and they live long while being cared for by responsible scientists.

The ignorance of the aforementioned issues along with the promotion of the work as a responsibility-related project borders on hypocrisy or at least on the total lack of awareness of background elements of modern research in biology. Another ignored thing is the fact of patenting genomes of living creatures, particularly those having a market potential: the creatures whose commoditization can involve high financial profits. This refers mainly to animals that are fit for domestic breeding, such as the green rabbit. Kac fulfilled his famous project one year after scientists from the National University of Singapore patented a popular species of aquarium fish modified with the fluorescence gene, which makes them emit a bright green light, as in the case of Alba. Then scientists signed a contract with a large company Yorktown Technologies, assigning rights to the production and sale of genetically modified fish. In 2003, the species named GloFish began to be sold in zoological gardens in the United States. The author of *GFP Bunny* says nothing about the patenting of life and ethical implications of such actions; he also ignores completely the context of market trade in creatures of this kind and the problem of commodification of life. Because of this, contrary to what its defenders suggest, the work can be perceived as unjustified manipulation with the genome aiming at visual showiness and additionally shrouded in an idealistic and uncritical tale of the wonders of biotechnology. Therefore, it can be regarded as kitsch. Moreover, posters and photographs of the rabbit presented in the gallery space along with the affirmative and naive treatment of methods that made it possible to carry out the project can be essentially treated as an advertisement of possibilities offered by biotechnology.

Kac states that his goal was not to create the fluorescent rabbit as the final product, but to initiate a debate concerning significant issues in this way. Unfortunately, the trivialization of the debate concerning biological techniques and the ignorance of the broad consequences of their dissemination suggests that the project should rather be perceived as the final product addressing bad tastes.

Here, it is worth quoting the sentence of George Gessert (2010: 81), one of the representatives of the bio art trend. Gessert reverses the order

of the word 'kitsch', stating (in the same fashion as previously quoted Walter Benjamin) that this category describes market products rather than artistic creations. As an artist employing techniques similar to Kac's and crossing various species of flowering plants, Gessert criticises the mass production of genetically modified flowers, which he regards as kitschy. He believes that accusations concerning the lack of responsibility of artists working in the field of bio art are absurd, because, according to him, moral indifference is generated by kitsch in the form of market products. Even if Gessert is right, Kac's project was unfortunately formatted like a spectacular biotechnological... product, which is additionally shrouded in a tale of care and responsibility that I find totally unconvincing.

Let us come back to the question announced at the beginning of this text: what important things about life can we learn from a work classified as kitsch? Before trying to answer this question, I would like to clarify what I exactly mean when using the term 'life'. I hope that such comment will explain and justify my criticism and the devaluation of the Brazilian artist's creative work. My reflection on the meaning of the phenomenon of life begins with a fundamental issue: looking for its definition. At this stage, however, we come across a fundamental problem. It turns out that one cohesive and logical definition of this phenomenon, common and true for a certain class of objects and allowing us to distinguish between animate and inanimate matter, simply does not exist. An attempt to explain the phenomenon of life has been undertaken by almost all fields of science – from biology, physics and chemistry to human sciences. Mathematicians also looked for a solution to the formal definition of life. A huge section of philosophy – ontology – deals with the issues of being and existence. All of those fields have worked out their own understanding of life that stresses its different properties and characteristics. Consequently, however, the proliferation of definitions leads to disorientation: various conceptions are often mutually exclusive, some are contradictory, and the multitude of mental constructs excludes the possibility of clear determination whether we are dealing with life in the given instance or not. Edward Trifonov (2012: 647), a researcher in the Genome Diversity Center, Institute of Evolution, University of Haifa identified as many as 'one hundred and three definitions of the uncertain phenomenon', ultimately regarding all of them as imprecise and unsatisfactory.

The multitude of dissonant definitions includes also the alarming likelihood that life is a relative rather than absolute concept. Thomas Mann (1971: 274) wrote: ‘What was life? No one knew. It was undoubtedly aware of itself, so soon as it was life; but it did not know what it was’. Nearly one hundred years after the German writer’s conclusion, the state of our knowledge about life on the definition level looks similar. This is particularly alarming because today we can use tools that allow us to modify what we intuitively recognize as life. Still, however, we are unable to answer the question what is life. Until we come across its specific case, until we ‘see’ it, we will not recognize in an inexplicable and irrational way that we are dealing with it.

Assuming a certain definition as a verifying instance often led to the situation when certain phenomena were completely excluded from the sphere of life and regained the status of living creatures along with a different paradigm and a different definition a few years later. At this point, it is worth quoting an example of experiments conducted by the unmanned Viking spacecraft in 1976, the aim of which was to look for extraterrestrial life. Samples taken by the lander were examined through the prism of the restrictive metabolic definition, and certain observed changes were interpreted as chemical reactions in rocks at that time. Today, however, it turns out that they may have been signs of activity of microorganisms living on Mars, i.e., life, which was basically excluded by the metabolic definition. Thus, it seems that, faced with the helplessness of scientific definitions, we must rely on our views and feelings, regardless of how unscientific and non-methodological these techniques would be. With regard to determining what is life and what is not, we do not have any better method than non-rational and pre-conceptual feelings.

Kac’s work lacks the life that is exposed to view and can be experienced through senses. The presence of a genetically recombined organism was replaced with posters and photographs showing a fluorescent rabbit, but they might as well have been a result of manipulation in a graphic application. This means that the recipient cannot recognize life in *GFP Bunny*; in my view, he also fails to receive the impulse to enter a deeper level of reflection on both human and non-human life and on their mutual relations, because it only scratches the surface of kitschy visual representations. The fact is that the direct manipulation with genes from which the fulfillment of the project



started attracts the recipient's attention towards reflections on what is the biological basis of life. These issues were also presented during lectures and discussions conducted by the artist, when it was explained that the role of a genetic information carrier in living organisms is played by nucleic acids present in chromosomes. Both in the case of a human and a transgenic creature going beyond systematic categories, the foundation is the same. We only differ in the configuration in which individual compounds are arranged. This universal character of the life-coding material suggests that we are actually closer not only to the fluorescent rabbit, but also to any other less or more complex creatures and, in spite of significant differences, there is a bond of molecular materiality coding existence between us.

This observation serves as a reliable basis for post-human discourses that reject the anthropocentric paradigm. It turns out that the human being is not an isolated species; it is connected with other non-human forms of life. Moreover, Monika Bakke (2012: 241) indicates: 'without the non-human sphere there is nothing that is so human, but not because of negation, as it has seemed to us so far, but through communication and constant joint creation'. However, since Kac's project was really aimed at undertaking this subject area, was it actually necessary to create the enigmatic fluorescent rabbit that nobody has even seen? Eventually, the entire work gained the status of a social event and became a certain case-study, a phenomenon based on discussions and debates. Kac did not need a genetically modified fluorescent animal for activities like this. Nor did he need a legend that arose around the creature which could not be seen by anyone in public, or the kitschy halo of trashy pictures. This act, which bordered on mystification and the reduced the visual part of the work to posters and photographs of questionable quality, pushed Kac's work towards kitsch and substantially weakened the overtone of the debate, which, as the artist intended, would provoke a number of significant questions about human and non-human life and their mutual relationships.

However, since Alba actually came into being, it was necessary to take care of proper conditions allowing for its public presentation. Exhibitions featuring living, often also transgenic animals are nothing new; in spite of certain difficulties, they are not impossible to organize, either. It is worth quoting, for example, Katy High's project, in which the artist undertook the topic of transgenic laboratory rats with injected human genetic material.

High bought animals suffering with typical human diseases, ensured proper care to them and put them in the gallery space adapted in a manner resembling a laboratory. Those who visited this specific exhibition could feel the direct proximity of transgenic animals suffering for the good of humans.

In the case of Kac's work, the possibility of empirical contact with a transgenic creature would let recipients recognize life in it, and the experience as such would largely reinforce their commitment to the discussion concerning human relations with other non-human forms of life. Unfortunately, in the case of *GFP Bunny*, the audience received a trashy representation instead of the fluorescent rabbit and the unique experience of the recipient. My primary objection against the Brazilian artist's project concerns the absence of the title rabbit (assuming that it really came into being) and replacement of the presence of the unique creature with kitsch that discourages reflections and debate. If the animal was really created, I think it should have been shown in public. The questions of ensuring proper conditions during presentation would serve as another strong argument in the discussion on responsibility and care of non-human forms of life, on mutual relations between people and non-people.

If Kac did not plan to show *Alba* in public, maybe he should not have created it at all. In view of how the project was eventually presented, the creation of a transgenic animal seems unjustified, completely unfunctionalized and pretextual, and fluorescence itself appears to be an empty act aimed at complying with pop-cultural trends.

Moreover, the evaluation of the project offers some other alarming conclusions. If, as we have determined above, Kac's work is an affirmation of biotechnology in its expression, he accepts its interference in all levels of life, including human life. Since it is possible to modify a rabbit genetically, there are no obstacles to do the same with a human – this is the conclusion of the work. In this sense, the project legitimizes also gene therapies, the patenting of genes and the justification of the genetic profiling of patients, often without their knowledge and consent, with the need for research. There are no transparent technologies that would fail to involve certain changes and that have no impact on lives of people and non-people, and biotechnology is certain not one of them.

Unfortunately, Kac ignores these issues, so I am not convinced whether this project really concerns care and responsibility, as he assures. In my view,

in spite of what is often suggested by defenders of his work, kitsch is not a measure fulfilling critical or hard-hitting functions here; just the opposite.

As I have mentioned earlier, Kac counted on working out an aesthetics emphasizing social rather than formal aspects of life. However, is it possible to undertake seriously the subject of social aspects of life while ignoring completely the huge technology that helped to create life, its contexts, potential results and dangers involved in it? Is it possible to handle seriously the questions of care and responsibility, pay attention to post-human discourses rejecting the superior role of the human in favor of another life on Earth and, at the same time, propose a project from which an average recipient will only learn that we can manipulate with the life of other creatures in any desired manner with the help of technology that is not indifferent?

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## Summary

Bio art is a specific trend of contemporary art practice, where artists adapt solutions offered by biosciences in order to create living works of art. Their actions are subject to a discussion with dominant voices concerning the significance of such experiments for the fundamental ascertainments concerning what life is, but also for understanding the status of these constructed entities, which have not existed in nature so far. Post-human discourses such as aesthetics of care, non-anthropocentric aesthetics and zoe-aesthetics are a few examples of this type of reflection. However, is it possible that works which could be described in terms of kitsch constitute a solid ground for this type of discussion? Clement Greenberg has written about kitsch that it is ‘mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times’. If kitsch represents everything that is spurious and non-authentic in our life, can we use it in order to make general statements concerning the basis of life? Can we make statements concerning the fundamental problem of life on the basis of projects that confront us with glow-in-the-dark rabbits or paintings created with genetically modified color bacteria? In my paper I would like to refer to these questions on the basis of an artwork that can be classified in terms of kitsch.

**Keywords:** kitsch, bio art, life, biotechnology, DNA, fluorescent rabbit

## ON THE REASONS FOR THE PRESENCE OF KITSCH IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS SPACE

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The main aim of this study is to try to identify the sources of the phenomenon of kitsch in contemporary religious art in Poland. I will not analyze the notion of kitsch or other aspects of this problem. The following considerations will be presented from the point of view of a person who has been scientifically and practically engaged in the protection of religious art monuments for years. Observations made during the implementation of projects for church museums, providing advice on the protection of monuments<sup>1</sup>, as well as didactic work as a lecturer of art history in clerical seminaries prompted me

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<sup>1</sup> Preparation and implementation, together with Elżbieta Kasprzak (Techne Group), of projects for museums: Museum of the 200th Anniversary of the Lublin Diocese in Lublin (2007), Diocesan Museum in Łowicz (2011), implementation of the 'Museum in the Tower' in the Rector's Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (pobrygidkowski) in Lublin (2012), Museum at the Roman Catholic Parish of St. Wojciech in Wawolnica (2012); projects of museums realized with another contractor: the concept of the educational path *Monastery in the heart of the city* – scenario and arrangement of the educational path (2012), the project of the exhibition in the crypts of the Church of Finding the Holy Cross and St. Andrew the Apostle in Końskowola (2011); projects not realized so far due to lack of funds: the Ignacy Konarski Museum at the Roman Catholic Parish of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Opole Lubelskie, arrangement of the museum exhibition related to the history of the parish and the town of Końskowola, scenario and design of the permanent exhibition – Monastery of the Capuchin Friars Minor in Lublin.

to reflect on the level of Polish sacred art and its significance for the reception of the message of the Church.

The activity in the area of the protection of religious art monuments poses certain problems for the employees participating in the process of developing the church space. They often ask themselves questions about the reason for the emergence and spread of kitsch in this domain. Why, despite the rich tradition of the Roman Catholic Church in the field of construction, collecting works of art and creating exhibitions, is there so much kitsch in the churches? What is more, why is it so that wonderful works of art, which are an unrivalled model for contemporary artists and have been a source of admiration for many generations, often provide only a background for objects which do not represent any artistic value at all?

More and more often churches and sanctuaries are filled with objects which, although pretend to be works of art, do not have a proper aesthetic value. They are technically unprofessional, and their religious message is trivial, affectionate and, worst of all, even false, as it reduces and deforms the truth of the faith.

How does it happen that such products occupy sacral space? Is it to attract the faithful that popular tastes are being flattered? Or maybe the buyer is tempted by their availability or their relatively low price?

The problem is multi-faceted, it is difficult to give a concise and unambiguous answer to the above questions. While communing with great or at least good art requires a certain knowledge of artistic culture from an ordinary recipient, priests who are guardians of churches, and often investors and patrons, should be required to have a thorough education in art history, if only to avoid making the church space a place for gathering poor or kitschy art.

I am not analyzing specific objects, worthless creations of plastic art or misguided sacral architecture, but I am trying to explain the reasons for the presence of kitsch in the contemporary church space, based on examples of actions resulting from the decisions of specific people or institutions.

As the problem is very broad, I do not want to elaborate on the issue of crisis in art – including church and religious art – which has its ideological basis in certain philosophical currents (e.g. postmodernism or any concepts that instrumentalise art and reduce it to ideological and utopian purposes) or theological ones. This phenomenon, although it has influenced the perception

of works of art, lies primarily in the field of research of cultural philosophers<sup>2</sup>. Let me just mention, however, that the result of the crisis is not only the fact that art has become a field of experimentation, but also subjecting artistic creation to various ideologies that ultimately prevent it from achieving its proper goal, namely *catharsis*. In other words, the consequence of the crisis of art seems to be a departure from the categories of truth, goodness and beauty. Unfortunately, this departure is also accompanied by the violation of certain rules present in art so far, but above all by the betrayal of the proper purpose of art, which is to improve human beings. Kitsch is also present in religious and sacral art. It is therefore important to find an answer to the question about the reasons for this state of affairs.

Many reasons can be mentioned here, including the lack of proper education of the clergy, ignorance of the law and of the guidelines of the Roman Catholic Church concerning art in the sacred space. Thus, the evil of kitsch has its root not so much in the lack of aesthetic sensitivity, as in the departure of sacred art from its classical character.

## 1. THE PRESENCE OF KITSCH IN THE CHURCH SPACE

When analyzing the phenomenon of kitsch in the context of sacral art, we often concern ourselves with the reasons for its presence, yet less frequently with its influence on the recipient<sup>3</sup>. And the latter should be considered, as kitsch, once it appears, gradually makes us accustomed to its presence and, imperceptibly, causes enormous devastation in the area of cognition and religious life. This kind of 'art' certainly does not affect the minds of believers in any positive way.

At this point it is worth referring to the words of Plutarch, who, in his reflections on upbringing, posed the question of how to skillfully use the works of the poets. He drew the conclusion that 'reading is food that

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<sup>2</sup> The issue of the crisis in art was raised e.g. in the works of representatives of the Lublin School of Philosophy. See: Jaroszyński 1986, 1992; Kiereś 1993, 1996, 1996, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Numerous attempts have been made to define the concept of kitsch, and many studies have been devoted to this issue, such as: Banach 1968; Rożek (ed.) 2000.

gives health, but may bring about mental ‘un-health’ when used wrongly’ (Majchrowicz 1922: 27).

Travestying this quote for our needs, we can say that art is the food that gives health, but it may be ‘un-health’ when used wrongly. Kitsch deceives us, communicates the truth – in this case: religious truth – in a shallow form. We can agree with Ryszard Knapiński’s statement that ‘kitsch is a product of a man that responds to the need to experience beauty, but fails to satisfy it, and hence remains an incomplete, superficial, and in a broad sense unfinished work’ (Knapiński 2004: 111). The question arises as to why is sacral space filled with ‘works’ through which artists want to convey more than they actually can, whether regarding their technical skills, talent or religious knowledge. Why is there so much interest in this kind of ‘products’? (I am deliberately avoiding to use the term ‘works of art’)?

One of the reasons may be the lack of knowledge from various spheres. The reception of a real work of art is not easy, it requires sensitivity, but above all erudition, which leads to deeper reflection. Indulging in kitsch is also the effect of laziness (Kłoczowski 2003). Thinking about art and the message it conveys requires commitment, while contemporary mass culture does not require people to think, it often results from cognitive mistakes, and sometimes is accompanied by an ideology standing in contradiction to the Revelation. Just like in fast food restaurants, where we get a ready-made, nicely packaged product – yet, unhealthy and of little value – in the case of art, there is also a danger and some kind of evil, which should never be present (especially in religious art, which by definition, is destined for the highest matters, that is, concerning God, the knowledge of God, His love and eternal life with Him). This kind of ‘art’ triggers emotions and is understood manically, i.e. only as an area of emotional experience. And since everyone has different experiences, perhaps the guardian of the church, in order to respond to the feelings experienced by the faithful, sees no reason to remove these trashy objects from the sacral space. Meanwhile, art is materialized cognition and materialized love<sup>4</sup>. The one who introduces

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<sup>4</sup> See: Kiereś 2008: 310-312. As Kiereś observes: ‘Art is a field of human activity and together with science, morality and religion it co-creates culture. Art emerges from a productive (poetic) cognition and either supports the forces of nature in achieving its proper goal, e.g. in breeding animals or medicine, or



it into the sacred space should make sure that it is a high-ranking art, proportionally related both to the recipient (the believer) and to the reality of God, trying to present Him to present to man. Religious art leads to God, and kitsch definitely hinders its message.

Commerciality is particularly conducive to kitsch. The great availability of cheap products satisfies the tastes of average recipients. On the occasion of indulgence feasts, beatifications, canonizations or pilgrimages to sanctuaries, most of the participants buy devotional items produced in a careless manner and not representing any artistic value. The Sacral Fair 'Sacroexpo' held annually in Kielce (the second largest fair of this kind in Europe) is a paradise for exhibitors and buyers.

The organizers of the event should be given justice – they try to appreciate real art. The fair is always accompanied by conferences on contemporary sacral architecture and religious museums<sup>5</sup>. The symposiums aim to show the proper way in the field of designing new churches and religious museums,

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transposes the principles of nature's operation into creations, e.g. in construction or music. Nature is based on movement and change, and the first attribute of its dynamism is purposefulness. Art imitates nature (*ars imitatur naturam*), i.e. it creates intentionally, analogically to the purposefulness of nature; the artist decides about what and how to produce. The final reason (cause) for the existence of art is to fill the voids experienced by man in the world (*ars supplet defectum naturae*). Deficiencies appear in concrete beings: the 'defective' being does not have any perfection or integrating component to which it is entitled by virtue of its nature, e.g. health is perfection, and disease is the lack of perfection, thus: disease is the *raison d'être* of medicine. What is possible for nature, but what nature cannot produce without the participation of art (e.g. a house or a poem) is also an example of lack. The sole purpose of art is the good of man (*omnes artes ordinantur ad hominis perfectionem*), and the good of man is his own life. It is both given and inflicted on man (man is a potentialized entity), and it is a unity of three orders: vegetation, sensual and emotional life as well as intellectual and volitional (personal) life. Thus, art achieves proportionally 3 goals: it secures growth, disciplines the senses and feelings, thinking and acting, and updates the intellect and will of man' (ibid.: 310-311).

<sup>5</sup> In 2016, in cooperation with the Świętokrzyski University of Technology, the fifteenth conference on architecture was organized under the name *Contemporary Sacral Architecture. Poland-Ukraine*, as well as the 9<sup>th</sup> International

as well as to raise awareness of the problems related to modern trends in art. Although the conferences are open, despite the large number of visitors (in 2016 it was about five thousand people), the conference rooms are usually only attended by a handful of listeners in addition to the speakers themselves.

To draw attention to what is really beautiful and valuable, awards are given to artists engaged in religious art: the Medal of the Pontifical Council for Culture 'Per Artem ad Deum' for outstanding artists engaged in sacred art, the Honorary Medal of the Primate of Poland, Archbishop Wojciech Polak (this year the award was given to sister Natanela Wiesława Błażejczyk CSSF, graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, for a creative approach in the sculptural representation of the Way of the Cross) or the Honorary Award of the Bishop of Kielce Fr. Jan Piotrkowski (in 2016 the award received by Maciej Trocewicz's Studio Prata for the vestment with the image of the Black Madonna, combining traditional embroidery with contemporary utility embroidery).

The fair is accompanied by exhibitions of old and contemporary art, as well as trainings and workshops for lay artists and priests. However, all this disappears in the thicket of ubiquitous rubbish. As it was noted in the commentary summarizing the 17<sup>th</sup> Sacral Fair 'Sacroexpo', there is 'everything that the soul desires. A lot of business, a bit of art'<sup>6</sup>.

There is actually less and less real art from year to year. It simply fails to find buyers and it is not a matter of exorbitant prices, but rather of tastes. What is readily bought are images of saints, tacky vestments, altars, which do not present any artistic value and are often exhibited in a cheap way.

I will now return to the question posed at the beginning: why is kitsch present in the contemporary church space? I will repeat – in my opinion, the main reason for the presence of kitsch is first of all the lack of proper education among the clergy, as well as ignorance of the guidelines of the Roman Catholic Church related to sacred art, combined with the lack of willingness to deepen one's knowledge in this field.

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Conference of Museologists *Museums of Our Times*, concerning the problems of contemporary church museology.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.targikielce.pl/pl/sacroexpo.htm> [accessed: 25.09.2019].

## 2. ON THE NEED FOR EDUCATION IN THE FIELD OF ART HISTORY – LEGAL GUIDELINES OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

In its teachings, the Church does not ignore the problem of sacred art and provides appropriate tools, in the form of legal documents, to prepare priests in this field (see: Leszczyński 2006, 2008; Skrzydlewska 1997, 2002). For centuries, the Holy See has been formulating acts concerning the protection of monuments, and most of them have a universal character and are valid in the whole Roman Catholic Church. The only question that remains is to what extent are the guidelines contained in these documents implemented. And even if they are implemented, it seems that sometimes it is done only perfunctorily. An example could be, the issue of educating future priests in the field of art history and the protection of historical monuments.

Already in 1907, Pope Pius X in *Apostolicae Sedis* issued a decree in which he ordered the inclusion of lectures on Christian archaeology and art history in the curriculum of clerical seminaries (see: Mariani 1945). Understanding the value of teaching this discipline, the Second Vatican Council (1961, art. 129) maintained that decision: ‘During their philosophical and theological studies, clerics are to be taught about the history and development of sacred art, and about the sound principles governing the production of its works. In consequence they will be able to appreciate and preserve the Church’s venerable monuments, and be in a position to aid, by good advice, artists who are engaged in producing works of art’.

Adapting to the Council’s decisions, in 1973 the Polish Episcopal Conference published *The Standards of Conduct in Matters of Ecclesiastical Art*. According to this document, the task of the Commission for Ecclesiastical Art (created by the Polish Episcopal Conference) is to ‘postulate curricula in Theological Seminaries on religious art and the protection of monuments’ (*Normy postępowania* 1994: 301-306). *The Standards...* also mention that the Episcopal Commission should present ‘ideas of educating priests, nuns and lay people in the field of Christian artistic culture’. Priests from different dioceses, sometimes from different religious orders (as well as nuns, from time to time), are regularly sent to specialization courses in this field, yet, this concerns only a small percentage of the clergy.

The last document issued in this respect – *The Acts of the Ecumenical Council* – was created after the Second Polish Plenary Synod convened

on June 8<sup>th</sup> 1991, and ceremonially opened by Pope John Paul II (*Ochrona i konserwacja* 2001: 117-119). According to one of the articles of the document, the responsibility for the protection of cultural goods rests primarily with parish priests and rectors of churches. In order to hold such a responsible function in a professional manner, priests are obliged to have basic knowledge of art history and historical studies during their seminary studies. The seminary course also includes classes in the conservation of church art: 'These should be extended to include visits to restoration workshops in order to make the alumni aware of the complexity and cost of specialist treatments, which would often not be necessary, had the principles of monument protection been observed' (ibid.: 68).

When deciding on works of art, bishops must seek advice from the Commission for Ecclesiastical Art, as well as from experts in history, art history and protection of monuments. An unprecedented issue raised in *The Standards...* was the idea to 'establish schools or academies of ecclesiastical art in those countries where it is necessary' (ibid.: 69).

The above mentioned documents indicate the direction for the education of future art guardians. Unfortunately, these regulations remain to a large extent nothing but guidelines. My observations as an art history lecturer in clerical seminaries are not optimistic. Approximately thirty hours are planned for art history classes within the six-year teaching course<sup>7</sup>. Taking into account the fact that 99% of the alumni do not have basic knowledge in this area, it is necessary to focus the lectures only on the main topics. Therefore, it is not easy to elaborate on issues related to the protection of cultural goods, when it is difficult for the listener to understand why he should take care of something whose value he remains ignorant of. During such a short course it is difficult to sensitize future priests to beauty and to teach them how to distinguish real art from ordinary rubbish. Moreover, clerics who come from different backgrounds, are usually accustomed to mass culture and are generally unable to see which objects are made of unsuitable materials, what are their technical shortcomings, whether they convey real content or just 'pretend' and are in fact an illusion of something

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<sup>7</sup> The range of hours varies slightly depending on the rectors' decisions. Timetables are included on the pages of individual seminaries for comparison.

else, i.e. kitsch. This is highly disturbing as the kitsch filling the sacral space is like ‘cancer on the body of art’ (Oseka 1978; Mikeska 2008).

Further education should take place through regular studies in the field of history of art or protection of monuments, and only few priests are delegated to such courses. As a result, only individuals receive education in this field<sup>8</sup>. An important role can be played by occasional lectures organized by dioceses, meetings with artists and monument protection officers. Although there appear initiatives to meet these needs, apart from directors of church museums or chairmen of church art commissions, priests rarely participate.

### 3. A WORK OF SACRED ART – LEGAL GUIDELINES

Legal acts formulated by the Roman Catholic Church draw attention to issues related to the equipment of churches. These documents draw a clear line between what can be called a work of art and what we call trash. The main premise is to strive for aesthetic harmony, because only such harmony is conducive to concentration and directs our thoughts towards transcendent matters.

For example, the following works should not be present in churches, ‘(...) works which are not in conformity with faith and good manners and Christian piety, or offend the religious idea, either because of their inadequate form, or because of their poor level, mediocrity or imitation’ (Second Vatican Council 1986: art. 124). In a church, the faithful should seek truth, goodness and beauty; true beauty, not false beauty, because false beauty is kitsch. Temples are sometimes a place of great stylistic diversity. Many of them were built in bygone eras, but due to the fact that they functioned continuously for several centuries, they were being filled with objects characteristic of each passing epoch. As these works conveyed the truth in a beautiful way, they are also admired and understood by the contemporary recipient of art.

Every few centuries there are certain breakthroughs in the history of the Church, which lead to changes also in the artistic field. The most recent example is the Second Vatican Council. By changing the liturgy, the Council also introduced changes in the design and decoration of new temples. Opening to the new and contemporary was inevitable. This was

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<sup>8</sup> There is no need to carry out research in this area, because the websites of most archdioceses or dioceses provide links directing us to the ‘priests of the diocese’ site which provides information on the studies they have completed.

connected with the adoption of new trends in architecture and required changes in the artistic approach to religious themes.

Such approach was confirmed in 1967 by the Congregation for the Rites, which published the *Eucharisticum Misterium – An Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*. It reminds us that care for the setting of liturgical rites should be manifested in the selection of liturgical robes, which ‘should serve the task of noble beauty rather than empty splendor’ (Acta SS. 1964: 554).

The 1970 edition of the *General Introduction to the Roman Missal* recommended that attention should be paid to the interior design of the church. It was absolutely necessary to avoid splendor, decorations should be simple, and should reflect the style and needs of modern times (*Ogólne wprowadzenie...* 1970).

I have only mentioned some of the guidelines in force, which have been provided in the form of legal acts. They give an idea of how experience has been gained over the centuries in the field of the protection of cultural goods and the admission of new art to churches (*Codex Iuris...* 1984; John Paul II 1988, 1997; Congregation for the Clergy 1971; *Wskazania konserwatorskie...* 1994).

Summarizing the reflection on the presence of kitsch in contemporary religious art, we ask ourselves the following questions: why does the Church, while taking care of the proper transmission of the truths of faith and seeing the need to use works of art of the highest quality, have such a large number of kitsch buildings, sculptures and paintings? Why, despite the guidelines contained in numerous documents, does it continue to present the *sacrum* in such a banal and reduced form?

This is probably due to the lack of proper education of priests and lay believers. Mass production, in which real art is degraded to the role of a semi-finished product, is also to blame. Once we realize how widespread the problem is, perhaps we will be able to prevent the flooding of both churches and worshippers’ houses with rubbish (Zmarzły 2015).

Of course, it is not about absolutizing art, rather about associating it with culture as a whole, understood in the classical sense. Therefore, if the aim of art and culture, as the ancients used to say, is the ‘cultivation’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Latin word ‘cultura’ comes from *colere* – ‘to cultivate’. As P. Jaroszyński and M.A. Krąpiec (2005: 132) explained: ‘The term »cultura« originally meant

of human reason and the moral perfection of man and the combination of religious content and beauty, then we will deal with real art, art which, while developing man, connects him with God.

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farming in ancient Rome. Later, the term »agriculture« was used to describe farming. Early on, starting from Cicero, the term »culture« was used metonymously to denote »animi cultura«, which was understood as ennoblement of the human mind, essentially by philosophy: »Cultura animi philosophia est« (Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, 8 a 11). This understanding of the term »culture« was to a large extent a continuation of what the ancient Greeks called paideia (paidéia), understood as comprehensive »cultivation«, the rational upbringing of man, in its individual and social aspects. (...) The perception of order poses questions about its necessary sources and conditions. In the Middle Ages the expression »culture« was associated with religious worship and cult. It was then that commonly used terms came into being: »cultura Christi«, »cultura dolorum«, »cultura christianae religionis« – associated with the religious worship of Christ, his Passion, or the Christian religion in general. During the Renaissance, attempts were made to return to the ancient understanding of the term »culture« and to use it to denote the mental and spiritual perfection (or improvement) of man. Therefore, the well-known ancient terms were reintroduced: »animi cultura« and even »georgica animi« – practicing the spirit'. The classical understanding of the word 'culture' denotes that it is the development of man to a full personal life. See also: Chłodna-Błach 2016.

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### Summary

The study is the attempt to identify the sources of the kitsch phenomenon in contemporary religious art in Poland. The main subject of the study regards church interiors, particularly art works present in the sacred spaces of the Catholic church in Poland. The analysis, which does not include the notion of kitsch or other aspects of this problem, will be presented from the point of view of a person who has been scientifically and practically engaged in the protection of religious art monuments for years. Observations made during the implementation of projects for church museums, providing advice on the monument protection, as well as didactic work as a lecturer of art history in clerical seminaries prompted me to reflect on the level of Polish sacred art and its significance for the reception of the message of the Church.

**Keywords:** kitsch, art history, aesthetics, religious art, sacred interiors, interior design, contemporary religious space



# ALAN KURDI'S ONLINE RESURRECTIONS – OMRAN DAQNEESH'S ONLINE REANIMATIONS

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*By attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive (...). Photography has something to do with resurrection.*

Roland Barthes (1982: 79-82)

## I. THE DEAD BODY AS A REFERENT OF A PHOTOGRAPH

Culture knows three models of perfectly immobile bodies: 1. a sculpture, statue, monument, figure; 2. an image of a body (painted, photographed); 3. a dead body. These models can fuse with one another, an example of which are mediaeval sarcophagi (table tombs) presenting the dead lying on the catafalque<sup>1</sup>, as well as photographs showing the corpse. The body,

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<sup>1</sup> Nowadays one rather wants to remember the dead as living, and for this purpose gravestones frequently use photographs made while the deceased was still alive. When Roland Barthes (1982: 96) revealed the *punctum* of the photograph of Alexander Gardner *The Portrait of Lewis Payne* (1865), presenting the would-be murderer awaiting execution, he wrote: 'he is going to die'; the common *punctum* of the persons in gravestone photographs is: 'We do not know that we are already dead'; in this way the Barthes-inspired ('each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death'; *ibid.*: 97) remark by Wojciech Nowicki (2015: 267) that each photograph presenting a person is 'the image of a person dead *in spe*'. The fear related to being photographed (see tales of ethnographers and anthropologists of beliefs that a photograph takes away a part of the soul) was also articulated by Barthes (1982: 14), when he wrote of the 'micro-version of death' as the effect of transformation of the subject into an object by way of the photographer's

touched by the paralysis of death, becomes immobilised again here in the permanence of matter, or in an iconic figuration that is devoid of time.

The corpse is a paradoxical entity – ‘a presence that refers to non-presence’ (Thomas 1991: 43), the closeness of distance, the embodiment of an irremovable distance that separates those who remain, from the dead. The visual presentation of a corpse is an act of the immortalisation of the dead in their non-existence, yet at the same time it saves the body – in a painting, a figure – from inevitable decay, as it becomes, in a way, preserved, retained with a look not different from the look of a living body, at times even in a position taken by it (some *post mortem* photographs may serve as examples here<sup>2</sup>).

The photograph of a corpse – just like discourse about them – is there to serve the interests of the living. One of the oldest human strategies is to try to preserve the dead in the land of the living, in an image, resemblance, so that the exposition capacity, a property of every social being, is retained. The photograph in this case is a further step in the evolution of representations of the dead, following effigies, masks, casts, sculptures and paintings<sup>3</sup>. As Hans Belting (2011: 130) writes: ‘Death, an unbearable

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doings, which he referred to as ‘embalming’ (so, the photographer does not as much kill me, they disclose and preserve me as a corpse that I shall henceforth be); analogously, he read the feeling of discomfort noted by persons watching photographic representations of themselves: ‘what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person’.

<sup>2</sup> This practice, characteristic for the Victorian era, is returning again as part of the therapeutic movement (‘Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep’), formed in the United States in the year 2005, fusing psychologists, medical doctors and professional photographers, offering the parents who have lost a child (a newborn child, mostly), a photographic session for remembrance, see: [www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org](http://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org) [accessed: 14.09.2019].

<sup>3</sup> When photographic cameras became widespread, and bodies of the dead were not yet removed from the sphere of daily existence, there was the custom of taking photographs by mourners with open coffins, in which their close one would lie. A few kinds of these photographs are found in my grandfather’s albums. When asked about them, he replied that a common and almost obvious custom was at the time to call a photographer when somebody from the family died. My grandfather himself, who halfway through the 1950s purchased his first

absence, became endurable when an image substituted for the absence, a *symbolic body* replacing a *mortal body* that has dissolved into nothing'.

The second strategy is closely related to the 'iconography of suffering' and presents the body that is dead as a result of the violence it suffered, or a mass of nameless bodies (spaces 'littered with corpses', landscapes where 'corpses fall by the dozen'), or nearly-corpses (scenes of torture and execution) or soon-to-be-corpses (mutilated, disfigured bodies of those still alive, fighting for their lives). The purpose of such representations – or at least, of their creators – is to sensitise to the pain of others and to deter from evil (see:

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photographic camera – a Smena – was asked several times to take such photographs at acquaintances. However, he was unable to say, what was the purpose of this (in general, the question as to why one takes photographs, is not easy to answer; this practice-governed obviousness remains partly unanalysed in terms of consciousness). Nowicki (2015: 259) considers photographing oneself by dead relatives to be a secularised counterpart to rituals of preservation or making death casts or masks: 'Most probably, the moment of death – and only this moment – causes notions of memory, contractions of the muscle responsible for storing images (would it be because of the awareness that there will be no more occasions?)'. Barthes (1982: 93) adds a certain significant fact that Nowicki seems to have overlooked: the fragility, the mortality of the photograph itself. 'Earlier societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal; this was the Monument. But by making the (mortal) Photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of »what has been«, modern society has renounced the Monument'. Earlier on, he writes: 'The only way I can transform the Photograph is into refuse: either the drawer or the wastebasket' (ibid.: 93), which significantly corresponds to the remark by Louis-Vincent Thomas (1991: 101) on the handling of bodies in contemporary society: 'in a culture dominated by economy, where everybody is determined by the measure of their working power, the corpse is, of course, useless, so it is waste – as a car wreck. If hence this system considers death to only be technically mastered, one cannot wonder that practices related to bodies are uncommonly similar to practices related to waste'. Audrey Linkman (2011: 7) perceives this fact quite differently, who, in substantiating the choice of her analyses (photographs showcasing a private loss, not victims of war, cataclysms or violence), writes: 'In these portraits the dead body was neither neglected nor rejected. The physical remains that had once been the living person were still the object of love and care'.

Sontag 2003; Jakubowski 2015; Draguła 2015). Over the course of centuries, the sole bodies that were presented in this way was the (earthly) body of Christ and the bodies of holy martyrs (or perhaps the bodies of enemies, heretics, in triumphant battle scenes<sup>4</sup>). However – as Susan Sontag (2003: 33-35) writes – ‘these are destinies beyond deploring or contesting (...). The practice of representing atrocious suffering as something to be deplored, and, if possible, stopped, enters the history of images with a specific subject: the sufferings endured by a civilian population at the hands of a victorious army on the rampage’. Along with Francisco Goya’s series *The Disasters of War*, a ‘new standard of reactions to suffering’ is developed. Or it is rather – a new standard of the *required* reaction, because neither the producer of the image, nor even more so the image itself have the power to determine the use that is to be made of it, and the response (emotional, physiological, ideological) that the recipients will experience (if they experience one at all – indifference is, after all, an undesirable reaction)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Such representations are enjoying a comeback along with the practice of publication of photos of bodies of terrorists – alleged or not – who could be found and killed before they committed (further) crimes. Arjun Appadurai (2006: 107) notes that these representations are characterised by the logic of a self-fulfilling prophecy: ‘both state-sponsored violence against terrorists and local violence against ethnic neighbours converge on the display of the captured, wounded, or humiliated body of the enemy as the proof of the very treachery it was designed to destroy. In the repose of death or the immobility of surrender, terrorist bodies become silent memorials to the enemy within, proof of treachery in its very pathetic ordinariness’.

<sup>5</sup> Two more strategies can be named: 3) police or detective work, related to the photographic documentation of crime scenes for the purpose of investigations and collection of proof (the corpse, just like in case of an autopsy, coroner’s work or anatomic pathology, gains a certain paradoxical subjectivity in the act of full objectification: it is supposed to ‘tell’ the story of the last moments of the deceased), and 4) artistic, whereby the corpse becomes an object of aesthetics. The history of artistic photography of bodies of the deceased is presented by Audrey Linkman (2011: 154-186), beginning with photographers who created their series in mortuaries using anonymous ‘dead’ (Jeffrey Silverthorne, Hans Danusen, Rudolf Schäffer, Andrea Serrano, Joel Peter Witkin), through artists related to US counterculture and the underground bohemians in a time, in which the HIV virus began to ‘reap’

In her essay, Sontag traces the history and the intricacies of representations of violence and the discourse surrounding it, beginning with the conviction that 'if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war' (ibid.: 14), through 'pornography of suffering'<sup>6</sup>, all the way to the general indifference of all those who day after day, comfortably seated as 'not concerned', consume a solid dose of macabre imagery flowing from newspapers and the television, reacting at most with a fleeting and idle sigh of compassion. Discussions on the legitimacy of representing 'images of the pain of others' emerge from time to time on the occasion of publication of further 'shocking materials', most frequently by tabloids<sup>7</sup>, and fizzle out just as quickly. The accusers then speak of violations of ethics standards of plain human decency, the violation of elementary human dignity and of their death, not considering the feelings of those close to the victim, finally – seeking cheap thrills at the expense of human life ('foraging' on somebody's death). Defenders – most commonly representatives of the incriminated press – on the other hand argument

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its crop (Nan Goldin, Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz), all the way to those creators, who used photography to articulate private loss and process the grief (Richard Avedon, Anne Leibovitz, Anne Noble, Briony Campbell, Ishiushi Miyako).

<sup>6</sup> Sontag (2003: 33) herself does not use this term, even though it is ascribed to her; one can derive it, however, from the fragment, where she writes that '[i]t seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked'. Louis-Vincent Thomas (1991: 109) speaks on this occasion about the 'cannibalism of the eye': 'the media are eager to throw the most sensational images of corpses to masses devoid of drama'.

<sup>7</sup> An occasion was provided by the cover of the tabloid „Fakt” of August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, showing a terrified and bloodied ten-year-old girl attacked with an axe at the door to a book store in Kamienna Góra, Poland. The cover caption read: 'The girl is looking on with large, terrified eyes – just moments ago, an insane person attacked her with an axe right in the city centre. The beast calmly stands beside as if nothing had happened. He does not struggle, does not run away. But just now he cracked an innocent child's head with an axe! A few hours later, ten-year-old Kamila died (...). Sleep soundly, angel, only God knows why this happened'. I quote this fragment here solely to showcase the move from venomous protest ('beast', 'cracked an innocent child's head') to idle consolation ('sleep soundly, angel'), which will be of interest to me in the present text.

in favour of the positive effects of such practices, referring to the already mentioned narrations of sensitisation to the suffering of others, and deterrence from evil and violence.

The two strategies presented earlier on – saving the dead *in effigie* and ‘the image of the pain of others’ – position the corpse in a way, placing it in the private or public sphere, turning it into a person or a symbol and sounding the tone of mourning or guilt. Wojciech Nowicki (2015: 265) seems to refer to this classification, when referring to the photograph of a dead soldier from the time of World War I he writes – with a certain pride – ‘I rather look at the body, not at the political causes of death’. These two perspectives may shift between each other back and forth. Case one: three men leading a crowd, each one of them holding the corpse of a child wound in canvas with spots of pale red – as if it were dissolved blood; I read: ‘relatives carry the bodies of the victims of Israeli strikes on Beith Gahia (north Gaza strip)’. What the faces of the men is best described by is the Biblical word ‘lamentations’ (it spans both anger and pain). The dead children (*their* children) are the blow, they are an expression of guilt, the personification of grief and hatred against the aggressor. Case two: three-year-old John F. Kennedy Jr. salutes clumsily in front of his father’s coffin being carried in front of a military parade accompanied by the honour guard.

The opponents of publications of images of suffering and violence seem to question the equality of these two perspectives, noting – without a doubt, correctly – that the public aspect is secondary to the private one, that every person represented in them is *primarily* somebody’s child or mother, or father, etc., and that it is their next of kin who have the original and inalienable right both to their body, as well as its image, the right to privacy of grief, the right that is violated by political or symbolic exploitation of the image of the dead. What happens, however, if the next of kin themselves join in the spectacle of representations, the hero of which is the corpse of their relative? Is the pornography of the corpse not accompanied at times by the exhibitionism of grief?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Along with the photograph of Alan Kurdi, media started showing photographs of his distraught father with eyes red from crying and lips pursed in a spasm of pain. I am not saying that the grief of Abdullah Kurdi wasn’t authentic, only



I do not intend to continue along this line or ascribe to any of the above, slightly dated, rhetorics. Instead, I would like to trace, as a case study, the *fate* of a single photograph and a single frame taken from amateurs footage showing children as victims of the war in Syria and the so-called migrant crisis: Alan Kurdi (in a photograph taken by Nilüfer Demir, a Turkish photojournalist working for the DHA agency, in the beginning of September of 2015 on a Turkish beach in Bodrum) and Omran Daqneesh ('the boy in the ambulance' presented in a short footage showing the consequences of the bombing raids on the Syrian city of Aleppo).

Speaking about 'fate', I am thinking about the quite specific context that was not known to Susan Sontag, and described by the terms convergence culture or participatory culture, meaning – according to the definition by Henry Jenkins (2006: 290) – 'culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content', in which bottom-up and top-down content (related to government, mainstream media, the business world) intertwines, overpowering the hegemonic, centralised transmission model, which became possible ever since the 'people' – formerly, consumers and passive recipients – were given the tools and the infrastructure permitting the genuine involvement in many-to-many communication.

Images showing both boys were indeed not only broadly *shared* – both in traditional media, as well as social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter – but they were also *repeated* in a range of image conversions, remixes, paraphrases or references, becoming 'memory markers', 'image topoi' (as stated by Ewa Domańska [2006]), symbols or visual metonymies of the 'migrant crisis', they became viral, all the way to become memes. To trace all these forms of 'repetitions with differences', by necessity selectively and in an abridged form, will permit a gloss for Sontag, taking into account a change in the cultural paradigm related to the new media model. The basic tools used in the current paper will be a tools of semiotics.

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that in the presence of journalists it must have grown to spectacular (G. Debord) or mythical (R. Barthes) proportions.

## II. ALAN KURDI – THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF CONSOLATION, THE UNBEARABLE SOFTNESS OF PROTEST

### I. FRAMES AND SIGNS: VISUAL TACTICS

One would need to begin by stating that there are two photographs of the same subject: a boy, later recognised as Alan Kurdi<sup>9</sup>, a three-year-old Syrian, ethnically – a Kurd, lying on the beach, just by the shoreline, not far from the Turkish locality of Bodrum. The boy is dressed in a red short-sleeved t-shirt (the t-shirt is rolled up slightly, as a result of which a beige band of his belly can be seen) and navy shorts extending beyond his knees (the colours are darker, because the boy's clothes are wet); on his feet he's wearing black trainers (he might not be wearing any socks). He's lying on his chest, with his head towards the ground, tilted slightly to the left, with his arms lying along his body, palms upwards. The boy's legs are slightly bent at the knees, as a result of which the buttocks are sticking out slightly, pointed to the right. One photograph is oriented vertically, and presents

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<sup>9</sup> This individualisation (related to finding many other photographs of Alan, smiling, playing ball, hugging a teddy bear, hugging his brother, who also died in the same circumstances, just like the boys' mother) plays a significant role here: it permits – as stated by the United States artist Nan Goldin, photographing her friends dying of AIDS – 'gave the human face to the statistics (Linkman 2011: 176). Statistics do not give rise to real compassion and do not cause intense opposition (100, 200, 1000 persons – all of this is abstraction that does not differentiate emotions), as opposed to a single person, who one may get to know. This fact was used for instance by Steven Spielberg in *Schindler's List* (1993), singing out from the crowd of victims a girl through her red coat (the entire film, apart of the final shots, is in black and white) and showing her in two scenes: first being caught in the street in the ghetto, then on a carriage removing bodies. A similar effect may be found in the graphics by Robert Tauber Calvo Jimenez, who pasted the body of Alan Kurdi (small compared to the entire image, placed in a position that is not particularly visible – close to the upper left corner – being the only one in colour) onto a photograph showing beachgoers, who through this had become figures of perfect indifference, see: [www.boredpanda.com/mare-nostrum/](http://www.boredpanda.com/mare-nostrum/) [accessed: 19.09.2019].



Fig. 1-2. Alan Kurdi on the beach in Bodrum (photo by Nilüfer Demir /DHA)

the boy from the direction of his feet (fig. 1.), the other is horizontal, and was made from the left side of the boy, about five metres from the body (fig. 2).

The two most significant components of these photographs are the colours of the clothes and the arrangement of the boy's body – it is quite a clumsy position, yet at the same time cute in its clumsiness, akin to the position take by sleeping children. This position is at the same time quite unsettling – an instinct of care would suggest tilting the boy's head more slightly to the left or turning him onto his right side.

Sleep has for a long time been the basic cultural model of what is unthinkable, incomprehensible – of death, just like death is referred to as the 'eternal' sleep. Any attempt to understand death by analogy to dream is based on replacing the unknown with the known, and the unpleasant – with the pleasant. However, sleep – as a component of life – does not cease to be its opposite. A reference to the 'invigorating', regenerative power of sleep suffices. Hence, despite it being disconnected from the capitalist logic of production, it powers its supporting requirement of vitality.

As long as the attempts to understand what death is, which are doomed to fail, attempts at discerning what does it mean / what is it like to 'not live', place sleep as the analogon of death, on the level of representations, it can be its synonym: '(s)he looks as if (s)he were sleeping' – this is the way that bodies lying in coffins are sometimes described, in an act of consolation. In particular, a photograph, which freezes the signs of life present in a sleeping body – the breath, the pulse, changes to the position – may reinforce this feeling of puzzlement, even just be confusing at times ('does the photograph depict a sleeping or a dead person?', 'which of the persons in the photograph

is dead?<sup>10</sup> – many photographs, in particular old, silent, unsigned and context-free can be asked this in earnest, and, moreover, at times an answer may not be found<sup>11</sup>), yet at times they may console recipients: ‘Sleep was simply the sweetener with which it was acceptable to dress and serve the dish that was death’ – writes Audrey Linkman (2011: 21-22), adding: ‘The death-as-sleep portrait was clearly intended to comfort the bereaved and console the survivors’.

### **Tactic 1: Reframing**

The body of Alan Kurdi in the photograph by Nilüfer Demir could be an ambiguous or even an opposite sign. Its meaning is determined by the context, or more precisely – as we are talking about an image – by its frame. The original frame does not leave any place to doubt that the sign-body of the boy means death – nobody sleeps in *that* position in *that* kind of place; a passing wave washes his face, reaching the level of arms (and the element of water is the enemy of sleep, in this case even – the enemy of life; it is the one, which, caught on the photograph like a murderer who didn’t manage to flee the scene of the crime – even if being outside the register of guilt – killed the boy<sup>12</sup>). This indetermination of the meaning

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<sup>10</sup> It was again Roland Barthes who articulated this both (epistemological) flaw of a photograph and its (ontological) advantage: the complete triumph of existence at the cost of significance.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Such is the Photograph: it cannot *say* what it lets us see’ (Barthes 1982: 100). Traces of this confusion can be sought already in the beginnings of the history of photography – I am referring here to the photograph by Hippolyte Bayard from October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1840, entitled *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*. This photograph shows the author posing as a corpse in protest against the French government’s provision of financing for further research to L.J. Daguerre, and omitting Bayard – the inventor of an alternative technology, thanks to whom the photo-sensitive paper showed already the positive of the image.

<sup>12</sup> Audrey Linkman (2011: 24) writes that in many Victorian-era photographs ‘disturbing memories of a painful or violent death [are overlaid – P.J.] with a more lasting and consoling image of a soul at rest’. None of the remixes of the photograph of Alan that I know show any references to the pain of drowning, however the streams of water are presented as: caring embraces ([www.boredpanda.com/sleep-deep-in-my-shoulders-here-is-your-safe-home/](http://www.boredpanda.com/sleep-deep-in-my-shoulders-here-is-your-safe-home/), [www.boredpanda.com/](http://www.boredpanda.com/)

of the body-sign was used by the creators (prosumers) of representations which use the tactic of the reframing. Thanks to this the sign, retaining its identity as the *signifiant*, is shifted to its opposite as the *signifié*. The change of the field of denotation (death is turning into a sleep) also describes a very different level of connotation (unpleasant is now pleasant; painful – cute; unsettling – calm).

The level of the image is dominated by an utopian, counter-real representation ('the way it should be'), whereby its negative reference ('the way it is') hides in the reminiscences ('afterimages') of the original image and is present by way of a network of legible references (fig. 3-4).



Fig. 3. Reframing: illustration by an unknown artist



Fig. 4. Reframing: illustration by Birdan Saha

the-warmest-embrace/ [accessed: 14.09.2019]), bed sheets (www.boredpanda.com/just-sleeping/ [accessed: 14.09.2019]) or a hand holding the boy's body with care (www.boredpanda.com/sleep-my-child/ [accessed: 14.09.2019]).

**Tactic 2: Splitting the frame**

One of these representations – by Kayled Karajah (fig. 5) – sees the artist including an internal frame, dividing the image into two asymmetric spaces: ‘the way it should be’ (¾ of the image on the left side) and ‘the way it is’ (¼ of the image on the right), or ‘the way it was’ and ‘the way it is’. The sign-body of the boy is symmetrically divided by this vertical section, disclosing a dualised meaning (the left side means sleep, the right – death), and at the same time postulative and critical power, permitting the placement of the message on the level of utopia (the way it should be / the way it is) or nostalgia (the way it was / the way it is), whereby the first of these is appreciated positively as the current desired state.

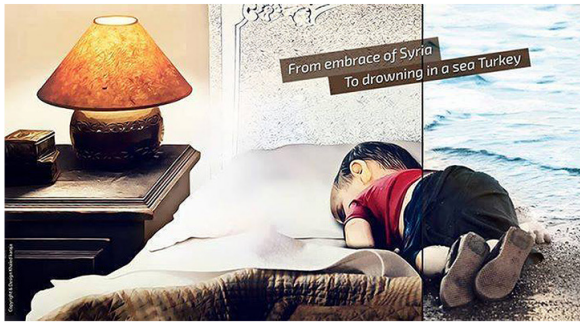


Fig. 5. Illustration by Kayled Karajah

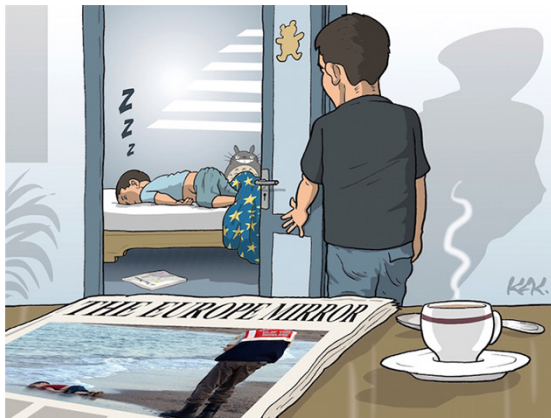


Fig. 6. Doubling the frame: illustration by French illustrator Kak

In a different case (fig. 6), two ambivalent frames (the frame of the bedroom door and the frame of the image on the paper cover) and the corresponding identical signs of opposing meanings were both placed inside a single image.

### Tactic 3: Re-signing

A different tactic in turn utilises associations related to the spatial context – indeed, the beach is a place of relaxation, care-freeness and play. Hence, retaining the original frame, the creators transform the sign itself (to discern it from the practice presented earlier, this one might be referred to as ‘re-signing’), which remains recognisable through its distinctive features (colour of boy’s clothing, dark, short hair). The postulative and critical influence is here analogous to reframing: it is the utopian or nostalgic ‘way it should be’ that fills the level of the image, whereby the painful ‘way it is’ remains in the afterimage of the original, but not only that – a close analysis of the image by Gunduz Akhayev shows that the thing that the boy is building out of sand on the beach (or the thing that he already built as he is currently focused on finishing the sand building, seeming as if he would like to lift it and carry it away with himself), is a shape of his own body, the position of which is known to us from the photograph by Nilüfer Demir. This death cast (made by the hands of the deceased himself) violates the smooth homogeneity of the representation – immersing itself into it on the aesthetic level, yet radically separating itself from it on the ethical one (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Re-signing: illustration by Gunduz Aghayev

Turkish artist Ugur Gallen took a different path. In his illustration – which also has a very calm and seaside convention – the sign-body of the boy is unchanged, but its absent reference (utopian or nostalgic) is seen in the form of the shadow cast by the body-sign, but not being its shadow (as it corresponds to it neither physically, nor semantically). We only see a shadow – index of that which is not there, and what was or should be, playing with a bucket; the place of the boy playing on the beach – removed from the representation, just like he was removed from existence – is taken up by the smooth, celadon surface of the empty sea and a slightly cloudy sky (fig. 8).



*Fig. 8. The sign and its shadow: illustration by Ugur Gallen*

#### **Tactic 4: ‘Stones and petrol bombs’**

Here, I shall utilise these stereotypical tools, being at the same time weapons, which crowds, people, aim against the soullessness, injustice, violence or blind indifference of rulers, to present the last of the discerned visual tactics of protest. If in most of the images presented beforehand, the mythical (in Roland Barthes’ terms) aspect was more or less hidden, it is here that it begins to dominate, and the image takes up its place fully in the register of guilt and public grief. The body-myth is displayed, thrown to the feet of the authorities, aimed against it, as if it were crying: ‘Look what you have done!’, ‘You have blood on your hands!’. Blown out of proportion, it is to be clear proof of guilt serving to dislodge those in power from their indifference and the politics of ‘hand-washing’.





Fig. 9. 'Look what you have done' – illustration by anonymous Internet user

In this case, each time we experience the question, whether the message was correctly addressed. Different illustrations point their *J'accuse* in different directions, placing the blame on the UN (and the relations of the West with the Arab world: secret arrangements, weapons for oil deals, hidden circulations of petrodollars, etc.), on the Arab world (with its endless wars)<sup>13</sup>, on the EU (with its foreign policy, the work of the Frontex, etc.)<sup>14</sup>. This sheer multitude of potential guilty parties dissolves the voice of reproach and opposition from the powerless and mute body of the boy, entangling it in a network of rhetorical fights which almost exclusively aim at shifting responsibility on to others. From 'a stone and a petrol bomb', the boy's body becomes a 'rotten egg' or 'hot potato' from the children's play, hastily thrown to someone else's hands, which all remain unblemished (fig. 9)<sup>15</sup>.

## 2. OCCUPATION: REPORTER. SPECIALITY: CHILD PHOTOGRAPHY

I have overlooked a very obvious, yet meaningful fact: the photographs of Nilüfer Demir do not only show a corpse, but the corpse of a child. In terms of the issue of the influence of showing violence instigated upon the civilian population on the development of a new standard of reaction to suffering,

<sup>13</sup> [www.boredpanda.com/the-leaders-watching/](http://www.boredpanda.com/the-leaders-watching/); [www.boredpanda.com/arab/](http://www.boredpanda.com/arab/) [accessed: 19.09.2019].

<sup>14</sup> [www.boredpanda.com/stap-looking-away/](http://www.boredpanda.com/stap-looking-away/) [accessed: 19.09.2019].

<sup>15</sup> Analogous image: [www.boredpanda.com/in-memory-of-Alan-kurdi-by-achraf-baznani/](http://www.boredpanda.com/in-memory-of-Alan-kurdi-by-achraf-baznani/) [accessed: 19.09.2019].

as mentioned by Sontag, the figure of the child should be ascribed with a special significance. The child, with its innocence, gentleness, fragility, has the ability to accumulate in itself the entire pointless tragedy of war, as well as the aggravation of the ethical problems related to showing ‘images of the pain of others’.

The story about the background of the photograph by Nilüfer Demir fuses in itself components of the Cartier-Bresson’s mythology of the ‘decisive moment’ and the mission of the photojournalist (hindered by humanly, womanly and motherly instincts): ‘I almost felt paralyzed when I saw the child’s corpse’ – says the Turkish reporter – ‘At the same time, as a photographer I have a task that does not allow time for second-guessing, for freezing. So, I took the pictures’ (quoted after: Küpeli 2015). Asked about her feelings and reflections related to the popularity of the photograph she took, the reporter said: ‘On the one hand, I wish I hadn’t had to take that picture. I would have much preferred to have taken one of Alan playing on the beach than photographing his corpse. What I saw has left a terrible impression that keeps me awake at night. Then again, I am happy that the word [most probably a typo that should read »world« – P.J.] finally cares and is mourning the dead children. I hope that my picture can contribute to changing the way we look at immigration in Europe, and that no more people have to die on their way out of a war’ (ibid.).

As always under such circumstances, voices of opposition and criticism also emerged<sup>16</sup>. I shall quote one of them, by Brendan O’Neill (2015), a columnist for Britain’s „The Spectator”, as it refers to the new form of idle

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<sup>16</sup> The conversions of the photograph by Demir include those that are aimed at the media. In one of these, by Michel Kichka, seven small persons with cameras, photographic cameras and tripods gather around an enormous body of Alan (<https://fr.kichka.com/2015/09/03/Alan-kurdi/> [accessed: 21.09.2019]), a different one shows two camera men with lenses aimed at Alan, the top shows the caption ‘Jackpot’ known from bar games, referring to the maximum possible prize (the signature comes from Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*; [www.boredpanda.com/society-of-the-spectacle-by-lhomme-jaune/](http://www.boredpanda.com/society-of-the-spectacle-by-lhomme-jaune/) [accessed: 21.09.2019]). Still a different image shows a photojournalist (male) crouching on a pile of child corpses in a pool of blood (caption: ‘Victims of terror’), only to take the shot of one Alan (caption: ‘Victim of migration’; [www.boredpanda.com/cynizm/](http://www.boredpanda.com/cynizm/) [accessed: 21.09.2019]).

compassion in the recipient, characteristic for the time of Web 2.0, and being an example of so-called slacktivism<sup>17</sup>: 'Isn't this just the saddest photo you've ever seen? And gross too? Quick, share it! Show it to your friends – on Twitter, Facebook – so that they will feel sad and grossed-out too. Gather round, everyone: stare at the dead Syrian child'. The author himself refers to this as a 'moral pornography' and deems it to be a sign of hypocritical narcissism, serving nothing but self-satisfaction and moral catharsis of the recipient: 'I cried, therefore I'm good'.

Just like in case of many 'iconic' photographs, there also emerged the suspicions that the entire scene was staged; these suspicions were even supported by – visual, of course! – proofs (so, where the compassionate and angry recipients tricked?). In line with the presented 'proofs', the body of the boy was moved by a Turkish coast guard from the place, where the sea threw it on the shore, to a more 'scenic' location, and arranged in a position in which it is to be remembered (see: Dearden 2015).

Irrespective of these controversies and speculations, the photograph by Nilüfer Demir will enter the canon of 'images of the pain of others' under the category of 'children', along with equally famous photographs by Nick Ut (1972, Vietnamese girl burnt by napalm – nearly-corpse) or Kevin Carter (1993, Sudanese girl dying of hunger – soon-to-be-corpse). In the culture of convergence, the connection could not go unnoticed and unutilised by creators of on-line 'repetitions with changes'.

In one illustration, a photograph by Ut, processed so that it shows but outlines, is placed, akin to an (anti-)advertising billboard, in the sea, whereby the known silhouette of Alan Kurdi lies on the shore as if he were looking at a photograph (to achieve this effect, it was necessary to twist the body by 90 degrees and align it parallel to the shore line). The Vietnamese girl (Kim Phúc, she is still alive and runs a foundation dealing with aid for child victims of war), taking a step with her right foot – only this part of her body, transgressing the lower edge of the banner frame, is shown in colour – is leaving the image and entering the sea (the creator signified

<sup>17</sup> A term by Malcolm Gladwell, a columnist for the „New Yorker”, a neologism fusing the words 'activism' and 'slack', which refers to all forms of easy and – in the end – idle engagement limited to liking, sharing, declaring participation, signing petitions, etc.

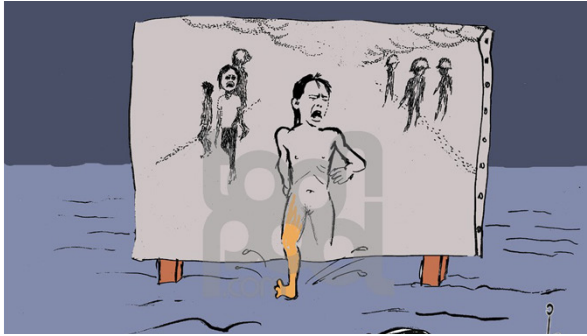


Fig. 10. Image memory: illustration by Joachim Tiedemann

this by a few strokes indicating water splashing), as well as Alan's present. So, the departure from the image is at once a journey in time. Even though the billboard is placed in water, it is somewhat unique (even more so as that it most probably serves to appear as if this symbolic event were true), its hidden resonance unites Kim Phúc and Alan Kurdi in a mythical register – as Child-Victims-of-War (fig. 10). In another image, the multiplied and blurred images of Kim Phúc, holding hands, form a sort of line, within which the body of Alan Kurdi lies (it may be supposed that this is a circle, although much more than the children's circle game it is reminiscent of medieval representations of the *dance macabre*). The multiplied silhouettes look at the viewer intensely, challenging them (breaking the rules of both the line, and the circle, which are oriented towards the inside) (fig. 11).

We do not know, and we will never know, the name of the Sudanese girl, and we can only make suppositions as to her later fate on the basis of improbability of hope; she remains solely as an image, she was solidified in the 'decisive moment', when a vulture landed behind her (critics say that Carter inadvertently immortalised himself in the photograph). I do not know, whether the afterimage of the Pulitzer-awarded photograph on the illustration depicting Alan, and in his background – a vulture with gun heads sticking out as if they were unruly feathers (and a further addressee of guilt indicated on its breast – 'Military industrial complex'), was in this case a purposeful move by the author (fig. 12).

A clearer reference may be found in a different image composed of three parts. In the top part, the author showed illustrations based on the known photographs by Carter and Demir, including the geographic and temporal



Fig. 11. Image memory: illustration by Garry J. Kendellen

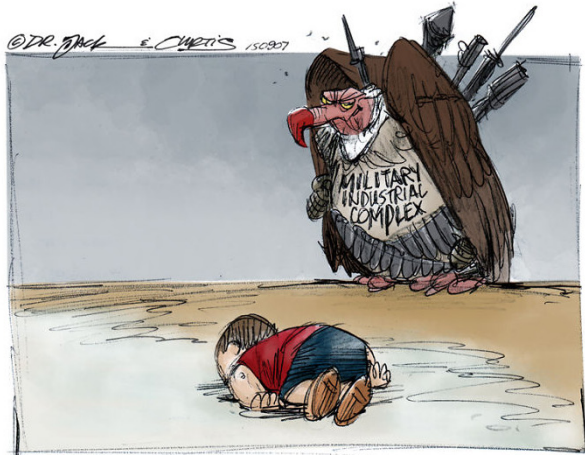


Fig. 12. Image memory: illustration by Dr Jack & Curtis

location, and in the bottom – an imagined meeting between the nameless Sudanese girl (who for this occasion turned into a boy, took off her necklace, but put on underpants that look like a diaper) with Alan Kurdi (whose hair paled). The meeting is taking place somewhere in the clouds, under the watchful eye of the sun: ‘Still the same?’ – asks the Sudanese boy, ‘Still



Fig. 13. Image memory: illustration by Hrishikesh Dev Sarma

the same’ – replies Alan. The world is still looking how little children are dying, and lets it happen (fig. 13).

### 3. AH, ALAN! AH, HUMANITY!

The stake in the game, in which many on-line images participate, is faith in humanity. For instance, the YouTube search engine shows ca. 25,000 results for ‘losing faith in humanity’ and 79,000 for ‘restore your faith in humanity’ (from which one may infer that it is not that bad – acts of Good outnumber acts of Evil – or just the opposite, that faith in humanity is so weakened that it needs an ‘army’ of images three times as large). Humanity in itself in the on-line conversions of the photograph by Demir is most frequently present in the form of a hand (or hands), which serve as a *pars pro toto* of a human (whereby these are rather hands of females, mothers, stereotypically indicating sensitivity, gentleness, care, as opposed to male hands that rather speak of robustness, certainty, strength), who, the female

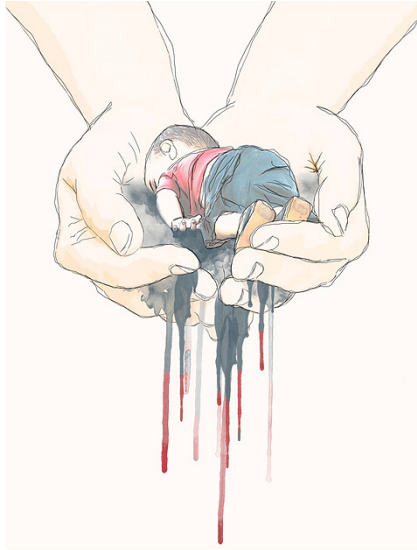


Fig. 14. Synecdoche: drawing by Helen Savvy

human, is in turn a *pars pro toto* of humanity (fig. 14)<sup>18</sup>. However, what do these images express – save for an empty gesture which is at the same time symbolic, utopian and late, lost for ages? I hear from them one word coming: consolation. I ask: for whom?

A much less positive image of humanity can be seen if it is shown metonymically as the World (visually: the globe of the Earth). These representations are clearly accusative, and the World – meaning, all together, hence, nobody in particular – functions as a (further) culprit: ‘Thank you World’ – says the inscription on the balloon that Alan Kurdi, lying on the beach, is holding in his hand in one image<sup>19</sup> (Banksy-inspired balloons frequently appear in remixes of Demir’s photograph).

In two images, Alan is lying on a cloud (is he sleeping?, is he dead? – hard to say) somewhere above the world, which in turn is shown in the shape

<sup>18</sup> ‘This is not Anne Geddes’ – says the caption for a very similar image ([www.boredpanda.com/ceci-nest-pas-anne-geddes/](http://www.boredpanda.com/ceci-nest-pas-anne-geddes/) [accessed: 19.09.2019]), the author of which refers not only to Magritte, but also to the famed photographer of children.

<sup>19</sup> [www.boredpanda.com/thank-you-world/](http://www.boredpanda.com/thank-you-world/) [accessed: 19.09.2019].



Fig. 15. *Metonymy: illustration by Dinko Art*

of a turd ('Leaving a Shitty World' – the caption reads<sup>20</sup>) or enveloped with a fiery halo (the Earth is seemingly on fire) which warms the boy's place of rest somewhat (caption: 'A Better Place') (fig. 15). A further image presents him when he's lying – again: on a cloud<sup>21</sup> – in front of a closed gate resembling the edges of rich mansions or state institutions; an unopened letter is found beside the boy (perhaps an asylum request, and behind the gate is an embassy or an authority for migrant affairs), whereby a man in a blue suit (an official?) is attempting to flee the spot and leave this entire affair behind him – the head of the person is the globe of the Earth, drawn on it as if in a cartoon, the face shows fear and terror (is this what drivers fleeing the scene of an accident look like?), the eyes – acting as if against his will – are turned towards that, from which the man is trying to flee (fig. 16)<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> [www.boredpanda.com/leaving-a-shitty-world/](http://www.boredpanda.com/leaving-a-shitty-world/) [accessed: 19.09.2019].

<sup>21</sup> Which did not prevent the creator from placing clouds 'in the sky' as well, or at least where they should be, according to the common convention.

<sup>22</sup> There is one more image, in which the boy is placed, uniquely, on a crescent moon. The moon is crying. The caption reads: 'Dirty world'; [www.boredpanda.com/dirty-world/](http://www.boredpanda.com/dirty-world/) [accessed: 19.09.2019].





Fig. 16. Metonymy: illustration by Ali Mirae

#### 4. 'HE IS WITH THE ANGELS NOW'

The decisively largest group of representations aligns with something that I would like to describe as a 'rhetoric of consolation'. This rhetoric is present even in critical representations – for instance, at least the last one quoted: why would the creator, having clearly the intention to accuse, not shy away from putting the entire scene on a fairytale cloud?

Many 'images of the pain of others' raise the question about the 'things to come'. This applies clearly to the images of almost-corpses and soon-to-be-corpses. These questions, I believe, are raised not only by 'ordinary human' caring or the simple human desire for a happy end, but the need to recognise, and then adapt one's own reaction to that which was recognised – it could be either grief or relief (this is missing from stories of those who have left home, never to return; stories of mountain explorers, the bodies of whom were never found – the inability to grieve, the inability to accept consolation; an emotional, existential *limbo*).

However, neither the corpse nor their photograph raise questions about the 'things to come', but the thing is that, in response, they have to remain within the fantastic (the imagined) or religious (frequently intertwining). The culture of convergence is not the first to provide these responses with an imaginary body. It is, however, the first, in which this image is such irritatingly naive. We've already seen the little clouds, let us just add that

they are not uniquely safe, as they do not touch upon the potentially irritable tones of religious or cultural differences: the clouds lie above cultural and religious diversities. We also already know Alan playing in the sand, so let's add a few elements – the halo and the wings – to gently suggest that this is not 'our, earthly beach', and we get Alan-the-Angel<sup>23</sup> building sandcastles (fig. 17). And here is laughing, holy Alan<sup>24</sup>, who had just completed his first sand building – beside him, quite a jovial man in biblical attire is finishing a creation, placing a white flag at the top (the caption for the image says it is Jesus<sup>25</sup>) (fig. 18). Even an uncomplicated graphical application suffices for Alan to sleep soundly on a flat surface of water among – what else – clouds (whatever they would be doing there) (fig. 19), or simply in the clouds – as an angel or not – beside two sad, hugging bears sitting on the Moon (fig. 20). But, if we already provided Alan with wings and a halo, let's surround him with an additional bright glow, give him a flower in hand and add a pastel celadon background. It's just as easy to conjure up an angel descending from the top of the image (with a quite scary visage at that, but that's not important, right?), extending their merciful hands towards Alan's embattled,

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<sup>23</sup> The tactic of styling dead children as angels was already present during the Victorian era, see: Linkman 2011: 27.

<sup>24</sup> The body of Alan was in a sense jointly consecrated, as might be inferred by the reaction to provocations (profanations?) of the artists from „Charlie Hebdo”, after which the majority of Internet users stated: *Je ne suis plus Charlie*. As a reminder, the first of the drawings shows Alan lying on the beach, with an advertising banner for McDonald's beside him, with the characteristic silhouette of Ronald the clown and a special offer: 'Two children's sets for the price of one', and the caption reads: 'So close to the target...' The other image, captioned in French: 'Proof that Europe is Christian', we see Jesus walking on water, signed: 'Christians walk on water', and beside a pair of legs pointing upwards in red shorts (the reference is more than clear, especially if one knows the context), caption: 'Muslim children drown'. The third drawing shows Alan from the future and referring to New Year's Eve 2015 incidents from Cologne; caption: 'Who would little Alan have become if he grew up? A butt-groper in Germany'.

<sup>25</sup> I found two drawings in which Alan Kurdi is shown as Jesus: once in the stable ([www.boredpanda.com/without-faith-in-humanity/](http://www.boredpanda.com/without-faith-in-humanity/), caption, in Spanish: 'When together with the image of a child my faith in humanity died' [accessed: 21.09.2019]), and once as a pieta ([www.boredpanda.com/pieta/](http://www.boredpanda.com/pieta/) [accessed: 21.09.2019]).



Fig. 17. Rhetoric of consolation: illustration by Edgar Humberto Alvarez



Fig. 18. Rhetoric of consolation: illustration by Asprino Leonardo



Fig. 19. Rhetoric of consolation: illustration by Sara VJ



Fig. 20. Rhetoric of consolation: illustration by Mariyana Koleva



Fig. 21. Rhetoric of consolation: illustration by Dijwar Ibrahim



Fig. 22. Rhetoric of consolation: illustration by the artist using the pseudonym/nickname SuperSmurgger

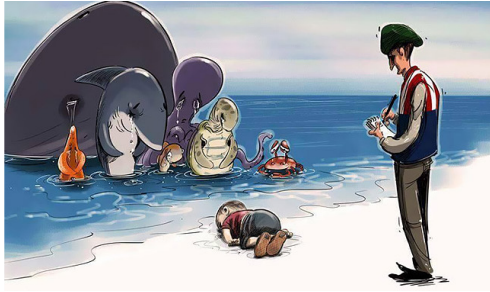


Fig. 23. *Cartoon grief: illustration by Azzam Daaboul*

innocent soul (fig. 21). Finally, in order for the whip discord to hit human indifference where it hurts most, we make Alan look at his own loneliness, a child's body lying on the shore, but let the onlooking Alan be smiling, may he be – this is getting boring, so I'll stop now, even though I could still go on – sitting on a cloud, may he have wings, and may there be an inscription in the clouds, in semi-transparent Arial: 'How many more shall be wasted in the name of indifference?' (let's add a tiny provocation: the 'No littering' sign) (fig 22).

And now for the most intense representation of fairytale and cartoon grief: a boy in a red t-shirt is lying on the beach again, beside him, a Turkish policeman is writing his report flatly, and a selection of marine animals are seen coming from the sea – a crab, a turtle, an octopus, a dolphin, a starfish, a whale and some smaller fish – they put their fins, legs or whatever they have, in a sign of prayer, crying profusely (fig. 23). In other images, teddy bears join them in tears, the Moon joins in, an unsettlingly weird fairy cries, the entire world cries.

I get the unsettling notion that these representations fall (together with the model of expected reception that they include) under Kundera's criterion of kitsch, meaning, the 'second tear' – the tear that is cried by a person that is moved by their own emotion. Is, however, communication based on visual cues and compressed content aiming at the evocation of emotional resonance, able to express protest, without at the same time moving towards kitsch? Even if some examples indicate that it is, of course, possible, should we automatically discredit those who are unable to achieve this? They remain clearly rare examples of empathy and calling for responsibility

in a world – virtual or not – that would rather keep migrants in ghettos, separate oneself from them with thick walls, or even do away with them...

## 5. ALAN'S LEGACY

On September 7<sup>th</sup> 2015, five days after Alan's death, Palestinian artist Osama Esbaitah made on the beach in Puri, in India, a five-metre-long sand sculpture representing the position and the clothes of the boy (the clothes and the hair were coloured)<sup>26</sup>. Two days later, thirty Moroccans, dressed in red t-shirts and jeans trousers, lay for several minutes completely still on a beach in Rabat in an act of protest and solidarity (Stanton 2016). In January of 2016, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who frequently engages in issue on refugees (the same who a month later will gather fourteen thousand orange lifejackets and tie them around the columns of Berlin's Schauspielhaus), publishes in „India Today” a photograph taken on a Greek beach on the island of Lesbos, not far from Bodrum. The image by the Indian photographer Rohit Chawli presents the artist in the 'Alan-like' position (Tan 2016). The beach is rocky, not sandy, the photograph is black and white, the person is not a boy, but a middle-aged man of clearly Asian descent, dressed in full trousers and a dark sweatshirt, however, the reference – thanks to afterimages of the original photograph – remains clear (fig. 24).

The intentions of persons protesting/paying tribute, and of the artists, are quite clear: they seek to support, or perhaps increase, the 'firepower' of the original photograph through the authority and power of the Crowds or the authority and power of Art, and at the same time to 'extend' it in these 'repetitions with differences', to prevent it from being lost in archives, overflowing with further media-distributed images, to continue to move and cause discord.

In March of 2016 Justus Becker (nickname COR) and Oğuz Şen (nickname Bobby Borderline) created on a wall at the river Main in Frankfurt a 120 square metre mural depicting Alan. Through this intervention in the urban iconosphere, the artists sought to move the beneficiaries of the welfare state passing by from the position of those who are not concerned, to remind them that the reverse of their success and luck is the suffering and the death

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<sup>26</sup> [http://m.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2015-09/08/content\\_21817372.htm](http://m.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2015-09/08/content_21817372.htm) [accessed: 10.11.2019].



Fig. 24. Ai Weiwei on the Lesbos beach (photo by R. Chawla)



Fig. 25. The destroyed mural of Alan Kurdi, Frankfurt am Main, Germany (photo by AFP)

of others (let us add that the mural was put opposite the seat of the European Central Bank). 'We hope to have people emotionally rethink their selfish fears of refugees coming to Germany' – said Becker. 'It is a memorial piece representing all children who died fleeing from war to Europe' (quoted after: McGee 2016) – added the artist, thus legitimating the status of the (image of) Alan as a symbolic representation of the child victims of the so-called migrant crisis, an iconic 'marker of remembrance'. Three months later, unknown perpetrators (most probably of far-right roots) painted over a part of the mural, writing 'Grenzen retten Leben!' ('Borders save lives!'), and with smaller caption: 'Fuck antifa' (fig. 25) (BBC News 2016).

Also in March of 2016, the Icelandic branch of UNICEF organised an event entailing bringing four hundred toys – each was to symbolise one child that drowned since Alan's death during escape attempts from Syria by sea – to be distributed along the island's rocky shore (Benjamin 2016).

In September of 2018, US hip-hop artist Lupe Fiasco recorded the song *Alan forever* (included on the album *Drogas wave*), which can be regarded as a literary counterpart of the above-mentioned tactic of reframing: ‘The waves can be your cover / The beach can be your pillow / My heart can be your house / My eyes can be your windows’ – sings the chorus. The second verse in turn represents the potential further fate of Alan, in which the element of water is strongly accented. The utopian vision sees a reversal of the relations of power – it is Alan who this time conquers it, and then ties his life to it: he wins medals in swimming at the Olympic Games (representing Canada – the destination country of Kurdi’s family flight), he breaks world records, to become a beach guard, saving another little boy from drowning<sup>27</sup>.

In February of 2019, a German rescue ship operating in the Mediterranean was renamed to ‘Alan Kurdi’. The rechristening ceremony was attended by the father and aunt of the boy (Agence France-Press 2019).

## 5. HEAR MY CRY

‘In *protest* there is the word *testis*, witness: you pro-test before you can at-test’ – said Paul Ricoeur (2016). The problem of attesting in the name of those unable to do it was also taken on by Giorgio Agamben (1999), who claimed that if the witnesses’ testimonies are based on the inability to speak of those who had been deprived of this right, then the genuineness of those testimonies cannot be negated. Bearing witness, they speak ‘on the authority’ of the one who, dying, fell silent and cannot express their inability to speak or the cause of this. However inadequate this may sound, the contemporary prosumers, facing the photograph by Nilüfer Demir, responding to it, become such a *testis*, and their *testimonium*, expressed by the image, gains the weight of protest-witness of the time of Web 2.0: ‘The only thing I could do was to make his [Alan’s – P.J.] outcry heard’ – said the Turkish photojournalist. Internet users, as we saw, are more than eager to aid her in this and bear the burden of giving testimony of the short life and the premature, tragic death of the Syrian boy.

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<sup>27</sup> The tune is available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6GIHl3-BzQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6GIHl3-BzQ) [accessed: 12.09.2019].



I believe in the nobility of intentions of the creators of the discussed images just as I believe in the statements by Nilüfer Demir. Is, however, Alan's cry of protest heard? I seriously doubt this. Even though one may suggest a certain influence in the area of tougher measures against smuggles or – a world-wide first – the reaction of the Canadian society (the Kurdi family chose Canada as the target of their migration), which led to the simplification of migration and asylum procedures (see: Newton 2015), but referring to the Polish context, it is difficult to point to any changes, the source of which may be the three-year-old boy's photograph.

Two months before Alan's death, the contemporary prime minister of Poland, Ewa Kopacz, made a subdivision of migrants based on the religious criterion (welcomed Christian versus not-wanted Muslims), pointing those who may seek shelter in Poland and those who may not (Alan would be among the latter; let us add that the boy died two days after Angela Merkel pronounced her famous 'Willkommen!'). Between March and October of 2015 (Alan, I remind, died in September) the share of adult Poles who responded 'no' to the question: 'Should, in your view, Poland accept refugees from war-stricken countries?', rose twofold – from 21% to 43%, to half a year later cross the threshold of 60% (CBOS 2018). On October 12<sup>th</sup> 2015, a month after Alan's death, Warsaw saw a nationalist demonstration under the watchword of 'Poles against migrants', during which banners were shown with the slogans 'Poland for Poles' or 'Muslim migrants are Europe's Trojan horse'. In January of 2016, during a similar event, a crowd of over a thousand gathered in the Castle Square in Warsaw to sin univocally – following the melody of a famous Polish song *Karuzela* (*The merry-go-round*) by Maria Koterbska – 'All of Poland sings along with us, fuck off migrants', waving white-and-red flags. In the meantime, the parliamentary elections were won by a party clearly against the acceptance of migrants, and this attitude (called by some commentators as 'the governance by fear') was regularly used during the campaign to gather political advocaci (see: Sowa 2017; Żyła 2018)<sup>28</sup>. On April 1<sup>st</sup> 2016., the new parliament passed the resolution, according to which 'it expresses decisive opposition against any attempts to put in place fixed EU

<sup>28</sup> Alternative forces, in turn, in privileged and influential fields of the media and politics did not oppose the words of competitors with a clear 'yes' on the migrant issue, instead being rather murky, distanced and moderate, see: Gdula 2018.

mechanisms of allocation of refugees or migrants<sup>29</sup>. After many reductions of the proposed EU quotas, Poland finally refused to accept 400 (in words: four hundred) persons fleeing areas of war and famine. To this day (fall of 2019) Poland, beside Hungary and Austria, is Europe's sole country not to relocate any persons of those who made it to Europe.

Beginning halfway in 2015, migrants became the 'folk devil' (Pasamonik 2017) of far-right and nationalist media and politicians. The Polish Internet saw the pinnacle, invigorated by the so-called migrant crisis, of hate speech, reaching the limits of 'persecutory imagination' (René Girard). Reports of further victims taken by the Mediterranean or by Balkan winters saw notorious comments suggesting bluntly that the migrant crisis should be solved by mass executions, the start-up of gas chambers and the reinstatement of crematory furnaces. The Polish public discourse was dominated by the representation of the migrating crowds as a threat on many levels: the economic, cultural, civilisational, health care, and in terms of a source of specific threats to the lives of the citizens (rapes, violence, terrorist attacks). The issue of migrants – as Zygmunt Bauman (2016) stated – was 'adiaphorized', meaning, excluded from the area of ethical responsibility and moved to the area of public safety (Foucault's biopolitics). Reactions to the photograph presenting the body of Alan Kurdi turned out to be, I believe, a clear example of what the Polish sociologist referred to as 'moral carnivals' – 'short-lived carnivalesque explosions of solidarity and care that are triggered by media images of successive spectacular tragedies in the migrants' unending saga" (ibid.: 90).

### III. OMRAN DAQNEESH – THE ETHICS OF REMIX

In this case, it is not a photograph, but a still frame extracted from short footage by Mahmoud Raslan, who documented the effects of the bombings of Aleppo, conducted on August 17<sup>th</sup> 2016, most probably by the forces of the Russian Federation in concert with the Bashar-Al-Assad regime during the Syrian civil war. The footage shows a boy covered almost entirely with dust, who was found in rubble, as he sits inside an ambulance. The greyness of the body and

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<sup>29</sup> Resolution of the Parliament of the Republic of Poland of April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, on the migrant policy of Poland, [http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/opinie8.nsf/nazwa/18\\_u/\\$file/18\\_u.pdf](http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/opinie8.nsf/nazwa/18_u/$file/18_u.pdf) [accessed: 10.09.2019].



Fig. 26. Omran Daqneesh wounded during the bombing of Aleppo

clothes, broken by the spot of clotted blood covering the left side of the boy's face, contrasts the various shades of orange dominant in the ambulance.

The still is most strongly dominated by the boy's gaze: disoriented, absent, uncertain, terrified, full of fear; as if it were aimed within, not without, still transfixed on the experienced trauma and not entirely aware of the fact that the greatest danger is most probably over, that he was *saved*. The effect is the stronger that all of this – or perhaps even more – is found in solely one eye, the right one; the left is half-closed due to the swelling, almost invisible under the darker spot of blood there. The boy, it seems, is sitting calmly, passively, fully subordinated to what was to happen; his hair tousled, his lips pursed, his hands in his lap, with bruised legs sticking out of his shorts and bare feet overhanging the seat of an oversized, 'adult' seat.

Setting aside as much as possible the ethical plane of the image – the unavoidable fact that we are yet again 'regarding the pain of others' – this image most certainly has its aesthetic values (see: Zarychta 2016), both in terms of composition (the almost ideal proportions between the central point and the background) as well as colours (the contrast between greys and oranges, the red blood spot on the face fitting the olive-burgundy image on the shirt – perhaps a dragon, which in this context looks unsettlingly similar to bowels). Furthermore, we are seeing a perfect lack of any ethnically discerning factors (in the context of contemporary Islamophobia [Bobako 2017]: stigmas) – one could say that the boy would be white, were he only not grey (fig. 26).

However, we recognise the topoi: ‘The practice of representing atrocious suffering as something to be deplored, and, if possible, stopped, enters the history of images with a specific subject: the sufferings endured by a civilian population at the hands of a victorious army on the rampage’ (Sontag 2003: 35). Of course, the ‘civilian population’ has a particular place for women, children and the elderly, whose position additionally emphasizes the innocence and randomness stemming from ‘being civilian’, reinforcing thus the discord, compassion or the indignation concerning the violence they experience and the pointlessness of war. In case of the Near East conflict raging from the beginnings of the second decade of the 21st century<sup>30</sup>, and the consequential so-called migrant crisis, the photographs have ‘the deeper bite (...), provide[s] a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it’ (ibid.: 20), present two boys: three-year-old Alan Kurdi, of which I spoke in the earlier part of this text, and five-year-old Omran Daqneesh – the ‘boy in the ambulance’, ‘the boy from Aleppo’.

## 1. BROTHERS IN SUFFERING

Let me start off by two general remarks. First of all, googling brought about a much lower number of prosumer’s references than in case of the photograph of Alan Kurdi. Second of all, among those that I was able to find, much more were as ‘clear’ reproductions of the image of Omran Daqneesh as possible, subordinated to the rules of a different visual medium (graphics, including computer graphics, murals but also... children’s dolls [fig. 27]).

Even though the image itself, it seems, could quite easily be reframed, e.g. by transferring the boy into the safe space of a house or playground<sup>31</sup>,

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<sup>30</sup> Even though its specific sources should rather be sought in the US military intervention in Afghanistan as part of the war on terror announced by the George W. Bush administration. See the uniquely thorough journalistic analysis found in the Pulitzer prize-distinguished book of Joby Warrick (2015).

<sup>31</sup> An example of such reframing was noting the visual similarities between Omran Daqneesh and six-year-old Alex (see: Express Web Desk 2016), who wrote the famous ‘moving’ letter to Barack Obama with the following content: ‘Dear President Obama, Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to our home? Park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons? We



Fig. 27. Doll representing Omran Daqneesh by Romanian artist Dan Cretu, called the 'Sufference Doll'

artists frequently decided to recreate the original shot – and thus, to multiply its frames – forgoing clear interventions such as adding different visual components or verbal commentary<sup>32</sup> (as if they were true to the rule that the image should 'speak for itself').

Among the images I have found, a few presented both boys – Alan Kurdi and Omran Daqneesh. Already placing them in a joint frame may be considered a critical gesture indicating on the one hand the permanence of suffering, the end, it seems, cannot be expected soon (these depictions seem by default to open up space for a further victim), yet on the other hand – the permanence of indifference to this suffering.

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will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him [Omran – P. J.] to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. Since he won't bring toys and doesn't have toys Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math. (...) Thank you very much! I can't wait for you to come'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6r1kbQH8hI> [accessed: 24.09.2019].

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps with a terse yet very clear comment, e. g. the mural showing Omran on building blocks that make up the words 'End war'; <https://www.trendhunter.com/trends/antiwar> [accessed: 23.09.2019].



Fig. 28. Omran Daqneesh and Alan Kurdi – illustration by Ruben L. Oppenheimer

However, do these representations not supply arguments that could be used against themselves, when (on the side) they also reveal the *permanent inefficiency of production and reproduction* of ‘images of the pain of others’? Such suppositions strongly come to mind with respect to the image by Ruben L. Oppenheimer (fig. 28), the image by whom seems to rail against the idleness of slacktivism<sup>33</sup>, as it was chosen to be published on... Twitter, hence, willingly or not, he generated what he turned against (retweets, likes, shares, approving comments, etc.)<sup>34</sup>. Khalid Albaih, in turn, a Romanian-born Sudanese illustrator, referring to himself as a ‘virtual revolutionist’<sup>35</sup>, showed the figures of Omran and Alan to depict two possible scenarios of a tragic alternative, to which Syrian children were left: what you will experience if you stay (Omran Daqneesh), and if you leave (Alan Kurdi) (fig. 29). More critical, in the area of heartbreaking, is the image showing

<sup>33</sup> An expression of which is the placement of a comic book-style caption with the thoughts of Omran Daqneesh including the word ‘blah’ repeated among Facebook and Twitter logos against the backdrop of the body of Alan Kurdi.

<sup>34</sup> An example of a direct attack on the media participation in the emergence of global ‘indifference’ is in turn the image by Saada Hajo showing Omran reading a paper with numerous graphics of... himself. The boy looks with sorrow from behind the paper (and from the paper) onto the onlookers, see: <https://mjcob.com/hajo-saadomran-reads-about-omran> [accessed: 20.09.2019].

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.cartoonmovement.com/p/3310> [accessed: 18.09.2019].

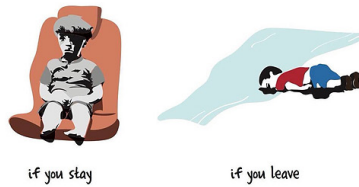


Fig. 29. Omran Daqneesh and Alan Kurdi – illustration by Khalid Albaih



Fig. 30. Omran Daqneesh and Alan Kurdi – illustration by an anonymous artist

Alan lying (sleeping?) in Omran's lap, who additionally covers 'his little brother' with his left hand (fig. 30). This representation is surely far away from the 'rhetoric of consolation' that I criticised – there are no clouds, angels or cute pastels here, but an atmosphere of sadness, resignation, reconciliation with the violence of the world and a desperate attempt to get for oneself even a bit of warmth, of a gentle touch, in these desperate times (as a sidenote, I notice that in the two last quoted examples both boys are perfectly 'white', which surely is in place to simplify empathic instincts of Western audiences).

## 2. BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS

Among images that present Omran alone, one can find such that reproduce the strategy of direct protest and accusation (accusation both of indifference or permission as well as – indirect – perpetration), described by me – as a reference to the punk protest song by Polish band Cool Kids of Death and stereotypical tools of opposition of the 'people' against 'power' – as 'stones and petrol bombs'. Just like in the case of Alan Kurdi, the image of Omran



Fig. 31. Omran Daqneesh and ‘leaders of the world’ – illustration by artist under the nickname Gungor



Fig. 32. Omran Daqneesh and ‘leaders of the world’ – illustration by artist under the nickname Sherif Arafa

is put up for show, presented to ‘the wealthy of the world’. And so, the image by the Turkish artist working under the nickname Gundur shows a boy in a stereotypical attire of a schoolboy during a presentation to representatives of ‘worldly authorities’ – lay as well as religious<sup>36</sup> – of a chest or laptop, onto which the author quite clumsily pasted a fragment of Omran’s image from

<sup>36</sup> The majority of the *dramatis personae* is easy to identify, I only do not know whether the man beside Pope Francis (who beside everything is the source of perhaps the most clear and unequivocal pro-migrant message on the global political stage) is certainly Bashar al-Assad, and it is difficult for me to discern who is the man beside Putin in the ‘Uncle Sam’ costume – perhaps a ‘variable designator’ for the ‘president of the United States’ (Barack Obama included).





Fig. 33. Omran Daqneesh and ‘leaders of the world’ – photomontage by an unknown author

the ambulance (fig. 31). However, who among the eight is responsible for what happened? And could among these be perhaps found those who do not deserve to be placed in this context?

A similar tone is struck by the image of Egyptian cartoonist Sherif Arafa published in the paper „Al-Ittihad”. In this case, however, Omran is the subject of collective derision by representatives of many forces – frequently opposing each other, to note. Beside president Bashar al-Assad (the only one ‘in person’), the image shows symbolic representations: of Russia (bear in an *ushanka*), the United States, the Arab world (in two versions: one rather ‘Saudi’, the other rather ‘Maghreb’), the Jewish world, the UN, the EU, the Catholic church (if the second person from the left is a nun), and... a terrorist in a suicide vest, taking a group selfie with a pink smartphone (behind them, in the background, there is a crowd of men in good moods – probably meant to represent the ‘world’). The humiliated Omran turns his gaze away, looking at his own bloodied hand (fig. 32).

Thus, guilty are all those, so nobody in particular, hence: others, perhaps the ‘world’<sup>37</sup>, maybe ‘the West’<sup>38</sup>, but not only, for sure (I saw three images with Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama beside Omran (fig. 33); deconstructed

<sup>37</sup> Just as in case of remixes of the photograph of Alan – shown metaphorically as the Globe of the Earth (resp. the figure with the globe instead of the head). See e.g. <https://politicalcartoons.com/?s=omran> [accessed: 23.09.2019].

<sup>38</sup> In an image by John Cole, a pair of young people staring at their phones (their clothes say ‘The West’) pass by Omran; the woman asks: ‘Hey, any Pokemon around here?’; <https://image.cagle.com/183718/1155/183718.png> [accessed: 21.09.2019].

Cold War rhetoric retains its framework of the presence of two ‘powers’ here, however, they are not against each other – they collaborate, with others, like Omran, but also Alan, being the victims<sup>39</sup>).

### 3. SAINT OMRAN

The majority of the ‘on-line resurrections’ of Alan Kurdi analysed by me was subordinated to what I described as the ‘rhetoric of consolation’. In case of manipulations of the image of Omran Daqneesh, I found one<sup>40</sup> – but

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<sup>39</sup> The image by Brazilian cartoonist Vini Oliveira shows Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama, both smiling and glad, playing chess. The chessboard is the Syrian territory, and the pawns – Alan Kurdi (held by the head by the president of Russia) and Omran Daqneesh (which the former president of the United States is playing with); <https://mjacob.com/vini-oliveira-omran-daqneesh-and-Alan-kurdi-pieces-of-board-of-a-dirty/> [accessed: 23.09.2019].

<sup>40</sup> The meagre presence of the mentioned rhetoric may be substantiated by the fact that Omran’s story has a happy ending – so, it does not need to be added by images of the boy’s joy on the other side – the five-year-old survived, and a year later the media and the Internet saw photographs and films showing Omran ‘alive and well’ home with his father and siblings (at that time the information emerged that during bombings, his ten-year-old brother Ali also died; see: Sanchez 2017). On this occasion, numerous controversies arose. It came to light that Omran’s father declared loyalty to the regime of president Bashar al-Assad, accusing the media of ‘Trading in his [Omran’s – P.J.] blood’ (a film showing a rescue mission was published on the website of the Aleppo Media Center, a group of opposition activists fighting Assad’s policies), whereby Omran himself was supposed to deny that he was injured in course of attacks of the government forces of Syria (the participation of Russians in the bombings of rebel districts remains alleged). Western commentators noted that the man might have been forced to make that statement – after all, the family remains in Syria, and the interview was provided to the government-backed Syrian and Lebanese television channels (including the journalist Kinana Allouche from Al-Sama TV, who once gained fame when she posed, all smiles, for a selfie against the backdrop of dead fighters; see: The New Arab 2016). These are not the only controversies showing Omran. After the government of Syria denied all liability for victims of bombings, putting the blame on the rebels, Chinese public television CCTV published viral material from an ambulance suggesting it was staged (I remind that analogous suspicions, together with proof of being staged, emerged on the occasion of the photograph of Alan Kurdi), and



Fig. 34. Judith Mehr, *Omran, Angels Are Here* (2016), oil on canvas

spectacular – depiction of this rhetoric, and it was fused with a veritable canonisation of the boy – not an on-line remix, but an oil painting by US painter Judith Mehr entitled *Omran, Angels Are Here*, visually referring to the *Trinity* icon (ca. 1410-1427) by Andrei Rublev. Three angels surround the sitting boy, with an inscription in their halos: ‘joy – peace – hope’ respectively in Arabic, English and Latin; the entirety is framed with an ‘Arab-looking’ ornament, and the top of the image bears the inscription ‘peace be with you’ (in Arabic), the bottom – the title of the painting (in English) (fig. 34).

The artist herself spoke in this way of her inspirations and intentions: ‘I saw that photo of the little boy in the ambulance seat who had just been pulled out of the rubble of a bombed building in Aleppo, Syria. I really wanted to comfort [*sic!* – P.J.] that boy so I thought of angels coming to attend to him’ (quoted after: Neeley, Webber 2016). So, this painting is a visualisation of the empathic instinct of the authoress, however, problematic is its limited creative self-awareness. Mehr – certainly ‘in earnest’, and not following

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that it is part of a Western ‘propaganda war’ which is supposed to substantiate the necessity of a ‘humanitarian’ military intervention aimed at ending the civil war in Syria (the EU and the USA were frequently criticised for their passivity with respect to the conflict and hidden support for al-Assad’s policies); see: Dearden 2016.



Fig. 35. *Sanatan Dinda, body painting with Omran Daqneesh*

a post-modern game – fused into one whole three radically different traditions of relations between the image and the *sacrum*: non-representing (Muslim), figurative (Western, Catholic) and making-present (Eastern, Orthodox). Moreover, the icon, which not only contains a uniquely sublime symbolic stratum based on deep theological knowledge, but the process of creation (writing) itself being almost like prayer, is summarised by the author to just be the surface, striving solely to achieve a visual similarity.

A different example of quite a unique alteration of the shot with Omran Daqneesh is the work by Indian painter Sanatan Dinda, who chose to paint the boy on a... model's naked body (fig. 35). The story of the birth of the idea for the painting reminds of the narration by Mehr, with the difference, however, that the reaction of Dinda was closer to opposition than consolation – 'I have been very disturbed ever since I saw the photograph (...) I didn't know what I could do to express my angst' – and additionally, the artist went a step further and put the original image in a symbolic register: 'Omran's numb face is a metaphor of the numbness that the world is experiencing when it comes to reacting strongly about the issue of displacement' (quoted after: Dasgupta 2016)<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Sanatan Dinda was also the author of a body painting showing Alan Kurdi, see: <http://refugeewatchonline.blogspot.com/2016/07/renowned-artist-from-kolkata-sanatan.html> [accessed: 24.09.2019].



Fig. 36. Gianluca Costantini, Omran Daqneesh – *I don't Exist!*

The painting presents quite a pale Omran (as if of gypsum) sitting on and orange seat, the headrest of which is bleeding. The semicircles of the breast of the model optically deform the back rest and seem as if concave, as if the boy was about to fall into her body. The model's thighs are very important in the interpretation, since Dinda used here the mentioned-above tactics of 'splitting the frame': the split between the legs of the model, invisible due to the photograph being taken against a dark background, introduces a gap dividing the representation of 'what is' (the right thigh with bombs and ammunition painted on it), and 'what should be' or 'what was' (left leg, showing circular coloured lollipops), as a result of which the entirety becomes embedded in an nostalgic or utopian register.

#### 4. AGAINST REPRESENTATION

I retained the last example that I would like to analyse for that moment, as this is the only representation I found – also including the depictions of Alan Kurdi – which derives its critical power from the fact that it problematises (or even questions) its own status. The case concerns the photograph by Italian illustrator and activist Gianluca Costantini published on the artist's blog (fig. 36). The picture shows a crossed-through drawing of Omran Daqneesh as laying on a desk beside art supplies and the fragment of a book (probably an album with old photographs). This image is not only a meta-image (the photograph of a drawing), but it is also a compressed photo-story

(see: Michałowska 2012). Even though – as every image does – it ‘freezes’ time, it is possible to reconstruct the story of its creation by abductive reasoning. The author, in a sense, invites to it, putting himself in the lower part of the photograph (a fragment of a t-shirt and trouser legs indicates that the creator is leaning over the desk to take the photograph).

Most certainly Costantini first set out to make a drawing of Omran – perhaps motivated by analogous convictions as Mehr and Dinda – however, at a certain point, having already sketched out the boy and coloured (with various shades of brown!) the visible parts of the body, he abandoned the idea, and in an act of anger or resignation he crossed through the unfinished sketch by two strokes of a black marker (also visible in the photograph). It is difficult to determine whether the two inscriptions – ‘I don’t exist!’ and – framed – ‘Aleppo is hell’<sup>42</sup> – were created before or after the crossing out (interestingly enough, the drawing is signed, and one usually does it only having finished the work).

It is interesting, why the author did not choose to publish the (failed?, abandoned?) drawing, and instead it just took a photograph of it against the wider backdrop of their workplace. My idea is to treat it as a suggestion to look at the context, in which the image emerged, more closely than at the image itself<sup>43</sup>. The key fact here is the sole gesture of crossing out (or rather: a trace of this gesture, the symbolic and indexable, according to the terminology of Ch. S. Peirce, ‘X’ mark). Contrary to tearing the sheet apart or crumpling it up and throwing it into the dustbin, the crossing-out is at the same time a *negation of the image* and a *component of the image*, and it is in this double, aporetic character that it is found in the photograph by

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<sup>42</sup> Such statements are found in all (several) works of the artist on the bombings of Aleppo and published in „The New Arab”. See <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/blog/2016/10/26/gallery-aleppo-is-hell> [accessed: 24.09.2019].

<sup>43</sup> We must add that the effect of the abandoned workplace in disarray is most certainly staged – the photograph shows tools that were not used when making the drawing (crayons, pencil, light-blue marker). Hence, we are dealing with a triple, or properly – as will turn out – a quadruple artistic creation: the creation of the drawing, the ‘creative destruction’ of the drawing, the staging of the scene and the taking of the photograph.

Costantini (moreover, from behind the 'X' we see Omran's sad and reproachful gaze).

The gesture of crossing-out is additionally reinforced by the statement 'I don't exist!'. The semicircular line running from this phrase to Omran's lips would, by convention, assign it to the boy, however this statement includes a performative contradiction: indeed, the condition for making any statement is... to exist. There is something more to this than a next embodiment of Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, as the recognised 'treachery of images' is here the point of department, not the objective. In the end, the sole instance that can pronounce these impossible words is the *crossed-out drawing of Omran Daqneesh* – within the above-indicated aporia, born into existence through the gesture removing it from existence, existing as its own negation, existing. The introduction of the meta-level perspective, the image of the image<sup>44</sup>, permits the communication of this aporia (even though it by far does not resolve it): it presents the image as being an internal – being its part – but also an external – being a separate image – component of the scene (similarly to the *story* on the Cretian who believes that all Cretians lie, but not *being* this Cretian and *stating* it).

W.J.T. Mitchell (2005: 18), the visual culture theorist from the United States, noted, referring to the World Trade Center attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, that 'iconoclasm is more than just the destruction of images; it is a »creative destruction«, in which a secondary image of defacement or annihilation is created at the same moment that the »target« image is attacked'. The photograph by Costantini certainly is an example of 'creative destruction' – even if the author hides from the viewer the sole spectacle of destruction (the scene of the drawing being crossed out can only be told and imagined), but he presents its result. The key problem with the application of analytical theories suggested by Mitchell to the case of Costantini, however, stems from the fact that in all examples discussed by the American scholar, the idolaters and iconoclasts are *two sides* of a conflict,

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<sup>44</sup> Apart from that, the drawing itself – as showing the photograph – is a secondary sign, which suggests terming it a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994) Costantini's photograph thus would be a second-degree simulacrum – the photograph of a drawing of a photograph – with an introduced key break in the form of the „X” – a trace of the gesture of crossing out.

however, here we are dealing with a *single person* – the one who created the drawing (the idolater), and the one who destroyed it (the iconoclast), and then took the photograph of the prepared scene of its destruction. Hence, some kind of conversion, metamorphosis, a ‘before’ and ‘after’, are necessary. One could say that Costantini, while still being an idolater, at a *certain moment* when drawing Omran Daqneesh became an iconoclast – hence, he abandoned this idea and destroyed his drawing – and it was possible because he was able to gain a perspective (awareness), thanks to which he saw himself as an idolater – somebody who believed in a ‘false god’<sup>45</sup> (who, until the moment he believed in him, was God), and then he ‘saw the light’. If we agree with this line of interpretation, it will become clear, why the artist publish not the drawing itself, but also the context of its emergence and ‘creative destruction’ (along with himself as a key component of this context). What did Costantini really see when the ‘scales fell from [his] eyes’ (Acts 9,18), we do not know, however, the analysis up to this point may make some suggestions: the falsity, stemming from the ‘illusion of reference’ (Roland Barthes) present in every representation of reality, particularly problematic in the ‘pain of others’, which are not and will never be adequate to suffering of those who are presented there, and at the same time do not have the power to handle the truth of experience<sup>46</sup>; the obscene, and at the same time, inevitable *aestheticity* of all representations of suffering, based additionally on common conventions and cliché metaphors that negate its singular dimension; the idleness, powerlessness and inefficiency, perhaps even the harmfulness of representation of ‘images of the pain of others’ (participating in the common indifference, generating a narcissistic slacktivism or hypocritical ‘moral carnivals’), etc. ‘Aleppo is hell’.

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<sup>45</sup> The structure of Costantini’s photograph may in this respect be compared to the narrative structure of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine of Hippo, which include a fundamental discrepancy between the perspective of the narrating ‘I’ and the narrated ‘I’. In the discussed case, the narrating ‘I’ is the one who created the photograph (and, at one point, destroyed the drawing), and the narrated ‘I’ is the one who did the drawing.

<sup>46</sup> In this context the photograph would not only show the *unrepresentable*, but *unrepresentability* itself.



Costatini's photograph may thus be referred to as the counterpart to Maurice Blanchot's (1973) famous explicit of the *Madness of the Day*. After a suitable paraphrasing, it would sound like: 'An image? No, no images, never again'.

Of particular importance is the fact that in this regard, this does not equal to the call to abandon the creation of any representations or testimony of the suffering of other human beings – just the opposite. In the paraphrased end of Blanchot's story, one can hear the famous *dictum* by Theodor W. Adorno, most commonly quoted out of context: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. As Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi (1989: 93) shows, this statement 'was made in the context of a discussion which he concluded by saying that »such an abundance of suffering permits no forgetting«, that even if art is in constant danger of betraying the victims, there is no other place where suffering can find »its own voice«. Hence, the exit from the aporia of the simultaneous *necessity* and *impossibility* of representation of 'the pain of others' leads through *deep ethical responsibility* of the creator<sup>47</sup>, the voice of whom must carry the painful burden of the protest-testimony made 'in name' and 'by authority' of the victims.

I'm afraid that of all the artists – professionals as well as amateurs – discussed in this text, only Gianluca Costantini was able to become aware of this burden.

## POST SCRIPTUM

In his cycle of photographs from the year 2004 entitled *Positives (Pozytywy)*, Polish artist Zbigniew Libera presented 'optimistic' versions of a few iconic photographs taken from the visual archives of cultural memory. It cannot be puzzling that four of the five works present corpses (of Che Guevara from the photograph by Freddy Alborta and Russian soldiers killed at Stalingrad from the photo by Dmitri Baltermants) and nearly-corpses (scene from the chronicle on the liberation of the Auschwitz camp and the most famous photograph by Nick Ut). In the photographs of Libera, the Argentinian revolutionary rises from the catafalque and lights up a cigar, the bodies of soldiers turn into tired runners who failed to reach the finish line in

<sup>47</sup> Including the re-creator, by definition, the author of, it would seem, 'frivolous' on-line remixes, if only they undertake the topic of 'regarding the pain of others'.

a race, the camp prisoners smile from behind the fence made of clothes lines, just like Kim Phúc, quite frivolously running naked among walkers and paratroopers. In one interview, the artist quite provocatively stated that ‘people prefer coloured reality from the truth, so I decided to give them what they wanted. A world that is good and ordered, and just positive’. Ewa Domańska (2006: 235-236), interpreting his works, noted that ‘through them one could show how these image topoi, reproduced in the media, turn into banal images that do not make a big impression; they become domesticated somehow’. In a culture of convergence and remix, this discrete mechanism, indicated by Libera and described by Domańska, gains its fully tangible, reinforced and immediate confirmation. There is no need for a provocation by critical art to experience the truth known otherwise that ‘before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch’ (Kundera 2009: 278). However, should we not draw from this sentence the conclusion to which both the provocative series by Libera, as well as my analysis of the visual tactics user in on-line remixes of the photographs of Alan Kurdi and Omran Daqneesh draw us – that kitsch is also a vehicle of remembrance; the customs duty paid for the presence in common memory?

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## Summary

The aim of this article is to critically analyse the Internet's remixes of Nilüfer Demir's photograph showing the dead body of Alan Kurdi – a 3-year old Syrian refugee – found on the beach near Turkish city Bodrum, as well as the widely-shared shot of the Omran Daqneesh – 5-years old Syrian boy sitting in the ambulance and fully covered by dust with visible traces of bruises and stains of blood – taken from the viral footage which reported damages and sufferings caused by the airstrikes on the Syrian biggest city, Aleppo, during the civil war. The main question here is: how the convergence culture 'regards the pain of the other' and deals with it? Semiotic analysis of chosen examples leads to a conclusion that while some artists undertake a specific visual tactics of protest and objection, more often, and even in clearly critical pictures, the 'rhetoric of consolation' is a predominating one and serves to both artists' and viewers' complacency and consoling. Terror of the pain and death is deleted from those images and replaced by tenderness or even kitsch. Moreover, author discusses not only the visual rhetoric strategies applied in those remixes, but also their ethical dimensions, especially in the reference to the category of 'unrepresentability'.

**Keywords:** Alan Kurdi, Omran Daqneesh, photography and death, migrant crisis, culture of convergence, political protest, remix, Internet art



## FAUST/INA. *IN RADIANCE* BY ARTUR PAŁYGA

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The publication of new Polish dramas in „Dialog” is sometimes accompanied by an interview with their authors; after the last unusual words of the heroine of the monodrama *In Radiance* (*W płomieniach*): ‘I stand here, all in radiance / And I turn into the sun’ (Pałyga 2016: 72), the interview with Artur Pałyga entitled *How to Become Skłodowska* (*Jak zostać Skłodowską?*) was published. I was intrigued by this title. Could schoolgirls from the state grammar school in Włocławek write also today: ‘Many of us would like to follow you, but we do not have enough genius and patience that fills you to such a great extent’ (*Korespondencja...* 1994: 224-225), like they did 93 years ago? This cannot be ruled out. After all, whom could contemporary girls admire and with whom could they identify if they would like to become world-famous scientists and win a Nobel Prize? The schoolgirls from Włocławek chose Skłodowska as a role model and the patron of their class, about which they wrote to her in a letter dated June 14<sup>th</sup> 1924: ‘We have hung your portrait drawn by one of us in our school and every day, looking at it, we think about your silent, selfless and committed work. We are really at a loss for words and some strange feelings overtake us’ (*ibid.*: 245). Skłodowska must have felt uncomfortable when reading this confession and, as she basically did not like school as an institution, replied briefly: ‘I received your letter only after holidays, but I want to send you at least these late words of thanks for your kind words and wish you good luck at work’ (*ibid.*: 249). It was not a cordial response, but it certainly delighted the schoolgirls. After all, the ideal from the portrait did speak to them!

So, can Pałyga’s picture of Skłodowska, who also says in the final part of the work: ‘I’d like to howl like a wild animal / But I can’t, ‘cause I’m already ash’ (Pałyga 2016: 72), arouse the imagination of today’s schoolgirls? It certainly can, since, according to Monika Żółkoś (2016: 48), who consistently calls the Noble Prize winner a ‘scientist’ in accordance with new trends,

the monodrama ‘draws the portrait of a woman who is radical in her pursuits, uncompromising, fully committed to work’. Pałyga does not say the same about her, although he stresses that he was strongly moved by Skłodowska’s letter to the Nobel Prize Academy, in which she replied with ‘dignity’, ‘rage’ and ‘pride’ to sexist charges made against her because of an affair with a married man, who was also younger than her. Nonetheless, *In Radiance* is not a literary recipe for a learned feminist with character or a theatrical script of her rebellion. Indeed, the subjective narration included in this work really ‘releases the voice from the inside of female experience’ (Żółkoś 2016: 48), but at the same time it transforms this voice and experience in a surprising manner. The intriguing title of the interview with Pałyga refers mainly to his own creative attitude, which admittedly has something in common with grammar school pupils...

## SÉANCE

Below there is a fragment of the aforementioned interview:

When I write, I try to become characters that I write as far as possible. I cannot write in any other way. And I turned into Maria at nights, from midnight till four or five in the morning, or sometimes at daytime, from twelve till five in the afternoon. But also I did not want to make a play about myself involuntarily – it was supposed to be a reliable biographical monodrama. I hit upon the idea of the letters she never sent to herself, but still it was not the proper spark. Finally I sat down and started to strike matches and hold them until my fingers got burnt. And I thought that she did the same. And that we feel the same pain in our fingers. And that is it. It has come. I guess that Skłodowska would have ridiculed me. Although she attended a few séances with Pierre, she quickly realized that it was a misconception. I would not exaggerate, too – her spirit did not haunt me (this rather happened when, writing about Morrison, I made a request to him: ‘Talk to me!’), I simply tried to perform an exercise and imagine what I would feel and think as young Marysia or old sick Maria. I also had little sleep during exercises (laughs) (*Jak zostać Skłodowską...* 2016: 78) .

An interesting confession that speaks much about the sensitivity of this author, his techniques and approach to drama. Although Pałyga is ironic about his artistic ‘exercises’ in imagination, he does not hide them and openly says about his desire ‘to become Maria’, which means an attempt

to identify with the heroine to the fullest, almost intimate extent. These exercises really resemble a séance in which the writer acts as a medium for a dramatic character: he would like to summon her from non-existence, feel her within himself, speak her voice and maybe also experience her existence in some aspect of special importance to him. Obviously in imagination, which requires not only spiritual, but also – as we can see – sensual stimulation. A person like Skłodowska might have stimulated Pałyga's interest in spiritualism, which the scientist treated very seriously for some time. The writer seems to underestimate this motif of her unusual life in the interview, even though he does otherwise in the monodrama. However, before going on to read *In Radianca*, let us listen to Maria's biographer Barbara Goldsmith (2005:109-110):

The Curies along with their circle of scientist friends – including Crookes; Jean Perrin and his wife, Henriette; Georges Gouy, and Paul Langevin – explored spiritualism as did Pierre's brother Jacques, who was a fervent believer. Pierre and Marie attended many séances, most notably with the Italian medium Eusapia Paladino. They regarded these séances as 'scientific experiments' and took detailed notes. The historian Anna Hurwic wrote that the Curies 'thought it possible to discover in spiritualism the source of an unknown energy that would reveal the secret of radioactivity.' (...) A few days before his death Pierre had written of his last Paladino séance, 'There is here in my opinion, a whole domain of entirely new facts and physical states in space of which we have no conception'.

Goldsmith believes that, after Pierre's death, Skłodowska 'seem[ed] to speak to her late husband like a spiritualist in her diary' (ibid.: 131), and the convention of a conversation with a dead person is exceeded in favor of direct contact between both persons in this document. Skłodowska speaks to her late husband and listens to his answers, although only despair after the loss of the beloved person may make her behave like a medium. However, spiritualism really seemed to attract her, particularly because its creator Hippolyte Rivail, himself engaged in mathematics, physics, chemistry, astronomy, physiology and anatomy, treated it as a science and addressed his theories to scholars, writing:

As the invention of the microscope has revealed to us the world of the infinitely little, the existence of which was unsuspected by us, and as the telescope has revealed to us the myriads of worlds the existence of which we suspected just as little, so the spirit-communications of the present day are revealing to us the existence of an invisible world that surrounds us on all sides, that is incessantly in contact with us, and that takes part, unknown to us, in everything we do. Yet a short time, and the existence of that world, which is awaiting every one of us, will be as incontestable as is that of the microscopic world, and of the infinity of globes in space. Is it nothing to have made known that new world, to have initiated us into the mysteries of the life beyond the grave? (Kardec 1996: 421).

In *The Spirit Book*, Rivail's first and most important work (published under the pen name Allan Kardec), the author's questions were italicized and spirits' answers were put in inverted commas; the remaining fragments are the author's comments:

*Have souls a determinate, circumscribed, and unvarying form?*

'Not for eyes such as yours; but, for us, they have a form though one only to be vaguely imagined by you as a flame a gleam, or an ethereal spark'.

*Is this flame or spark of any color?*

'If you could see it, it would appear to you to vary from a dull grey to the brilliancy of the ruby, according to the degree of the spirit's purity'.

Genie are usually represented with a flame or a star above their foreheads—a sort of allegorical allusion to the essential nature of spirits. The flame or star is placed upon the head because the head is the seat of intelligence.

*Do spirits employ any time in transporting themselves through space?*

'Yes; but their motion is as rapid as that of thought'.

*Is not thought the movement of the soul itself, a transportation of the soul itself to the place or the object thought of by it?*

'Wherever the thought is, there the soul is, since it is the soul that thinks. Thought is an attribute' (ibid.: 90-91).

Skłodowska must have known these dialogues, which were popular in the circle of French intellectuals, and the image of spirits with a flame on the forehead (they were imagined like this mainly by occultists like Nostradamus, whose books were studied by Faust) may have been particularly appealing to her. In one of her youth letters, she wrote about her burning head and wittily compared herself to a match. Pałyga even states that she

liked playing with fire (probably because of cold weather) as a tutor in Szczuki ('where I traveled three hours by train and four hours by sledge from Warsaw' [*Korespondencja...* 1994: XI]), but we do not know anything certain about this. We know, however, that Pałyga burnt his fingers with a living flame in order to recall Maria – as if he were taming the fire element in order to release a spirit from it in a mysterious ritual... And he read her correspondence very carefully.

## ELEMENTAL POETRY IN ACTION

The subtitle of Pałyga's monodrama is: *Completely Unknown Letters of Maria Skłodowska-Curie*, which almost exactly corresponds to the composition of the work, encompassing also *The Prologue* – a paraphrase of the first sentences of Maria's famous lecture delivered after her assumption of the chair of the late Pierre Curie, and *The Great Improvisation of Maria Skłodowska-Curie* in two parts, which is a perverse and unique allusion to Konrad's improvisation from the third part of *Forefathers' Eve (Dziady)*. The remaining parts of the work bearing titles are in the form of letters addressed by Skłodowska to herself; however, her words in them are also directed to Pierre, their two daughters and unborn child, as if she wanted to recall not only herself, but also four of them and to explain her life to them. Of course, the primary addressees of this correspondence are readers of the monodrama, and I admit that when I read Maria's 'completely unknown' letters, I felt it much more strongly than after reading the 'known' letters that had really been written by her and had been collected and made available to a broader public many years later. Maybe because only fragments of them were printed? What is hidden in those dotted spaces in letters to Maria's father, sister, husband, daughters, friend and lover? In order to check this, I would have to renounce intermediaries – editors – and find original versions. Take the sheets filled with words into my hand and read them in the hope that they will speak to me in the scientist's real voice in an unedited and uncensored version. I do not do it, but I read Pałyga's text many times. It is interesting that publishers are a problem to me, while I do accept another intermediary – the writer. I do not trust the publishers, yet I do trust the writer, even though he offers a literary apocrypha to me. Maybe this is because he behaves like a medium himself...

*In Radiance* has nothing to do with an occasional compilation of Skłodowska's letters or with their critical 'rewriting'. It is rather the writer's personal reply to the scientist's thoughts that absorbed his attention most strongly and the amplification of the motifs present in her correspondence that appealed to his imagination most vividly. Pałyga reads Maria's letters, literally interprets her words, though not in order to reveal any faults, and cunningly alters the meaning of quoted phrases: 'Human curiosity is uncontrollable / It will find and disembowel everything, and it will add what it will not find' (Pałyga 2016: 56-57) says Maria. Pałyga is curious about it, but not in such a way. He adds certain things, though not those that are not even mentioned by the scientist. He listens to her voice to hear it better, not to drown it out; however, imitating Skłodowska's slightly old-fashioned style, he often departs from it, breaks the phrase, modernizes the language and applies an entirely new rule to it. His heroine often uses 'nice sentences', like in real letters from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, trying to be precise, logical, comprehensible and unambiguous. This clear style of speech expressed in writing is her defense against 'tentacles' of human curiosity that 'force' their way into the gaps of someone else's life. But these 'nice sentences' frequently change into a stream of living speech that sounds like a dramatic poem:

I am not writing this letter.  
I am speaking it – after all, nothing is lost.  
Words radiate (ibid. 55).

They 'radiate' with meanings and energy of the speaker. Maria's language is poetic because it submits the reality to surprising transformations with the force of metaphors hidden in it and triggers sudden associations of thoughts, feelings and impressions with the power of juxtaposed words like in an avant-garde poem. It is interesting to notice that the ordinary Polish word 'radość' (joy) contains exceptional radioactive radium ('rad') and a sharp prickly fishbone that we can choke with ('ość'). However, Skłodowska's monologue is also dramatic: it pulsates with the presence of a speaking girl and then woman, expresses her reactions, her exultation, fatigue and pain and reflects the dynamics of thoughts and the heat of desires; in short, it imitates an exceptional action. I do not know any other text in which a scientific experiment would undergo a poetic and dramatic transformation! Obviously, numbers, geometrical shapes, chemical

compounds and physical phenomena have inspired poets, and when Maria ‘improvises’ the separation of polonium and then radium, futuristic poems by Tytus Czyżewski – for example, his *Poem of Figures (Poemat liczb)* from 1920 – come to mind. However, futurism – a movement inspired both by science and by spiritualism or magnetism – is not the only literary affinity that can be indicated. In Maria’s monologue, we can also hear the voice of the main protagonist of Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz’s drama *An Anatomy Lesson by Professor Tulp: According to Rembrandt (Lekcja anatomii profesora Tulpa: według Rembrandta)* from 1964, in which the active poetic description refers to a post-mortem examination. Maria’s ‘elemental poetry’ in her dramatic action sounds like this:

Hydrochloric acid for pitchblende.

An acid solution.

Hydrogen sulphide is added.

Only uranium and thorium are left in the solution.

What has separated from the solution, note, what has separated from the solution is more active than uranium and thorium as a whole.

What is it?

What is it?

If uranium requires the death of a star, what does it require here?

What do we have in our hands?

I examine.

It is a mixture of metal sulphides: lead, copper, bismuth, arsenic and antimony.

That is all we know.

And the unknown?

(...)

So, it is pitchblende!

We treat it with chlorine, and we come up with chlorides

U, Th, Pb, Cu, As, Sb, Bi and X!

There is sediment.

Sulphides

Pb, Cu, As, Sb, Bi and X!

And  $(\text{NH}_4)_2\text{S}$  on it.

Three are left.

Pb, Cu, Bi.

And the fourth one, like the fourth musketeer – X.

And NH<sub>3</sub> on it.  
 And there are hydroxides Pb, Bi and X!  
 And H<sub>2</sub>S on it.  
 And there is still Pb, Bi, X.  
 So nothing changes.  
 Then there is sublimation.  
 700 Celsius degrees.  
 And this is it!  
 On one side, PbS<sub>1</sub>, BiS<sub>3</sub> go away to heaven, and we get to the middle of hell.  
 X!  
 Let's call it polonium! (ibid.: 61)

Speaking aloud, Maria not only explores and creates worlds, but she also becomes more real. She will tell us about it straight out, although Pałyga formulates her thought in a manner suggesting that it is not only a matter of direct meeting with the heroine, but also with reality: 'I am speaking aloud in order to restore realness', states Maria and she will fight for this realness, also when she loses the thread... So she wants to 'restore realness' and tells us about this, and she immediately adds mysteriously: 'To get out of something like becoming something' (ibid.: 55). Maria is thinking aloud about becoming someone else; like substances being heated by her, she is subject to constant change, which leads to the separation of what is the most important in her. Speaking, she 'gets out of something' and becomes 'something' anew, as if the internal transformation of the human being required not only his/her will and reflection, but also his/her action going hand in hand with words. A written letter will be only a dead memory of this mysterious process, whereas a letter spoken here and now, in real time, addressed to someone, even to herself, a letter changed into an act of living and direct communication that is extraordinarily based on the word being subject to intense thought and the surprising work of imagination, a letter-action is that process itself. It is a powerful carrier of an experience changing personality that can be triggered – and experienced! – not only by an actress performing Maria's monologue, but also by its reader. Quoted already in *The Prologue*, the main definition of radioactivity – 'Radioactivity is the transformation of one element into another through the emission of radiation' perfectly expresses the principle and aim of this monodrama.



## IN THE THICKENING DARKNESS

We already know that it was created by an ignitable match... In her letter to a friend dated March 13<sup>th</sup> 1889, twenty two-year-old Maria wrote: 'My head burns so much, it is so full of projects that I can't get along. You see, while Your Mania is alive, she will be a match of matches!' (*Korespondencja...* 1994: 19). Like most girls from her generation, young Maria devoured poetry, translated foreign poems and wrote her own; thus, witty playing with phrasemes was nothing special to her. Therefore, even in a 'nicely' written letter she does not write about her 'feverish head', but about her head being 'on fire'; she will immediately associate this image with a burning match (which also has a head) and... will become it immediately. Obviously, she will not become an ordinary match, because the metaphor (which initiates the metamorphosis!) assumes thinking and Maria wants to be a scientist, so she will be a 'match of matches', a big one, the biggest one, like a Biblical song... Nevertheless, she will be a match – like the one for burning a candle or a gas lamp – rather than a torch or firebrand that has ignited the imagination of many poets. Pałyga noticed that difference and caught hold of this match, i.e., he followed Maria's youthful, poetically 'un-overscaled' imagination, yet, he also let his own fantasy work; thus, around this motif, a dramatic situation of key importance for the entire monologue arose in his work: 'I'm here, in the thickening darkness / There is a table, a card, and an unlit lamp in front of me. // In front of the lamp there is a match' (Pałyga 2016: 72), says Maria to herself from the future in the first monologue entitled *Entrapment*.

Each further letter is spoken by an increasingly more mature woman; this one is spoken by an 18-year-old. She is much younger than historical Maria from the letter to Przyborowska, and she is celebrating her birthday. A lonely November evening is an exceptional time for her – a time of transition, change and also trial. The girl has attained maturity and, at the beginning of her adulthood, experiences this kind of existential shock where the sense of passing plays the most important role. 'Big Mania', 'Mania in the maturity of her fruitful life' realizes 'the minuteness of our life in the infinity of the universe' and she thinks that she is already leaning towards non-existence, she is beginning to disappear and 'fade into this darkness' (*ibid.*: 51). An incredible, mysterious moment! Maria feels lonely, but also distinct; she did not go to the party although she had been invited. She did not want to waste her short life on insignificant matter; this is made easier

by her unattractive appearance she even tries to be proud of: 'I'm ugly, and I consider it to be a gift, the biggest gift' (ibid.: 52).

Maria's loneliness, her detachment from people is intensified by the absence of God, who disappeared from her life after her sister's death, which was soon followed by the passing of her mother. Hurt by this double loss, the hitherto religious girl lost faith in God's goodness: 'I've prayed for so many nights, my faith was unshaken and solid as a rock, I believed in: ask and you shall receive. // And both of them died' (ibid.: 62). And when she became a scientist, she completely excluded God from her reflections on life and death. But that was then; now, recalling her adolescent tragedy, she says: 'what has remained, is the void that needs filling in' and she fills it with herself, because she decides to write letters to herself. This surprising idea perfectly reflects the most important traits of Maria's personality: concentrated, introvert and proud, and therefore closed to others, but also looking for a more mature confidant to whom she could confide the most 'shameful' and 'intimate' contents. Maria's monologue was intended by Pałyga to be a kind of confession that Konrad calls the 'discovery of the soul' in *Dziady*<sup>1</sup>. Maria 'hates Romanticism', and yet her letters are written exactly in this fashion, even though the two fragments of the monodrama that Pałyga called *The Great Improvisation of Maria Skłodowska-Curie* (*Wielka Improwizacja Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie*), are devoted to an entirely different discovery – not of the soul, but of polonium and radium. However, in the case of the heroine, it is actually the same... Konrad addresses God in a friendly manner in his confession, but ultimately he reacts with a blasphemy (which is not spoken!) to His silence. Maria does not believe in God, but she longs for the presence of someone similar to Him: 'And I want, I need so much to feel someone's presence – feel that someone sees me, knows about me, understands me' (Pałyga 2016: 51).

If Maria's monologue were spoken by an actress from the stage in our presence, the empathy that we would feel towards this girl could fulfill her desire. But Maria does not speak to an audience – she speaks to herself and chooses herself as this other empathic, conscious and understanding person to whom she can open her soul. Like Henryk in *The Marriage* (*Ślub*), Maria

<sup>1</sup> 'I am uncovering my soul to You like a friend' (Mickiewicz 1974: 200).

speaks about the void that we would like to call metaphysical and which is signified by darkness both in Gombrowicz's play and in Pałyga's work: 'I'm here, in the thickening darkness,' says the girl, experiencing the loneliness of a modern intellectual on the threshold of her adulthood, which pushes her to create a lookalike character. Writing to herself, Maria pretends to establish her second 'self', but she does that out of her genuine internal need in order to speak herself towards that 'self', or – more precisely – to build herself in accordance with her desire. By 'creating' Władzio (which was an inadvertent act – Władzio emerges from the protagonist's dream in *The Marriage*), Henryk established someone 'below' himself, someone over whom he could 'rule', force him to commit suicide and become a(n involuntary?) tyrant. Maria has different intentions – she dreams of herself as a more conscious, wiser, greater, even immortal person! Her attempt is not yet undermined with the sense of disaster and internal breakdown that fills the souls of so many literary figures with a nihilistic view and a heart filled with desperation in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Maria still represents the intellectual group that writes the word 'positivism' rather than 'negation' on its highly raised standards, combining the entire (religious, philosophical, poetic) idealism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the realism of laboratory experiments and transforming it into a lofty scientific world view: 'So let's work', calls Maria. 'Let's work as long as the light of the day and the small light of the night shines for us'.

Pałyga perfectly captured this dimension of Skłodowska's spiritual construction – he emphasized it, but also analyzed it from a deeper poetic perspective. First of all, he filled Maria's monologues with alchemical symbols, recognizing the esoteric Faustian myth in her unbending knowledge-seeking attitude that fascinated schoolgirls from Włocławek and the entire world so much. Skłodowska's actions – her endless attempts to separate various substances by heating them to a higher and higher temperature – were put by Pałyga into the framework of an occult ritual whose artistic representation is the monodrama itself. In Pałyga's work, Maria exerts her influence not only on matter, but also on herself; her scientific practices affect directly her physical and mental condition and not only broaden her knowledge, but also change her views and shape her personality. *In Radiance* makes us realize that, contrary to positivistic assumptions, research work develops the scientist and changes his/her spiritual structure, and this internal

transmutation process is more difficult to follow, define or measure than the transformation of bodies. 'We acquire the features of things that we've become fond of, that our life sticks to', says Maria, and she adds: 'I am radium'. With every word, she enters a higher level of her consciousness.

## THE BRIGHT RAY OF TRUTH

So, how does Maria perceive herself? How does she understand herself – now and in the future? What does her monologue reveal? She is (will be) proud and alone, she is (will be) different and she is (will be) determined. She wants to dedicate herself to science in order to tear out from the world the secrets that will make people happier. In the darkness, the metaphysical void, a flame is born and a scientist is born who, like Prometheus, is ready to steal fire from the gods and bring it to people even at the cost of martyrdom. She is irritated by this word, but the experience behind it clearly attracts her. She takes a match in her hand and analyses the ingredients from which it was made (wood and phosphorus), thinking about this strange 'element' that brings so much good and so much evil; then she lights the stick and holds it until it burns out in her fingers, ready to bear an even stronger pain in the future. 'I disappear in pain', she says. 'There is only will'. And sheer will is the thing that would like to become above all elements, the will that is resistant to everything that weakens it. To physical and mental pain and all obstacles, like the fact that she is a woman, that only men are allowed to study in her epoch, that she is a Pole, that knowledge in her country is the domain of Russians, that she is poor and learning is expensive, that she has to live with people who always expect something... And that she is within the body that is subject to fatigue, illness, old age...

How to avoid succumbing to human weaknesses when you are a human? Self-exercise is necessary, so Maria invents her private 'ritual' of fire. But that is not enough. In order to go outside our own limits, we need stronger help, and Maria knows that making it up is not sufficient to hold on. Therefore, on that night, in the complete solitude of her dark room, she not only establishes her second 'self', but also summons someone. This happens in sheer reality: the whole world calms down, the match burns, Maria moves her fingertips closer to the bright flame and then a voice is heard:

The flame speaks to me.  
 'Mania', it speaks to me.  
 Like someone close to me, the closest one, a member of the family, the nearest  
 family.  
 'Mania', speaks the flame.  
 'I am', I say.  
 I am.  
 And I'm afraid.  
 And I feel the rising fear, the panic that must be suppressed.  
 And my fingers already feel hot.  
 I want.  
 I can.  
 I ask.  
 I demand.  
 I order.  
 Let it arise here.  
 Here in front of me.  
 Like in front of Faust.  
 For the world.  
 For humanity.  
 Am I ready?  
 Yes, I'm ready.  
 For everything?  
 Yes (ibid.: 54).

Maria knows that when the pain comes and can be endured, the world  
 (along with all those unaware people) goes away and there comes... who?  
 'Like in front of Faust' – the Spirit of Earth, maybe Mephistopheles himself?  
 It amounts to the same – the entire scene refers to Faust. Pałyga fills it with  
 a multitude of allusions to the first scene of the first part of Goethe's tragedy  
 entitled *Night*:

The lamp flickers!  
 Now it dies! Crimson rays dart  
 Round my head – Horror  
 Flickers from the vault above,  
 And grips me tight!  
 I feel you float around me,

Spirit, I summon to appear,  
 speak to me!  
 (...)

*He grips the book and speaks the mysterious name of the Spirit. A crimson flame flashes, the Spirit appears in the flame* (Goethe 2003).

The first monologue of *In Radiance* is Maria's night – the night of her 'liberation'. We can see the similarity in words, objects, images, and the very situation of talking to a flame, which is a clear reference to occult practices in *Faust*<sup>2</sup>. Maria lights a match and ignites the thought that suddenly breaks away from her and speaks to her like an arriving guest. Just like Faust's heart, her heart 'laces up' the fright that she must overcome to release herself and gain enough power 'to flow through Nature's veins, and, in creating, enjoy the life divine' (ibid.). This is the direction in which Pałyga will lead the further parts of the monologue spoken by Maria, for whom the examination of nature will be also the creation of its unknown elements and the establishment of dimensions of which we are unaware. Maria's desire is not caused by some scientific disillusionment following many years of hard research work; she is rather guided by the same poetic cognitive passion that we know from Adam Asnyk's poems weaved into Pałyga's monodrama: 'Look for the truth of the bright flame! / Look for new undiscovered roads...' recites Maria and then she soberly adds: 'And I'm looking, looking for a flame with my burnt hands, right? / Only with this God...' (Pałyga 2016: 62). Thus, the key moment for the initial Faustian situation is the one when Maria gains control of the pain and fear, and the power of will guiding her releases not only the brave, rebellious and almost desperate thought, but also the second voice that puts the future scientist to the test. No, Mephisto does not appear in Pałyga's monodrama, although Maria will summon his name in adulthood; as Małgorzata Szpakowska (2016: 81) aptly notices, nobody gives the girl any guarantees that 'things will turn out right and her effort will not be in vain'. However, it is the internal decision that counts. Maria is ready for everything and will endure everything, 'even when' – what?

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, it refers to the 'smaller pentagram driving the ritual away'. See: Abyss 2007: 42.

## THE FAUSTIAN ARRANGEMENT

The thought of Maria's 'Faustian arrangement' appears also in her biography by Barbara Goldsmith. The author of *Obsessive Genius* associated it with the second Nobel Prize, which Skłodowska received for the discovery of polonium and radium, the separation of pure radium and the examination of properties of radioactive elements. The prize popularized the new elements, particularly radium, which was treated as a miraculous antidote to all diseases, particularly cancers, even though these were actually caused by it – Maria died of leukemia as a result of intense radiation with radium. She paid with her health and life for the international fame that brought her the opportunity for further experiments, although it did not make her rich (the discovery was not patented by the scientists); moreover, she exposed many other persons to the risk. In Goldsmith's biography, we come across the recurring motif of the scientific obsession that pushes aside Maria's own good and the good of people close to her to the background of everyday life. Skłodowska literally loses herself in the work that exposes her to a huge danger. According to her calculations, the radium separated from pitchblende was to be 'several hundred times more active than uranium'.

She was mistaken. One tenth of a gram of pure radium chloride would prove to be ten million times more radioactive than pure uranium. Four years later, Pierre Curie said that had it been his choice, he never would have attempted the task of isolating radium. For Marie there was no choice (Goldsmith 2005: 73)

The last sentence of Skłodowska's biographer sounds very ominous, as if Maria's attempts were not voluntary, but the scholar's determination to separate radium had purely scientific grounds. The theoretical discovery of the new element could satisfy physicians 'working with the properties of rays' (ibid.: 73), who could regard the source of radiation as real on their basis. On the other hand, chemists expected a substance, and Maria was determined to deliver it to them, in spite of the absence of proper conditions. The work that she performed with Pierre Curie's help in her simple laboratory in a shed should have been carried out by a large team of persons equipped with appropriate devices. Another problem was that only Maria with her extraordinary skills could perform necessary measurements during reactions she created. The fatigue resulting from many months of experiments was not

the only price she paid for milligrams of radium isolated from many tons of clay. Skłodowska also suffered from recurring depressions. Goldsmith suggests that in December 1903 the scientist did not travel to Sweden to receive the Nobel Prize because of the depression that was a consequence of her miscarriage:

The previous summer, although five months pregnant, she had taken a bicycle trip with Pierre, who had emphasized how much he needed her company, oblivious to the danger such a strenuous trip might entail. After three weeks of constant biking, Marie suffered a miscarriage. When she could obsessively throw herself into work, she could keep going, but now the arduous labor was behind her. She was depleted physically and had not yet had time to mourn the loss of her father or her unborn child. The following week she took to her bed, speaking little, eating less, ignoring Irène, rousing herself only to teach her classes at Sèvres (ibid.: 88).

In 1912, she collected her second Nobel Prize personally, but after her return to Stockholm she was hospitalized due to suspected kidney failure. Although she underwent an operation, the reasons of her collapse are not clear. Symptomless tuberculosis was suspected, too:

What was not said was that she had experienced a total nervous breakdown and had fallen into the deepest, darkest depression of her life, more enduring than all the episodes that had come before. Later she told her daughter Eve that this time she wanted to kill herself and indeed some of her letters indicate that she planned to commit suicide (ibid.: 141).

However, these letters are unknown to us. Or maybe the suicidal thoughts of the great scientist were dotted out by publishers of her correspondence? In 1911, Maria experienced not only the miscarriage, but also the tragic death of Pierre Curie, who was run over by a horse-drawn cart (the scientist's head was literally crushed by a wheel) and the mentally devastating affair with the younger Paul Langevin, for which she was stigmatized. Thus, the 'Faustian arrangement' – if we assume this risky interpretation of events experienced by Skłodowska – involves also Maria's 'forbidden' love and suicide attempt; fortunately, the latter did not materialize. Faust tried to commit suicide, too...



## UN-HUMANISATION

Thus, the chain of Skłodowska's great scientific successes was accompanied by a chain of her personal misfortunes that evoke associations with the Faustian pact with the devil. In Goldsmith's story, Maria resembles the brilliant composer from Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*. Just like Adrian Leverkühn, she is the discoverer of entirely new worlds in her field and suffers, spending long weeks of her physical and mental collapse in the perpetually darkened bedroom that resembled a grave (ibid.: 141). But this was not the only motif linking her with the protagonist of Mann's novel. The biggest shock for Leverkühn was the death of his little child Nepomuk, for whom the composer and his whole home environment had deep affection and whom they called Echo (which means old times and forgotten childlike faith). The boy prayed for the whole creation in his own way, which surprised and touched Adrian. The composer perceived his sudden death as another, most horrible attack by Mephistopheles, with whom – as it seemed to him – he had concluded a pact. By creating the figure of the devil, Mann obviously follows Goethe, in whose work, as Mircea Eliade (1965: 80) writes:

Mephistopheles does not oppose directly God, but Life – His main creation. Instead of motion and Life, it tries to impose stillness, rest and death. Everyone who ceases to change and transform breaks apart and dies. This 'living death' manifests itself in the emptiness of the spirit and is eventually tantamount to condemnation. Whoever allows the roots of Life to die within him, he submits to the Spirit of Negation.

The Satanic dialectic! Mephistopheles stimulates the human cognitive and creative attempt and, at the same time, establishes death as its opposite and necessary condition, which is permanently inscribed in development, progress and all human actions. In Pałyga's monodrama, Maria summons Mephisto at the moment of her epochal discovery (performing the polonium separation process in front of us) and immediately asks:

What has to be sacrificed?  
 What do you want, Mephisto?  
 If we sacrifice our own life, this is forgivable.  
 If we sacrifice ourselves on the altar, this is great, superhuman, admirable.  
 And if not ourselves?

If someone else?  
 If you, child? (Palyga 2016: 66).

Maria seems to be speaking about the child that she miscarried, and this motif makes us think about infanticide Margaret from *Faust* and Susanna Margareta Brandt – the prototype of this character, who was accused not only of infanticide, but also witchcraft and beheaded in Frankfurt in 1772 (Schöne 1996: 214). First, still being pregnant, she addresses her child as a son, but after the miscarriage she will say: ‘Look, daughter!’, because she already knows the child’s sex. ‘You hurt so much, daughter!’ she will call at another moment, as if recalling the moment of the approaching delivery, although the pain to which she refers may also be understood a spiritual sense: ‘My child was dead when it came out of my body. / My daughter. My little daughter. My child. It was sacrificed.’ But Maria does not have ordinary qualms of conscience. In her unusual trance-like hyperconsciousness (and relationship), death constantly blends with birth, creating one reality of constant change, which is not subject to moral evaluation, because it belongs to another non-human order. This rule applies to all animate and inanimate bodies, according to the knowledge proclaimed by former alchemists and contemporary chemists and physicians as well as spiritualists standing between them:

*What becomes of the matter and the vital principle of organic beings after their death?*

‘The inert matter is decomposed, and serves to form other bodies; the vital principle returns to the general mass of the universal fluid’.

On the death of an organic being, the elements of which its body was composed undergo new combinations that form new beings. These, in their turn, draw the principle of life and activity from the universal source they absorb and assimilate it, and restore it again to that source when they cease to exist (Kardec 1996: 50).

The mysterious ‘vital principle’ is called here a ‘fluid’, which Rivail (Kardec) will associate with electricity: ‘Organic bodies may thus be said to be a sort of electric battery, in which the movement of the fluid produces the phenomena of life, and in which the cessation of that movement produces death’ (ibid.: 50).

As we can see, in the first part of her *Great Improvisation...* Maria descends: 'into the middle of hell' and separates polonium at an immeasurable temperature, in the fire that destroys everything. In the second part, she makes use of bodily fluids extracted from a dead man's corpse and pours them on the dead rock fallen from Space, thereby separating a new element – radium. She destroys living things and brings dead ones to life, and finally she burns to ashes and turns into a ray... However, before Maria fully burns out, she experiences the great Faustian exultation in the second (*Witch*), third (*Tiredness*), fourth (*Fulfilment*) and then fifth and sixth (*The Great Improvisation...*) part of the monodrama. The spirit of totally unrestrained will transforms the matter of her research and the matter of her life, which mix with each other like clay in a tank and soup in a pot, because Skłodowska, though buried in her work, tries to live up to her responsibilities as a mother: 'To feed the child, mix, heat, warm, cook' (Pałyga 2016: 57).

By means of surprising strings of metaphors, Pałyga equates research and the ordinary everyday reality of a woman in her monologue, which is both a moving and thought-provoking measure. After all, the scientist brings down the material, moral and spiritual aspect of existence to one common denominator, which is called 'radioactivity': 'What kind of light is being emitted by something in this heap?! / What has been born here and for whom?' (ibid.: 59), asks Maria, surprised with having discovered such a powerfully radioactive element. In her mind, polonium is a child, and the child is a compound of elements that radiate in the same way as pitchblende, though to a weaker extent. At the same time, she experienced self-transmutation – in accordance with alchemists' beliefs that inspired depth psychologists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Jung 1990). However, when building Maria's internal biography, Pałyga does not follow the path of Jung's individuation, she does not lead her heroine through stations of successive female archetypes. He is interested in another process, which the scientist tries to name at the very beginning of the monodrama, in the part *Witch*: 'I feel that I'm undergoing the process of unhumanization, hyperhumanization or subhumanization, I don't know its name' (Pałyga 2016: 55), says Maria, and Pałyga codes in her words the Spirit's line from Goethe's drama<sup>3</sup> and

<sup>3</sup> 'I am here! – What wretched terror Grips you, the Superhuman!' (Goethe 2003).

this key concept (*Übermensch*) that expressed a higher stage of development of the human being released from moral obligations (Nietzsche 2006). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the same concept became a sign of modern nihilism that led to the methodical extermination of millions of human lives backed up by scientific discoveries and developing technology. Immersed in her scientific trance, Maria does not ask questions about biological, social and moral consequences of her discoveries, although she experiences them herself; she is not concerned about the ethical borders of science, either (see: Galewicz 2013). She still belongs to this epoch of great idealists who naively proclaim the neutrality of research and experiments and whose pockets contain bags of radioactive substances that make their bones crumble (Goldsmith 2005). She represents the epoch of frantic scientific attempts that opened people's eyes to invisible energies, but they destroyed their bodies and took away their souls – i.e., distinctness and uniqueness that disappeared in the *cosmos* of continuously mutating elements. Observing the glow of radium at night, Maria thinks about the invisible side of existence that has finally been shown to human senses thanks to her work. We are in the very centre of the Faustian myth – the dream of the scientist who wanted to touch the metaphysical rule of the world is coming true.

I assumed, and this was my risk, that something else exists in spite of the reality and expectations of people that I respect and like.  
 Something that is invisible.  
 Because our senses are imperfect.  
 But we have something that strives for perfection it will not attain – and it is perfection.  
 Namely, science.  
 Science will reach where the senses cannot reach.  
 And I do not mean spirits.

Unfortunately, she does not mean people, either – she means humanity at the most... The whole first part of *The Great Improvisation of Maria Skłodowska-Curie*, this performed description of a chemical experiment that Pałyga likens to the alchemical element transmutation process is actually a record of the Faustian strive for the separation of 'a force from the beginnings of the world, which is penetrating and present.' In the end, her impressively beautiful personification – the author is deeply concerned

about maintaining this ambivalence – becomes Maria himself. Half-blind, with burnt interiors, fingers like scorched sticks, restless and painful, she becomes the sun and ash at the same time. She radiates and disappears.

## SISTER

In Maria's eleven spoken letters, Pałyga records the lofty world-view of a modern scientist who would say like Skłodowska:

People think that it is a matter of good and evil, of what is moral and what is immoral.

No.

It is a matter of avoiding an error (Pałyga 2016: 54).

He embeds this world-view in the Faustian myth and in alchemical or spiritualistic imagination, perfectly sensing that the rationalism of the Enlightenment is not sufficient for its description. Twenty years earlier, similar intuition was expressed by Jerzy Jarocki when he was preparing the theatrical performance of Goethe's drama in a new translation by Jacek Buras: 'listening to *Faust*, we feel that there is Something that knows and we still do not know; that the evolution of knowledge has returned to the starting point and that it is not longer the Enlightenment point of view – we find ourselves somewhere else' (*Das Streben...* 1996: 233)

In order to get nearer to this 'Something', Pałyga takes knowledge back to its magical and mythical beginning, recalling the names of Faust and Mephisto and, eventually, confronting this model of scientific world-view with Christian mysticism and theology. He does this when he composes Maria's monologue in the fashion of Saint Paul's *Hymn of Love*. If we replace the word 'element' with 'man' in it, and the Gospel allusion suggests such a possibility, the scientist's words will sound to us like a hymn to a new god of science:

Love does not ask whether he is useful, does not expect that he will serve someone or something and does not try to involve him in the harness of some pragmatic forces.

Love is satisfied with his existence (Pałyga 2016: 56).

In view of the ideal of pure cognition, Maria assumes the whole beauty and the whole burden of her discoveries. She does not regret anything and does

not apologize to anyone for anything. She makes a sacrifice to deified science, and she is ready to burn out and crumble to dust, because such is the superior 'divine' rule of the material world in all of its dimensions. Speaking of science in terms of selfless love, she creates a sort of secular theology that contains also a certain design of humanity. It is based on courage, freedom and the Faustian strive that brings forth human curiosity and the desire for rational cognition and independent explanation of phenomena: 'It was me, your mother, who revealed it. / I turned the invisible into the visible. / It was me,' she will say like the Creator. The collision of two world-views – the scientific one and the Christian one – has also a personal and historical dimension in the monodrama, because when Maria says: 'During that oath, I virtually became Faust, Faustina, didn't I? / This was like a pact, like a drop of blood on this devil's paper', she will code an allusion to a completely different Maria in the feminine form of the name Faust – the one whose true name was Helena Kowalska and who assumed the name Maria Faustina after joining a convent. A surprising association! Kowalska is the spiritual opposite of Skłodowska, even though she seems to be her daughter... Like her, she was not very pretty, shunned people, devoted herself fully to her mission and died of an unrecognized disease. She also wrote letters and, instead of scientific lectures, she kept a diary of her mystical experiences, which were as incredible as experiments carried out by Skłodowska in her shed. Both of them dealt with the 'invisible' for years, which Skłodowska perceived as impersonal energy (associated with spirits by spiritualists) and tried to look, examine, calculate and harness for the benefit of all human bodies suffering and finally crumbling to dust. On the other hand, Kowalska recognised the personal loving God in the 'invisible' and tried to answer Him, submit to Him, worship Him and express this for the benefit of all human souls that are eternal. She wanted to express this not only by means of the word filled with Christian mystical symbolism<sup>4</sup>, but also by means of the picture – the concrete image of Jesus Christ, the most important element of which is light in the shape of rays coming out of his heart:

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<sup>4</sup> The metaphor of fire plays a special role in it, as in *The Living Flame of Love* by St. John of the Cross. To read more about the mystical language of Saint Faustina, see: Machniak 2000.

In the evening, when I was in my cell, I saw the Lord Jesus clothed in a white garment. One hand [was] raised in the gesture of blessing, the other was touching the garment at the breast. From beneath the garment, slightly drawn aside at the breast, there were emanating two large rays, one red, the other pale. In silence I kept my gaze fixed on the Lord; my soul was struck with awe, but also with great joy (Kowalska 2005: 35-36).

The rays on the famous painting symbolize the Divine Mercy advocated by Saint Faustina. Although they resemble sunrays and the nun wrote about the 'Divine Sun' and the 'Sun of Divine Grace', they do not burn and do not turn to ash. Just the opposite; in the mystic's oxymoronic imagination, they 'gush' like water from a spring – they moisten, water and give life to people<sup>5</sup>. In Skłodowska's monologue, water (if not examinable) means only bodily fluids leaking out of a corpse or ice.

*In Radiance* can be read like an apocrypha of Skłodowska's correspondence or like a secret dialogue with Maria Faustyna Kowalska's writings. In the Noble Prize winner's monologue, the Saint appears like Priest Piotr in Konrad's cell, but only in the form of a shadow invisible to the main heroine. Sister Faustina's *Diary* was written in the years 1934-1938, but its first paragraphs are in the form of a memoir and move us back to the year 1924, when Maria experienced her first vision during a party in a park in Łódź. A few weeks earlier, she had asked her parents to allow her to join a convent, but her request met with their flat refusal. She tried to stifle 'the call of grace' with 'amusements', but in vain. She saw suffering Jesus, ran to the cathedral and there she heard: 'Go at once to Warsaw; you will enter a convent there.' She was eighteen years' old at that time, which was the same as Skłodowska's age in the first monologue of Pałyga's monodrama. Both women's lives are similar thanks to certain biographic motifs (hard and harsh life, diseases, conflicts with the environment) but they attain the level of myth only due to the analogous, though quite different pursuit of goals for which they sacrificed everything. The scientist follows her ingenious intuition concerning the existence of unknown elements with powerful radioactive properties, sacrifices her life for their discovery and separation, and her

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<sup>5</sup> 'O Most Sacred Heart, Fount of Mercy from which gush forth rays of inconceivable graces upon the entire human race, I beg of You light for poor sinners' (Kowalska 2005: 45).

biggest concern is the correctness of calculations, i.e., the truth of the physical realness of the invisible. The mystic follows the vision of Merciful Jesus, listens to his voice and devotes her life to the transmission of his will, and her biggest concern is certainty, i.e., the truth of the metaphysical realness of God. Skłodowska is afraid of error and she often commits it exposing herself and other people to danger. Eventually, however, their discoveries will be confirmed by experiments of other scientists, and science will follow the direction of research on radioactivity shown by her. 'I turn into radiation. I penetrate, I make an impact' (Pałyga 2016: 70) she will say prophetically in her monologue. Kowalska is afraid of illusion and she often submits to it, sinking into spiritual crises she gets over with the help of her confessors. Eventually, however, she remains certain of her mystical experiences, which the Church will confirm by canonizing Faustina and determining a new path of spiritual development for believers. Moreover, both women are subject to the mysterious transformation process; in the mystic's case, it consists in the personal union with God, and in the scientist's case it is based on the physical (phantasmatic) transformation into cosmic energy, which is understood and perceived as a sort of immortalization: 'Now that I'm already blind and burnt, there is nothing like life, non-life anymore', Maria will say.

When Kowalska experienced her most important revelation in her convent cell on February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1931, Skłodowska-Curie was raising money in America for one gram of radium for Poland. A year later she brought it to Warsaw and both women would have met at that time, had their worlds not been so distant from each other in spite of so many similarities. In May 1932, the Radium Institute was opened, in which Maria's radioactive element was placed. Two years later, in June 1934, Eugeniusz Kazimirowski finished the painting *The Image of Merciful Jesus*, whose shape had been dictated to him by Sister Faustina (who was dissatisfied with the result of his work, anyway). Skłodowska never saw it. She died of excessive radiation in France on July 4<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, *The Spirits Book* by Hippolyte Rivail was published in Poland...

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF INSOMNIA

Let us make a summary. Skłodowska's letters written by Pałyga are not necessarily unknown; they rather form a secret, almost esoteric correspondence that is performed like an occult ritual. *In Radiance*



triggers the phantasm of alchemical physical and spiritual transformation in imagination. In its centre, there is the Faustian myth, whose dynamic structure binds the most important elements of Maria's soul. The despair after the death of her sister and mother makes Maria rebel against God and want to serve another huge force – deified science symbolized by the Spirit of Earth and Mephistopheles himself. Using the power of will forged in fire, Skłodowska subordinates her whole life to science, and sacrifices herself and the child in return for the received knowledge. She almost literally burns out on the altar of science, but in return she attains a secret – huge radioactivity contained within polonium and radium. Distilled at the cost of Maria's immense physical effort and mental collapse, this second chemical element fulfils the role of the philosopher's stone and is treated by the world as the elixir of life. The Faustian myth triggered in the monodrama spiritualizes the research done by this unusual woman and adds demonic properties to her efforts. Skłodowska calls herself a 'witch'; indeed, her portrait drawn by schoolgirls from the pre-war grammar school could have hung in a museum of former and contemporary heretics, i.e., those who 'have sunk' into books, metal, numbers and the corpse – as Mickiewicz wrote in Konrad's *Improvisation* – in order to acquire divine wisdom. Maria also 'improvises' by revealing the secrets of her hyperconsciousness and subconsciousness. While Saint Faustina burns out in the fire of divine love, still thirsting for life, the scientist shines with a bright phosphorous flame of knowledge for which she pays with her life. As new Faustina, she becomes a female symbol of Promethean rebellion and a figure of intellectual enlightenment, which has been absent in the Polish imaginarium so far. The brave can make it come alive within them by performing Pałyga's unusual monodrama. Indeed, the consequences of playing with matches at night by one of the most gifted contemporary dramatists are surprising...

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## Summary

In his essay, author deals with the interpretation of a very original, new monodrama by Artur Pałyga, entitled *In Radiance* (2016), whose heroine is Maria Skłodowska-Curie. The author is interested in a poetic and performative dimension of Maria's dozen monologues, which the author described as completely unknown letters' of the scientist. These monologues reveal the process of Maria's spiritual development from the moment

of attaining maturity, until her death due to excessive irradiation. Author focuses on the aspects of Maria's consciousness that Pałyga has brought forth from the myth of Faust, which comprises the foundation of the scientific world-view.

In this monodrama, Skłodowska-Curie is the Polish Faust who is ready to break the moral rules and pay the price of her and others' life for sheer possibility of revealing the mystery of the universe. Kopciński confronts this original literary image of a scientist with the history of her life and highlights the moments in her biography that can be read as the execution of the 'Faustian arrangement'. At the end of his work, he compares the character of Skłodowska-Curie, who calls herself Faustina, with the figure of another extraordinary woman who has also adopted this name – Maria Faustina Kowalska. The comparison of the scientist and the mystic woman allows us to see many similarities in the characters of both, their way of life and their relationships with other people, but it also describes fundamental differences in the world-views they represent. Finally, two Faustinas are two different symbols. The figure of the scientist symbolises desire for the intellectual control of the world, which constantly changes like elements discovered by Maria Skłodowska. On the other hand, the figure of the mysticist symbolises desire for an inner union with loving God, which involves the sacrifice of one's 'self' to gain the eternal life of the immortal soul.

**Keywords:** *In Radiance*, Artur Pałyga, monodrama, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, Faust, Faustina Kowalska



## THE ROLE OF THE CAMERA IN WOJCIECH SMARZOWSKI'S FILMS<sup>1</sup>

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The most important inspiration for this sketch was my desire to return to the issue that I had undertaken in 2003, which resulted in the article *Who is Favored by the Digital Cameras? (Komu cyfra sprzyja?)*. Back in the day I pointed out that digital cameras shortened the waiting time for the opportunity to make a debut film, and secondly, became significant props<sup>2</sup> enabling the protagonists to communicate – this is what was supposed to happen for example in Iwona Siekierzyńska's *My Baked Chickens (Moje pieczone kurczaki, 2002)*, where the conversation between the conflicted couple was replaced by playing the clips recorded by the wife. I wrote 'was supposed to happen', because the theme of a 'digital camera acting in a film' was carried out in a way that seemed to be ham-fisted – the protagonist attended film school, which meant that making materials did not stem from her desire to rebuild her marriage, but instead preparing them for a school project. The way digital camera was 'cast'<sup>3</sup> in Łukasz Barczyk's debut *I'm Looking at You, Mary (Patrzę na ciebie, Marysiu, 2000)* was much more convincing and smooth – in this film, it serves as a medium through which the protagonist reaches his girlfriend, learns more about

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Bartek Piotrowski for his help in writing this paper, but above all I want to express my gratitude to Piotr Sobociński jr, who patiently endured all my questions.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, there were also films in which the digital camera appearing on the screen served only as a prop informing the viewer about the social status and wealth of the presented characters, thus showing the fact that a camera has become one of the items commonly used by Poles.

<sup>3</sup> I wrote about 'casting' the camera, because in this sketch I will deal with the camera that 'appears' in the film, rather than the cameras used to make them.

the person with whom he had been in a relationship and lived with for several years, yet, in fact, knowing very little about her<sup>4</sup>. Michał learns about Marysia's desires, sympathies and dreams only when he points at her the lens of an amateur camera<sup>5</sup>. In Mariusz Front's *Double Portrait* (*Portret podwójny*, 2001), the digital camera serves as a notebook, which contains 'sketches' of Warszawa, being thus a full-fledged character in the film, as well as very personal images<sup>6</sup>, such as the face of the sleeping protagonist filmed by her boyfriend. In addition, the size of digital cameras and the fact that it requires a small amount of light<sup>7</sup>, which lowers the requirements concerning

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<sup>4</sup> *I'm Looking at You, Mary* was shot using a Beta and a tiny DV digital camera, Kacper Lisowski was the cinematographer, and Karina Kleszczewska worked with the actual camera.

<sup>5</sup> I decided to go with the word 'amateur', because this is how DV digital cameras were perceived at that time, despite the fact that they were also used by professionals, including the authors of *Double Portrait* (Jacek Januszyk, Mariusz Front and Elżbieta Piekacz), awarded at the Gdynia Festival in 2001 for 'searching for new forms of expression', and the aforementioned creators of *I'm Looking at You, Mary*. It seems particularly important to me that *Edi* (2002) by Krzysztof Ptak and Piotr Trzaskalski, awarded the Golden Frog (*ex aequo* with *Road to Perdition* shot on film by Conrad Hall and Sam Mendes, later also distinguished with an Academy Award for cinematography) at the 2002 Camerimage Festival, was made mainly using a DV camera. In the decision of the jury of Camerimage, equating the motion picture shot on film with one made using a DV camera, I see evidence of the introduction of digital recording to the world of big cinematography.

<sup>6</sup> A similar situation occurs in Marcin Koszałka's documentary *It will Be Somehow* (*Jakoś to będzie*, 2004), a sequel to the famous *Such a Beautiful Son I Gave a Birth To* (*Takiego pięknego syna urodziłam*), which ends with a clip of the face of the director's daughter, Zosia, who at that point was several years old, kissing the lens.

<sup>7</sup> Although it still has to be very precisely planned: 'The film is far still more tolerant of exposure errors, especially of overexposure of the bright parts of the image. Paradoxically, when filming using standard film, it is easier to organise lighting on set. When it comes to digital recording, this has to be done with far more precision. On the other hand, apart from the obvious savings in time and money, a digital camera works infinitely better in difficult lighting conditions thanks to its impressive sensitivity' (Bukowiecki 2002: 15).

set lighting, made it easier to work with amateurs, who in the past could have felt scared by the size of the camera itself, as well as the lighting setup used on a film set. I mention this because both in *Edi* (2002), as well as in *Double portrait* and *Junk* (*Złom*, 2002)<sup>8</sup>, in addition to professionals, there were amateur actors, thanks to whom the productions gained a unique authenticity.

These were the results of my reconnaissance in 2003, when filmmakers still used DV digital cameras (small cameras associated with amateur filmmakers), or HD cameras (see: Bukowiecki 2002: 14-15) – such a camera was used to shoot *Pornography* (*Pornografia*), directed by Jan Jakub Kolski (2003), featuring camera work by Krzysztof Ptak – a precursor, pioneer and master of digital cameras and digital image processing, among others. Today, in 2019, making films with digital cameras no longer surprises anyone and is not treated as an artistic fad or the only chance to make a debut, since along the way, two new types of digital cameras were developed, enabling filmmakers to record images with quality equal to that achieved with an analogue camera and light-sensitive film: Red Epic and Arri Alexa. The production of films using digital cameras has become standard, which is why in this article I will no longer focus on the form of films shot this way, but on the role of the cameras ‘cast’ in films, for example those appearing in the hands of the characters in the films by Wojciech Smarzowski. I decided to take a closer look at this director’s films because, first of all, I consider him to be the most interesting filmmaker in Polish cinema after 1989. Secondly, because as often as the axe, which is considered an almost obligatory prop in the films by the author of *The Rose* (*Róża*)<sup>9</sup>, the hands of the protagonists of Smarzowski’s films hold... a camera<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> *Złom*, dir. Radosław Markiewicz, cinematography by Dariusz Radecki. Cf. Lebecka 2002; Sendecka 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Tajemnice „Drogówki”*, czyli czy wiesz, że..., additional materials on a *Drogówka* (*Traffic Department*) DVD, graphic design: E. Wastkowska, project coordinator: M. Kosińska, producers: R. Kijak and M. Skowrońska, Agora SA 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Three of the five films he has made to date have been recorded with the use of digital cameras: *The Dark House* (2009) – Sony ex 1; *Traffic Department* (2013) – mainly Red Epic (I will return to the issue of the types of cameras used in the production of this film in the further part of the paper); *The Mighty Angel*

The clips recorded by the cameras used by Smarzowski's film characters<sup>11</sup> always reveal the truth. Sometimes it's about 'something' recorded accidentally, which was the case in his debut *The Wedding (Wesele)*, where the Cameraman, who is trying to collect himself in the toilet after being assaulted, learns about the price for which Janusz married Kasia. In another case, in *The Dark House (Dom zły)*, a crime scene investigation, the aim of which is not to find out the truth, but to accuse the detained man of crimes he did not commit, becomes a kind of grotesque *dance macabre* performed by police officers. It is precisely because of their carelessness and being too sure that they could do anything they want, the camera – held by one of them – would record scraps revealing the true intentions of the law enforcement officers. In *Traffic Department (Drogówka)*, on the other hand, materials recorded by one of the officers, enabling him to blackmail the perpetrators of road traffic offences (which brought him considerable profits, but also led to his murder), are used by another police officer as evidence of his own innocence. In *The Mighty Angel (Pod Mocnym Aniołem)*, the images from the hospital CCTV system give the film its authenticity<sup>12</sup>, since they often clarify and verify the visions of patients suffering from alcoholism.

The actions of the protagonists of Smarzowski's films are devoid of the gesture of Filip Mosz featured in *Camera Buff (Amator)* by Kieślowski, where, in the final act of the film, the protagonist points the lens at himself, so that after portraying the world, he can look at himself as well – because Smarzowski's world is not about gaining self-awareness. This is only true

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(2014) – Red Epic. Only *The Wedding* (2004) and *The Rose* (2011) were shot with an analogue camera (what is more, it was even the same model – the Arri bl3 camera) on film. *The Dark House* also features fragments made using a Krasnogorsk camera, which records on a 16 mm film. *Volhynia (Wołyń)*, 2016) was also produced using digital camera – this time it was Alexa. (Here I would like to thank the cinematographer of *The Rose*, *Traffic Department* and *Volhynia*, Piotr Sobociński jr, and the camera operator in *The Mighty Angel*, Bartosz Piotrowski for information regarding the cameras used).

<sup>11</sup> In *Traffic Department*, the recordings included in the film were shot by the actors; see: Wernio 2012.

<sup>12</sup> I will talk more about the importance, role and significance of authenticity in the fragment devoted to *Traffic Department*.



of the Cameraman in *The Wedding*, who ends the filming saying: ‘I wanted to do things right, the result was as always’.

The camera in the hands of Smarzowski’s protagonists is not an object, but instead it becomes another protagonist, a silent one perhaps, but able to look and then convey the image. It serves as an impartial witness. It seems to be a medium living its own life and therefore able to reveal the truth, even against the intentions of those filming. Perhaps I might be overanalyzing it, but I believe that the belief of the director in the image – which, according to Chris Menges, cannot lie<sup>13</sup> – is a side effect of Wojciech Smarzowski’s studies at the Cinematography Department of the Łódź Film School.

Despite being a trained cinematographer, Wojciech Smarzowski quickly realized that he is more interested in working with actors rather than manipulating lights and cameras, that he is more of a director, rather than cinematographer. He debuted by making *The Wedding*. Story has it that he first realized what medium would shorten the waiting time for his debut, and then he found the so-called social justification for using it (see: Taras 2007: 258-260). Of course, it turned out to be a digital camera. After that, all he needed to do was to create a list of events that have always had a digital camera. The wedding turned out to be the most meaningful and at the same time made it possible to refer to Wyspiański’s work<sup>14</sup>, who – as the future would show – would become an artist of great importance to Smarzowski, a director who is so interested in reinterpreting and perhaps even deconstructing myths that we consider important. When I asked Piotr Sobociński jr – the cinematographer with whom Smarzowski worked the most often on making his feature films (and judging by the results – I hope this cooperation will last as long as possible) – if he could confirm

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<sup>13</sup> Chris Menges – an eminent cinematographer, former camera operator for documentaries, responsible for making Ken Loach’s *Kes* or Roland Joffe’s *The Killing Fields* and *The Mission*; see: Taras 2015: 5-8.

<sup>14</sup> Smarzowski’s directorial debut features a statement ‘You must wear shoes at a wedding’, which is uttered by Wojnar, after he was robbed and assaulted; however, the references to Wyspiański’s art works seem much more important to me – these are inserts, short shots which are film versions of *Sleeping Staś* (*Śpiący Staś*) and *Motherhood* (*Macierzyństwo*), which give the viewer a moment of peace and quiet; see: Taras 2007a: 138-139.

the story about making of *The Wedding* using a digital camera, it turned out that this was only a legend, because the film was made on... 35 mm film, using a traditional film camera. Unfortunately, I am unable to pinpoint the exact reason for creating this 'digital legend'.

*The Wedding* takes place in one of the villages in the Podkarpacie region. The film covers the wedding ceremony of Kasia (Tamara Arciuch) and Janusz (Bartek Topa) and the following celebration, from the afternoon to the dawn of the following day. For the sake of clarity, I will explain that throughout the entire film, the viewers are dealing with two cameras: one which was used to make the film and the other one, operated by one of the characters shown on screen – the Cameraman (Maciej Stuhr), hired by Wojnar (Marian Dziędziel) to record the wedding of his daughter, but above all to make people see that the richest farmer can afford such a service. The fact that the Cameraman uses a small DV camera provokes outrage by Wojnar's wife (Iwona Bielska) – 'Didn't they have a smaller one? It's so small that people might not notice it!' The clips shot by the Cameraman appear in the film from the very beginning, as inserts interrupting the wedding sequence, thanks to which, first of all, they inform the viewers that they will deal with a film within the film, featuring both shots made by the team led by Andrzej Szulkowski, as well as those made by one of the characters – the Cameraman), and they simultaneously instill a sense of anxiety in the viewer, thanks to their dynamism. The shots made by the protagonist are, of course, more chaotic, rough, on the verge of 'visual dirt'. However, the longer we watch *The Wedding*, the more we find out that somehow the film and the 'film in film' do not diverge visually from each other too much and that the materials recorded by the Cameraman<sup>15</sup> perfectly complement the 'official' recording. Perhaps it was this 'lucidity' that led to the creation of the legend of digital origins of *The Wedding*? The motion picture made with the most noble and respected tool among the cinematographers – a film camera, using the noblest of all materials – 35 mm film, really resembles amateur videos (!) shot at weddings. It is worth noting at this point that the cinematographer, Andrzej Szulkowski, went beyond the principles of cinematography, which

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<sup>15</sup> Fragments recorded by the Cameraman were shot with a DV digital camera.

requires both great awareness of the technique (a sense of which principles can be ignored and which must be respected) and humility.

The Cameraman recorded the 'second life' of the wedding, a subcutaneous existence present outside the narrative of greetings and best wishes. We can see chaotic images and at the same time we can hear recorded statements about bad food, diluted vodka, motives of Janusz, who married Kasia too quickly, because 'he probably got her pregnant', as well as Wojnar's stinginess and wealth. We observe wedding games, which make the bride embarrassed. Several times throughout the film we can see her face, which absolutely does not resemble the face of a woman happy to get married, having fun at her own wedding. Kasia smiles when a bride rather should not, for example when the clumsy best man drops the wedding rings. At some point, the girl takes over the camera and films how the local thugs beat the Cameraman after she convinced them to do so. It turns out that he is the father of her child, that he cheated on her and left her, which is why Wojnar gave his daughter a choice to either get an abortion or marry Janusz, who was once in love with her, but who was never noticed by the girl. What is more, he agreed to do it not out of love, but for an Audi TT car. The cameraman wanted to see if Kasia was happy, which is why he asked for a favor from the owner of the wedding film company. This explains the chaotic shots from the beginning of the film – the protagonist learned how to use a DV camera. The materials recorded by the Cameraman turn out to be a book of proverbs, life truths and confessions of the community, ruled by Wojnar due to his financial status. These confessions are often moving, as in the case of a mother showing photos of her son, a 'good boy' who only drinks too often and then he beats... The rest of the confession is left to our imagination. The Cameraman managed to record events that reveal the truth about the motives of the protagonists' behavior. The amateur recordings expose the hypocrisy of guests who have come to the wedding, but do not wish the young well at all, and have come to see what will go wrong, as well as out of fear of offending Wojnar. It is from a clip recorded almost by accident in the toilet, where the beaten Cameraman was trying to collect himself after the assault, that Kasia learns about the transaction she became an object of, and about the death of her grandfather, who could not deal with the truth about how his son-in-law treated his granddaughter – in order to save money, Wojnar imported a car for Janusz from abroad,

and one of the parts of the car payment was to be a part of the grandfather's land, where a planned motorway would be built in the future, which was something that the protagonist did not know about. The man did not agree to give away the rights to his land, he did not want to give in to the demands of his son-in-law, finally, devastated by his granddaughter's situation, he died of a heart attack. The camera in the hands of the protagonist of *The Wedding* records the transgressions of the community, witnessing Wojnar's efforts<sup>16</sup> to make everything right, that is, in accordance with the rules respected by his community. Apart from that, it is also an intimate diary of a man who still loves Kasia, as evidenced by the long close-ups of her face, which slightly resembles the situation from *Double Portrait* (and *It will Be Somehow*) and at the same time confirms that a digital camera, such as the one installed in a mobile phone, serves as a place to store the most intimate and important memories of our lives, it plays the role of a talisman (this will be convincingly shown by Piotr Szczepański in *The Valley of Shitheads* [*Aleja Gówniarzy*, 2006], in the sequence of showing off children's antics recorded with their parents' phones in front of the childless Marcin [Marcin Brzozowski]). It seems particularly important to me that even one of the direct references to Wyspiański's work – whose influence on Smarzowski's aesthetically unstable film cannot be unnoticed and underestimated – a shot inspired by the *Maternity* (*Macierzyństwo*) pastel artwork, featuring a dark-haired woman breast-feeding a child, while being watched by girls with big bows in their hair, was made by the Cameraman, which only confirms the protagonist's distance, his ability to observe and focus on things that seem to be missed by others. Only the Cameraman notices the breastfeeding mother, while other guests are so drunk that they are unable to control their reflexes or even notice what is going on around them. It is probably worth asking, where did the woman come from, and what is she doing in the company of people from whom she clearly stands out with her beauty and clothing? After all, her presence does not add anything new to the plot, although, of course, her character serves as a direct reference to Wyspiański, announces the 'wedding dance' which in this space will turn

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<sup>16</sup> In spite of all the man's villainy, I can't see him as unambiguously negative, because Wojnar is simply a product of the community he is a part of. Only the grandfather and Kasia oppose the hypocrisy and the cult of money.

into singing *Rota* by the drunk guests<sup>17</sup>. Perhaps the dark-haired woman and the children accompanying her are phantoms, which would also be a reference to Wyspiański's *The Wedding (Wesele)*, which is chock-full of phantoms that appear only to some of the protagonists? Perhaps only the Cameraman sees a woman and children, or maybe they are only seen and recorded by the camera, which lives its own life in Smarzowski's films, sometimes recording what it wants, rather than what would have escaped the attention of someone using it anyway.

This happened in *The Dark House*, where the camera, used as a tool for documenting the crime scene investigation, will record a drunk prosecutor (Robert Więckiewicz) falling into a ditch, a re-enactment of the game that preceded the murder, an agreement between police officers and the prosecutor on how to get rid of Lieutenant Mróz... Such things could not be filmed by the officer operating the camera. One can probably say that in Smarzowski's films we are dealing with an 'intelligent camera' – although another term, namely 'fair camera' seems far more appropriate, since the camera records the moments of truth, reveals the true intentions and motivations of the characters.

*The Dark House* features a Krasnogorsk camera, recording on 16 mm film, which is more than just a prop, because it was also used to record the sequence of a crime scene investigation carried out in February 1982 in what remained after the fire on Dziabas' family farm (Kinga Preis and Marian Dziędziel), constituting a significant and crucial part of the film (the rest was shot using a Sony ex 1 digital camera).

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<sup>17</sup> This is the first of the very strong and meaningful scenes in Smarzowski's films, which can be regarded as his signature. Such sequences knock the audience out of – as Maria Janion described it – 'falling in love with one's own beauty' (Janion 1996: 15). In *The Dark House*, such scenes included throwing out Lieutenant Mróz out of a village shop by people waiting in a line, wanting to buy vodka and cigarettes, chanting 'Solidarity, Solidarity!' and showing the 'Victory' gesture, as well as the pregnant policewoman standing in line for a shot of vodka for every participant of the investigation. In *The Rose*, it is the penultimate sequence showing that Róża Kwiatkowska's farm was taken over by displaced persons from the Borderlands, whom the woman had warmly welcomed. *Traffic Department*, the most intense, almost festering visually, consists almost only of such scenes.

The example of *The Dark House* shows that in the world of Smarzowski it is not important who holds the camera. On the basis of *The Wedding* one could conclude that the camera is in the hands of someone who wants to understand the situation, someone who wants to know the truth (the Cameraman wants to know the reasons for Kasia's marriage, and also check if the girl will have a chance to be happy in life), and someone who is not a member of the community, keeping distance from events and characters (with the exception of Kasia), who will thus be able to judge everything. In *The Dark House*, at first we are deceived that Jasiak (Grzegorz Wojdon), a policeman who records the investigation, is a positive figure. It turns out, however, that this is not the case, because it is him who provokes Środoń (Arkadiusz Jakubik) to flee by telling him 'They are trying to frame you, get the fuck out of here!' and then films the man who stopped, shocked by the sight of the body of the murdered lieutenant Mróz (Bartłomiej Topa), and picked up the knife used to kill the man.

In Smarzowski's world, the camera (the one seen on the screen) is much more important than the person who operates it. It witnesses the events, as if it was more aware than the cinematographer and knew better what to record. It is independent and impartial, as proved by *The Dark House*. After all, the purpose of the investigation is not finding out the truth or re-enacting the situation that led to the double murder and suicide on Dziabas' farm, but to frame Środoń for the murder of Dziabas, his wife and son, and then additionally for murdering Mróz, who, while working on the case of the unlucky animal technician, accidentally approached the mysterious embezzlement in a state-owned farm, which worried the authorities to such an extent that he was met by a high-ranking secret police officer on his way to Arłamów, who offered him a promotion for stopping his private investigation. (In just a few hours, Mróz discovered more than others did in several months, simply because he wanted to know the truth about the crimes and one unlucky road bend, where many witnesses of the thefts died in an accident). For the sake of clarity, I will add that Środoń came to Dziabas' farm in autumn of 1981, because after his wife's death he wanted to start a new life in some distant place. He was offered a job in a state farm in the Bieszczady mountains, and due to the fact that the bus he was travelling on broke down, he decided to go on foot so as not to waste his time. Having decided to take a shortcut through Dziabas' field, he was bitten

by their dog, and as a compensation, the hosts offered him a refreshment, with copious amounts of alcohol. The moonshine encouraged the characters and allowed them to get so close that Dziabas and Środoń started to plan a joint venture – the production of alcohol on an almost industrial scale. Środoń showed them his savings, which he had got from his wife's insurance policy, which is when they decided to kill him. The guest was supposed to sleep in the room of Dziabas' son, Janusz. The man went out for a while, which is when the 'rightful' tenant returned to the room and promptly died at the hands of his own father, convinced that he was killing the guest<sup>18</sup>. Dziabas, devastated by the fact that he killed his son, also killed his wife, and then hanged himself. Środoń has been accused of committing the crimes. In *The Dark House*, the shots which attract the most attention and capture the viewer the most, are close-ups showing Środoń terrified by the fact that it is held responsible for deeds that he did not commit. The fact that the murder is something abstract to him, that it does not fit within his values is evidenced by his protests not to film him with an axe, which the police try to give him forcefully. One of the many paradoxes or ambiguities of this film, which only testify to its value, is that the camera, a tool that was supposed to forge a lie, to accuse an innocent man, captures elements of truth, clearly contrary to the statement that repeats throughout the whole film: 'Truth? There is no such thing.'

I wonder if this intelligent, free, fair camera, 'cast' in Smarzowski's films, cannot be linked with the last shot, characteristic of his films, in which we can see the set from above, the space where the events presented to us transpired and the characters whose dramas we have managed to get to know? Is it not possible to associate it with the gaze of the One who rules over this world but does not interfere with it? Someone, whose presence the author misses. Maybe this Somebody also operates a camera and that's why the camera becomes fair, seeing and knowing?

In *Traffic Department*, the recording devices are for sure operated by people. The protagonists use iPhones, treated as intimate diaries, to record moments of joy, such as a company event, pranks pulled on Hawryluk

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<sup>18</sup> All associations with Karol Rostworowski's *Surprise (Niespodzianka)* are very much in place, as this drama was inspired by the authors of the script – Wojciech Smarzowski and Łukasz Kośmicki.

and football successes of Król's son. In turn, a road police officer, Lisowski (Marcin Dorociński), registers people's misdemeanors with his mobile phones, which he then uses to blackmail them. Hawryluk (Robert Wabich) filming sergeant Król (Bartek Topa) on his way to a brothel, and then in the venue itself, to charge him with Lisowski's murder does the same thing. One of the ways to read *Traffic Department* may be recognizing it as a film about the power of images<sup>19</sup>, but even more about the fact that it all depends on whose hands the recording will end up in and what context it will be given. The clips that had enabled Lisowski to blackmail others were used by Król as a foundation of his alibi. He also disseminated clips from the orgy with politicians and businessmen, although he was promised a bribe for stopping his private investigation (another one in the world created by

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<sup>19</sup> The fact that *Traffic Department* can be interpreted as a film about the power of the image can be proved by the sheer number of camera types used by the crew during the production of the film – all in order to ensure the authenticity of the film. As the cinematographer, Piotr Sobociński jr, explains: 'Our basic assumption was that we wanted to get closer to realism, but not necessarily by going with naturalism. We perceive the world differently when we are under the influence of strong emotions. We wanted to show it on the screen. We gave up the naturalistic, objective look at the scenes for scenes filtered by the emotions that accompanied them. (...) We used many media, because this is what was written in the script, and what brings us closer to the truth. The main camera we used was Red Epic. We didn't want to film everything using the Epic and then degrade selected scenes. We wanted to maintain the depth of field and all the characteristic features of each format. We used iPhones, CCTV cameras, GoPro cameras, pens with hidden camera, police material recorded on an analogue Hi8 camera, as well as dashcams. All these devices filmed and also appeared in the film as props. We had scenes taking place on the bus, during which we used two Epic cameras, all while half of the actors had telephones and filmed each other. We used as many as fifteen cameras for one scene! I sympathise with the editor, who then had to review it all. An interesting fact is that the iPhone turned out to be too good and the image had to be degraded. The difference was not as big as we expected. We need to find the right texture for these clips, because we wanted to preserve the authenticity and multiplicity of formats. (...) The concept is that the boundary between the objective world, that is to say the Epic, and the subjective world, meaning other cameras, starts to blur at some point' (Wernio 2012: 62-63).



Smarzowski). The hero did not succumb to blackmail, he himself did not want to blackmail anyone – just like the murder did not fit into Środoń's mentality and abandoning the pursuit of the truth was not in the nature of Lieutenant Mróz, Król could not stand blackmail – and that is why he informed the society about how its representatives behave. As a result, just like Mróz, he was murdered (incidentally, both roles were played by the same actor).

However, some progress was made in the world created by Smarzowski, because this time the guilty were punished, or at least in the last shot (mostly in the general plan with the camera pointing downwards, of course) there was hope that this will happen – Król's superior was arrested at the funeral of his subordinate by the officers of the department of internal affairs. Maybe this progress stemmed from the fact that this time Smarzowski showed Poland after the turn of 1989, and the plot of *The Dark House* took place just before the imposition of martial law and during its duration? If so, despite the fact that the image of Poland, which we are dealing with in *Traffic Department*, may be frightening (we see a society destroyed by corruption, with norms subverted both in private and public space), it is clear that now there is a chance for justice and punishment of the guilty, which was not mentioned in the world (and in times) of *The Dark House*.

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## Summary

In this paper, I reflect on the role and function of the camera 'acting' (that is, the camera placed in the hands of the protagonists of films by Wojciech Smarzowski) that appears on the screen as often as an axe, which as an item is strongly associated with this director's cinematography. I also refute the 'digital' legends of his debut – *The Wedding*, which has not been recorded using a digital camera, but an analogue one. A camera 'cast' in Smarzowski's film should not be considered an extra, but a full-fledged protagonist, a witness seeing (and therefore recording) more than can be seen by the characters holding it in their hands. This perfectly corresponds with the last shot – perhaps the most characteristic one for the author of the films discussed – the shot in which the One who reigns over the world, but does not interfere with it (since we have free will) gazes at the universe created by Wojciech Smarzowski.

**Keywords:** Wojciech Smarzowski, digital camera, cinematography, final shot, Poland after '89, film image, light in film

## PROUST AND THE OLLENDORFF'S METHOD

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Cooperation between Proust and the Ollendorff family of Parisian publishers who came from Rawicz in Wielkopolska (Western Poland) spanned at least twenty years: it started with an article written for a free-of-charge advertising newspaper, published by Paul Ollendorff's publishing house, which appeared in July 1893, through an attempt of publishing by Ollendorff in 1902 his translation of Ruskin by and further through a more or less successful cooperation with Ollendorff's daily „Gil Blas” (1904) up to the failed attempt at publishing the first volume of his masterpiece at the beginning of 1913. Let us take a look at all of its stages.

### 1893: „GRATIS-JOURNAL”

As the name indicates, it was a free-of-charge advertising news-sheet featuring information about new books published by Paul Ollendorff's company. We know that Proust published in the newspaper by accident, due to the fact that the daughter of the author of the book discussed by him, Count de Saussine, encountered Proust's manuscript among papers left by her father and handed it over to his editors.

Henri du Pont de Gault-Saussine (1859-1940) was an engineer by profession and a musician by passion. He lived in Paris at Hôtel Créqui (16, rue de Saint-Guillaume) and he used to organize staging of little known or completely forgotten musical compositions (in 1902 he staged *Le mariage secret* by Cimarosa and in 1912 *Stabat Mater* by Pergolesi). The Count's residence was also frequented by modern musicians, such as Fauré, Franck, d'Indy, Ravel, well-known writers including Bourget, Anna de Noailles, Henri de Régnier, and aristocrats like Countess Greffuhle or Princess Polignac. Proust visited him too and immortalized the atmosphere of these meetings, combining aristocracy of the spirit with aristocracy of the blood, in a short

story dedicated to the Count and entitled *Éventail (A Fan, 1893)*. Among quite malicious portraits painted on the fan, Proust also included his *alter ego* in the person of one T..., who describes his room to the lady of the house and the addressee of the text, which is covered with tar in order to resemble a ship's cabin. The narrator comments (and let us remember that Proust, in order to isolate himself from noise, asked to have his room lined with cork):

Your disdainful smile shows that you do not value this crippled imagination which is not satisfied with projecting all visions of the universe into a naked room and which treats art and beauty in such miserably material way (Proust 1971a: 52).

Henri de Saussine also composed chamber music and more complex musical pieces. His opera buffa *L'Amour-Marmiton* was staged in 1899. His other works were staged by Reynaldo Hahn and Ferdinand de Madrazo, who were also friends with Proust. The Count was also the author of philosophical dialogues, several comedies and two novels: *Le Nez de Cléopâtre (Cleopatra's Nose, 1893)* and *Le Prisme (The Prism, 1895)* (see: Bertrand 1996: 614-616).

Proust's text in „Gratis-Journal” published by Paul Ollendorff referred to the former and was immensely flattering. Having praised the successful combination of the sheer absolute with the meaningful concrete, Proust compares the author of the novel to Zola, Stendhal, Tolstoy and Shakespeare. At the end, making an allusion to the author's musical fascinations, he indicates a transposition of Wagner's *leitmotiv* in the form of Cleopatra's nose from the title.

It is quite probable that Proust wrote the text ‘for old time's sake’, at the request of the author of the novel. Nevertheless, it is impossible to completely rule out the possibility that the advertisement review was just one of several and possibly many anonymous advertising texts which the young writer had written on the order by the Parisian publisher with Polish roots. Their identification turns out to be very difficult due to the absence of manuscripts and the fact that the advertising news-sheet of Ollendorff is a true *ava raris*.

A highly flattering letter about the second novel of de Saussine, published by Ollendorff, offers some insight as to the nature of these texts. Proust sent it in 1895 to Tristan Bernard, in the introduction referring to his share in

the magazine called „Revue Blanche” (published in Paris by the Natanson brothers from Warsaw):

Dear Sir,

One of the former editors of „Revue Blanche” would like to express a wish; namely, he would like your magazine to run a piece about a very worthy work of Mr. Saussine, *Prisme*, published over a month ago. I do not believe that my attachment to the author of the work multiplies the benefits of the work, which is one of the most interesting, most complex and strongest in the recent years.

In my opinion only he, a musician equally erudite and zealous as a man of letters, could have written this doubly artistic work. I believe that you are going to read it with great pleasure and that you will have the honor of announcing it worthily. Forgive me if I am making an impression as if I was giving you advice (...) (Proust, *Corr.*, Vol. IX: 238)<sup>1</sup>.

## 1902: RUSKIN – 1904: „GIL BLAS”

Proust's biographer, George D. Painter, notes that in the summer of 1902 Proust sent a manuscript of his translation of the *The Bible of Amiens* to Charles [!] Ollendorff, who kept the text for five months without being able to decide whether he would publish it or not, and afterwards he gave up the profession of a book publisher and became the owner of the 'Gil Blas' daily and his successor went bankrupt (Painter 1992: 370). The biographer also quotes the writer's letter from 1904 to Antoine Bibesco claiming that Proust's memory let him down as he complained about a year long absence of access to the manuscript and meanwhile it was already in the middle of December 1902 that he had it back at his disposal again, and signed an agreement with Le Mercure de France.

The issue is more complex and it has to be analyzed together with the cooperation with Ollendorff's daily „Gil Blas”, which took place in 1904. Painter writes that in the autumn of 1904 Proust had a 'minor flirtation' with the new „Gil Blas” daily, the competitor of „Figaro”, whose owner was the same Paul Ollendorff (now, he is mentioned under his correct name) who did not

<sup>1</sup> Proust signed this letter as: 'Your former collaborator Marcel Proust'.

become the publisher of the *The Bible of Amiens* two years earlier (Painter 1992: 440). And so on September 9<sup>th</sup> – I continue to recount after Painter – Proust was trying to persuade Antoine Bibesco to write about the début of Louise de Mornand in the Vaudeville, announced for September 16<sup>th</sup>, for „Gil Bas”. Bibesco refused and Proust had to write the piece on his own, and then another one at the beginning of December. On December 14<sup>th</sup>, he published (under a pseudonym) a review of Fernando Gregh’s book about Hugo. At the same time, Ollendorff refused to publish a dialogue entitled *Vacances (Holidays)*, which later became a part of the series of novels in the form of the narrator’s walk with Albertine in Bois de Boulogne.

Let us take a look at the documents, primarily Proust’s correspondence.

In the letter to Georges Goyau, dated hypothetically at March 1904, and devised as a sophisticated acknowledgement for the received compliment, Proust wrote:

Dear Sir,

I wish to thank you wholeheartedly for the beautiful letter that you wrote to me. Your sweet praises are particularly dear to me:

Because only three or four people  
Among whom also you are included  
Can offer praise  
In a manner that will last forever.

The word ‘forever’ could be used if your praise referred to Ruskin. (...) Unfortunately, I can sense that you like Ruskin only partially and I blame myself for it. I began by translating only a few extracts from ‘The Bible of Amiens’ which were chosen to give the loftiest idea of his work, those most worthy of his reputation and most characteristic of his genius. But a publisher, hearing of this, commissioned me to translate the whole of The Bible. Later this publisher went bankrupt (I am not talking about Mercure [de France]! here). But I completed the work for another publisher and meanwhile I took a fancy to it and did not have the courage to sacrifice even one of these beautiful nebulas on which I was trying to shed at least some light. And I would have been rewarded for such sacrifice. Every omitted boring fragment, every sacrificed gloomy page would change immediately into clean air that could be breathed, circulating between the selected pages and magnificent excerpts, putting them in their places and in the atmosphere adequate for them – like pedestals, highlighting the noble and solemn aspects

in magical mirrors, which would recount the preserved fragments and multiplied their beauty forever.

But I did not do it and I have a feeling that this is not a book which could introduce people to Ruskin and win their hearts to him. Now, I am translating another one, much more attractive, simply a lecture – a long lecture about Reading (Sesame – of kings' treasures); it does not have extended or weak fragments or ambiguities, and it is not overloaded with superficial archaeology and fanciful history and I believe that you will like it. But it is difficult to translate. What Verlaine said about humble life: 'the humble life with tedious, simple work is an act of choice and a deal of love it asks' may primarily apply to translation (Proust, *Corr.*, Vol. IV: 79-80).

Let us start with the fact that the poem paraphrased at the beginning of the letter is the ending of the last verse of François de Malherbe's ode *À la reine, mère du roi, sur le heureux succès de sa régence* (1611), a verse starting with an invocation to Apollo, who allows for collecting the ever-green leaves with names which are going to be remembered forever, yet only few people (Malherbe proudly included himself among them) are able to make wreaths from them. The noun used in the phrase *l'art d'en faire les couronnes* in French means a wreath and a crown, which seems to make this verse a skilful allusion to the emblems of Henry III Valois, i.e. three crowns, symbolizing the kingdoms of France and the Commonwealth of Both Nations (Poland and Lithuania) and the motto *Manet ultima caelo*, accompanying it ('The last [crown] in heaven'<sup>2</sup>). Initially, Malherbe sought protection from Henry III, but he is also the author of an epigram criticizing his effeminate favorites ('*Invective contre les Mignons d'Henri III*').

When writing about capers with the publication of translation of Ruskin, Proust avoids names. The publisher notes in the commentary that it was Paul Ollendorff who ordered the translation for Société d'Édition Artistique; however, he later withdrew from the company, which led to its bankruptcy.

The second testimony that we have about this matter is the above-mentioned letter by Proust to Antoine de Bibesco dated at the evening of September 9<sup>th</sup> 1904.

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<sup>2</sup> On a side, it is worth noting that a reference to this idea is probably included in a poem by Słowacki *Daję Wam tę ostatnią koronę pamiątek...* (*I Give You This Last Crown of Souvenirs...*).

My dear Antoine,

I should be enormously grateful if you could get a message to Monsieur Ollendorff. It is to this effect. Some time ago, he had from me, by Picard, a dialogue which he had promised to print. Whether he prints it or not is a matter of complete indifference to me, but since the thing is 'set' in the month of September, I'd like him, if he doesn't hurry up, to let me have it back at once so that I may take advantage of its vaguely topical nature to get it placed elsewhere. All this must be told to him clearly and positively because, really, he is an impossible creature. My *Ruskin* was submitted to him for publication and it was a full year before I could get it returned. If it hadn't been that he resigned from the firm, and so been compelled (or rather, it was his successor who was compelled) to make a general clean-up, I doubt whether I should ever have set eyes again on that Bible of mine which he had at once so cruelly spurned and so jealously hung on to.

About that 'snapshot'. Louisa de Mornant took quite seriously what you probably meant as the vaguest of vague suggestions. You're the one who ought to do it. If you'd rather I took it over, nothing in the world will persuade me to sign it, because what's wanted is something incredibly vapid, a sort of pastiche of D. 'Remember this name: the day may come when the world will ring with it' – or 'she is mad about her art, and slaves at it unremittingly'. I think you could do it marvelously (Proust 1953: 130-131).

Proust mentions three texts in this letter. The first one was entitled *Vacances: Françoise – Henri: premiers jours de Septembre* (hence the words about its relative September validity) and was not published during Proust's lifetime; it was printed in 1949 by Harry Levin from the manuscript found in Harvard in the papers of Robert de Flers, to whom it was dedicated; in the Polish Plejada edition, it is entitled [*Dialogue*] and included in volume *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (Proust 1971: 431-435). The second text is the already mentioned translation of *The Bible of Amiens*, which was going to be published by Société d'Édition Artistique at the time when Ollendorff was the co-owner of this publishing house, but was finally published by Mercure de France. The third text to which a reference is made is a panegyric for a common friend of the addressee and the sender of the letter, i.e. the actress Louisa de Mornand (it was written by Proust and published by Ollendorff in „Gil Blas”), one of the few examples of the successful cooperation of the writer with this publisher.



Meanwhile, at the beginning of October 1904, when sending to Antoine Bibesco his literary portrait, which was published in „Le Figaro” on October 8<sup>th</sup>, Proust wrote on the top of the first page of the manuscript: ‘You did not tell me if you managed to recover my adorable *Dialogue* from Ollendorff’s hands or receive a promise of its immediate publication’ (Proust, *Corr.*, Vol. IV: 312).

Additional light on the entire case was shed by Cynthia J. Gamble in her book devoted to Proust as the interpreter of Ruskin. She made an assumption that the translation that Ollendorff commissioned from Proust (who knew about his work on Ruskin from two articles which were published after the famous English thinker’s death) encompassed a bare text of ‘The Bible of Amiens’, without notes and commentaries and possibly even only the (fundamental) fourth chapter. This assumption rests on the fact that Proust’s translation was going to form a part of a series of translations of Ruskin’s works published by Société d’Édition Artistique, a part of which was the translation of George Elwall which appeared in 1900, encompassing two works: *La Couronne d’olivier sauvage* and *Les Sept lampes de l’architecture*. At the time, when the translation by Proust was waiting in Ollendorff’s files, he was continuing his work on Ruskin, writing commentaries. After receiving the text back from the publishing house, he submitted a corrected text together with lengthy comments to *Mercure de France* at the beginning of 1903.

It is interesting to note that Cynthia J. Gamble (2002: 89) found fragments of the above-mentioned translation of Elwall in Proust’s papers. They include pages torn out from a printed book, but there are also the so-called ‘long-galley proofs’, signed by the translator and ready for print. How did they end up among Proust’s papers? ‘Did Elwall help Proust with translating *The Bible of Amiens*?’ Did Proust treat Elwall as a potential competitor or a source of inspiration?’ The researcher leaves these questions without a definite answer.

## 1908: NATANSON

In 1908, Ollendorff’s book store was mentioned in an article penned by Tadeusz Natanson, the husband of Misia née Godebska, in „Le Figaro” of April 29<sup>th</sup> and devoted to the prose writer Octave Mirbeau. We know that Proust read this article due to the fact that in a letter to Gaston de Caillavet’s

wife, he recommended her to read it, laughing at the French style of writing of the Polish Jew Natanson (this resembles his remarks about French style of Prince Leon Radziwiłł presented in an unsent letter to the Prince, after reading his two texts in „Gil Blas” at the end of March and the beginning of April 1907):

Read the article at the head of this morning’s Figaro. Any moment you expect to come across ‘dog in the soup’ etc. It lacks Gallicisms and it is truly comical not to find a single French phrase in three whole columns (Proust, *Corr.*, Vol. VIII: 105)<sup>3</sup>.

This is what Natanson (1908: 1) wrote in this article:

It would seem to many of us that others feel the same emotions that overpowered us when we saw – in the period of the first Chronicles of the old „Echo de Paris” and *Sébastien Roch* – the man from whom we are learning to think and even to feel, as he crosses – carefully wrapped in a long cloak made of blue fabric with a velvet collar, Ollendorff’s store at rue Richelieu, silent or speaking solemnly.

This excerpt shows Natanson’s convoluted style, his peculiar choice of vocabulary and curious accumulation of pieces of information from completely different levels in one sentence, next to one another. However, it is extremely important for this argument as a testimony to the presence of Ollendorff’s premises, a fixed point of reference in the landscape of the literary Paris at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### 1913: SWANN’S WAY

When the attempt at publishing the first volume of the novel cycle with Fasquelle failed, Louis de Robert mentioned Alfred Humblot as an alternative to Proust; at that time, Humblot was the chief editor (*directeur*) in Ollendorff’s publishing house, where he published Barrès, Régnier and Hermant, who were favorably inclined to Proust. At the beginning of January Humblot learnt that Proust was a great writer and that publishing his works would be an honor for the firm. A few days later Proust sent the manuscript without

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<sup>3</sup> Transl. after: <http://www.yorktaylor.free-online.co.uk/caillav.htm> [accessed: 20.09.2019].

mentioning – following Robert's advice – that it was already rejected by Fasquelle (Painter 1992: 640).

Humblot, relying on the opinion of Georges Boyer, a librettist and secretary general of the Parisian Opera, formulated an opinion to Louis de Robert, quoted with relish by Proustian experts, in particular American, as an extreme example of divergence between the publisher's opinions and the evaluation of posterity:

My dear friend, perhaps I am dense but I just don't understand why a man should take thirty pages to describe how he turns over in his bed before he goes to sleep (Proust, *Corr.*, Vol. XII: 87).

Proust reacted to this opinion resolutely, describing Humblot's letter as 'completely stupid' (*absolument stupide* [Proust, *Corr.*, Vol. XII: 84]); as for the essence, he wrote:

Indeed, in the first chapter I tried to present (I suspect that this is what [Humblot] wants to talk about, but I confess I have not recognized it) some half-dream impressions, the meaning of which will be explained later, but which went as far as my, quite modest, keenness allowed them. It is quite obvious that in this case it was not about stating that a man turns over in bed, and in fact fewer pages would have sufficed for that, but that this is only a means used for such analysis (Proust, *Corr.*, Vol. XII: 84).

At the same time, Proust persuaded his friend not to end the cooperation with Humblot and the Ollendorff publishing house due to this. Having reconciled himself with the thought that he would have to publish the novel at his own expense in another publishing house, he did not reject the idea of publishing its fragments in „Gil Blas”. In an earlier letter to Louis de Robert, written probably around February 19<sup>th</sup> 1913, he advised his friend to keep the news about Ollendorff's refusal to himself, claiming that it was not about his offended self-love. He wrote:

I would not mention it to Blum either, maybe only about Fasquelle. Although he knows Olledorf[f]'s house intimately and also Mortier, so he will know (Proust, *Corr.*, Vol. XII: 78).

Proust refers to René Blum (1878-1942), a critic, choreographer and future founder of Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, brother of socialist politician

Léon Blum. The word ‘house’ is to be understood as the ‘publishing house’ in this context. Pierre Mortier was the contemporary director of the „Gil Blas” daily where René Blum was an editor writing about art and theatre. Eventually, it was Blum who engineered the publication of *Swann’s Way* in the company of Bernard Grasset.

## NEWCOMERS FROM RAWICZ

It is time to move on to the Polish roots of the Ollendorff family, to which Proust was, as it turns out, related via various literary projects. The founder of the family was born in 1802 in Rawicz in Wielkopolska, probably as Hersz Gerszon. The name Ollendorff was not known in the area at that time. It was only around 1806 in Rawicz and in the near town of Sarne (Sarnowo), where two unrelated Jewish families, Gerszon and Pinkus, adopted the name Ollendorff. It is known that on September 17<sup>th</sup> 1809 a fire broke out in the house of inn-keeper Markus Ollendorff in Sarne, which destroyed a major part of the town, together with Polish, German and Jewish archives, due to which it is difficult to re-trace the earlier history of the family. Hersz Gerszon who is of interest to us, the son of a cloth merchant, signed his name Heinrich Gottfried Ollendorff; in England, he used names Henry Godfrey and in France Henri Godefroy. If he lived in Poland, he would undoubtedly be called Henryk Bogumił. He spent his childhood in Rawicz, but no details are unfortunately known about it. He left for London early, where he developed his own method of learning foreign languages. It relied on copying the manner in which the child learns the native language. Taking into account only the simplest grammar rules, the student – or actually the self-taught person – starts with simple sentences, consisting of a subject and object and gradually moves on to more complex structures. In 1830, Ollendorff moved to Paris and published, at his own expense, his phrase books for learning French, German, English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Latin and various combinations among these languages. Materially stable, he decided to marry; to this aim, he returned to Rawicz and chose an adequate candidate, Dorothea Pinkus. The wedding took place in Cologne, half way between Rawicz and Paris. After the wedding, the couple and their children continued to visit the native village and according to family legend, local children would gather at the train station in Rawicz, shouting *Da kommen die Pariser!* – ‘The Parisians are coming!’. However, this might be far from

true, due to the fact that Ollendorff separated from Dorothea and managed to get married two more times before the railway line between Poznań and Wrocław was launched in 1856 and the railway station in Rawicz was opened – unless the story refers to the mother and sons<sup>4</sup>.

Heinrich Gottfried and Dorothea had three children: Minna, Gustave and Paul. Gustave (1850-1891) was a lawyer and a clerk in the department of fine arts and later in the ministry of trade. Well-built and handsome ('great torso, stalwart chest, healthy complexion, wavy hair and silky Titian-like beard, eyes ardent yet mild, lips stretched in an honest smile or vibrating under the pressure of numerous and quick words' [Henry 1892: 178-179]), he was distinguished by an extraordinary oratorical skill. He wrote about art (Parisian salons) and had friends among writers (V. Hugo). He played a significant role in preparations for the universal exhibition in Paris in 1889. He was friends with Charles Richet, a doctor (Nobel prize in 1913), who was also a writer (he published his books under the pseudonym of Charles Epheyre, in Paul Ollendorff's company), a pacifist and a Polonophile; in 1898, together with Proust he belonged to the group of first signatories of letters in defense of Dreyfus (see: Carroy 2004: 217-149)<sup>5</sup>.

Paul Ollendorff (1851-1920) developed the publishing house set up by his father, going far beyond the assortment of language phrase books. His books bore a large decorative sigil, composed of initials PO stylized to resemble old font, which may be interpreted as 'Paul Ollendorff', yet which may also indicate the country of origin of the family of book-sellers and publishers: 'Pologne'.

The program of the publishing house included such writers as Guy de Maupassant and Hugo (Ollendorff published all of his works in nineteen volumes, beautifully bound and richly illustrated). The flagship authors of the publishing house also included Gustave Ohnet, long forgotten today (1848-1918). In the times of Proust, he was a very popular author, which is

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4 I used Bruck (1945) brochure and the unpublished biography of Ollendorff, written by Sergiusz Stema Wachowiak, made available to me by the director of the Museum of the City of Ostrów Wielkopolski, Witold Banach.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth adding that Richet and Maeterlinck are the co-authors of a brochure devoted to Poland under a meaningful title *Poland for Poles* (London 1916).

testified by the conversation between Swann and Madame Cottard, included in the first volume of the series, devoted to two of his novels from the *Les Batailles de la vie* series: *Serge Panine* (1881) and *Maître de Forges* (1882). The title character from the first of them, in spite of the Russian-sounding name and surname, is a Polish prince, born in Wielkopolska and boasting of the fact that, as all Poles, he knew Latin very well.

Another author from the ‘Ollendorff’s literary stable’ who published all of his French-language books in this publishing house, namely theatre plays, novels and volumes with literary sketches, was Stanisław Rzewuski (1864-1913). Proust knew him from „Le Figaro”, where Rzewuski managed the *La vie littéraire à l’étranger* section. Rzewuski was probably of interest to him as the nephew of Ewelina Hańska, whose painting collection Proust described in detail with clear admiration in *Sainte-Beuve et Balzac* (see: Proust 1971: 263-268).

At this moment, it is a good idea to go a step further and pose a hypothesis that Proust not only wrote advertising texts and articles for Ollendorff’s paper, not only translated Ruskin for him, but received something from him in return. In a word: could it have happened that Proust, who knew German but not English from school, started to learn this language with the method developed by the publisher’s father when attempting to translate Ruskin for Paul Ollendorff? This would explain why he was able, without any prior preparation, to translate two books of this difficult writer and, at the same time, why he had problems with talking with English people. Ollendorff’s quick course, combined with high literary culture, allowed Proust to translate two works of Ruskin; Ollendorff’s phrase books were good for holding a general conversation when travelling, yet not for intellectual debates on the level of *The Bible of Amiens*.

### 1911: ECHO

A small piece written by Proust in 1911 is related to Ollendorff’s phrase books. *Echo* is a pastiche of *Pelleas and Mesalinde* of Debussy based on a play of Maeterlinck. The key dialogue between Markel (contamination of the writer’s own name with Arkel, the name of Pelleas’ grandfather) and Pelleas (the model for whom was Reynaldo Hahn) sounds there as follows:

Markel: You were wrong to leave that hat! You will never find it.  
 Pelleas: Why will I never find it?  
 Markel: One never finds anything again... here. It is lost forever.  
 Pelleas: As we go, we will find another which looks like it!  
 Markel: There are none which look like it!  
 Pelleas: What was it like then?  
 Markel (*very quietly*):  
 It was poor little hat  
 Like everyone wears!  
 No one could tell whose it was... It looked as though it came from the end  
 of the world!  
 Now, we shall not look for it any longer because we will not find it.  
 Pelleas: It seems to me that my head is going to be cold forever. It is very  
 cold outside. It is winter! If only the sun had not set. Why has someone left  
 the window open? (...)  
 Markel: (...) It is too late. All the hats are gone. We cannot take anything  
 else. It is a terrible thing, Pelleas.  
 But this is not our fault.  
 Pelleas: What is that noise?  
 Markel: The carriages are leaving.  
 Pelleas: Why are they leaving?  
 Markel: We will have scared them. They knew that we are going a very long  
 way from here and they have left. They will never come back (Proust 1971:  
 206-207)<sup>6</sup>.

The dialogue refers – like conversations in Ollendorff's phrase books – to banal, daily issues, e.g. a lost hat, yet in the course of time it shifts inconspicuously into the sphere of grotesque, with a vision of carriages scared of the prospect of a lengthy ride. Everything is instilled with nostalgia, the characters speak about the lost hat like a dead friend.

## IN WRITERS' EYES

Ollendorff's phrase books intrigued writers. References to them helped gain greater popularity twice. The first reference is attributed to the Scottish author Basil Hall, a marine captain, who favorably mentioned the Ollendorff

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<sup>6</sup> Transl. after: <http://www.yorktaylor.free-online.co.uk/pelleas.htm> [accessed: 17.09.2019].

method in his diary about travels across Europe. The travelling started with meeting, half-way between Rome and Naples, a Polish friend with ‘a name impossible to pronounce, Countess Rzewuska’ (Hall 1838: 4)<sup>7</sup>. Artur Strindberg helped the second time. In one of his short-stories from a collection entitled *Giftas (Getting Married)*, 1884), he introduced the motive of a progressive school for girls, where the girls, after two years of studying with the Ollendorff method, are speaking French fluently, whereas their peers from the male middle school are stammering after six years of learning with the use of traditional methods.

Among Polish writers Bolesław Leśmian had close contact with the phrase books due to the fact that his uncle published the Polish versions of Ollendorff’s books, and it seems that the poet’s father was helping him in this enterprise (see: Łopuszański 2003: 157-158). Also Henryk Sienkiewicz exchanged letters with Paul Ollendorff (about the French publication of *Quo Vadis*) and even wanted to take him to court. In this context it is worth mentioning that Proust personally knew one of the translators of *Quo Vadis* to French, Józef Władysław Janasz, and deeply regretted his suicide in 1905 (Proust, *Corr.*, Vol. V: 311). Janasz is the author of a one-act play where the main character, Le Gentilhomme de Lettres, is modeled upon the young Marcel Proust.

### KORCZAK (?) – NEWERLY

In 1906, the „Wędrowiec” weekly published an article signed with letters T.F.K. and entitled *Ollendorff monstre*. The whole text – stylistically close to Korczak – consists of a dialogue, resembling Ollendorff’s phrase books, but containing a clear social and satirical undertones. When asked: ‘And do you know who wrote... *Agamemnon’s Tomb?*’, the interlocutor provides a list of results of subsequent fights of strong men, resembling the style of Old Testament genealogical lists. The auto-thematic dialogue, starting with a question about the assembly-line production of gramophones, is quite characteristic too:

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<sup>7</sup> A chapter entitled *The German Language* (Hall 1838: 110-122) contains a praise of Ollendorff’s method. The circumstances of Hall’s invitation to Styria are presented differently by baron Purgstall-Hammer (1836).



Have you ever been in a factory of gramophones when twenty-five gramophones are produced at the same time?

No, sir, but in any case I do not belong to any party. Politics bores me.

What?

Sir! Sir, you forget yourself! There is no 'what?' in any Ollendorff!

Never mind Ollendorff! Politics bores you! – well, well... (T.F.K. 1906: 193)

The dialogue follows the convention from Ollendorff's phrase books and, from simple questions and statements, transforms into absurd accusations. There is a colossal difference of cultural level and interests between the interlocutors, yet they are both trying to keep the conversation going in the mode imposed by the popular phrase books.

With respect to authorship, it is to be noted that Bara's dictionary does not list the abbreviation 'T.F.K.'. On the other hand, the tone of the dialogue resembles the chapter entitled *Wykolejony* (*Derailed*) from Janusz Korczak's novel *Dziecko salonu* (*Child of the Drawing Room*). In this chapter, the narrator starts chatting in French to a fat man who has just left the confectionery store with 'a package of cookies hanging from his button'. The dialogue is, in fact, a monologue in the form of questions and answers which starts with an innocent subject, such as parental love and cookies, and quickly moves on to drastic issues, such as venereal diseases and prostitution of children. The man with cookies finally speaks up and asks: 'Why don't you speak Polish?' and hears in response: 'Because you would not believe me... You are satiated: you do not know hunger and cold'. Here, a foreign language is the sign of education and good manners ('Oui, monsieur, I am a well educated child – un gentil homme. Only my pants are a bit torn and my soul is a bit frayed. Enfin...' [Korczak 1992: 351]). Another passage from the novel which corresponds to the article *Ollendorff monstre* is the chapter *O gramatyce* (*On Grammars*), i.e. a facetious apology of grammar, made during a class with poor children at the Solec district in Warsaw, along the same principle which was the core of the philosophy behind the language teaching in the Ollendorff method: the analogy between the language, learning the language and personal development of a child.

The chapter *Wykolejony* ends with an autobiographical diary entry, in which the narrator writes: 'December 14<sup>th</sup>. I got seven rubles for the poems and the short story for the calendar'. When working on this text for the edition of Korczak's selected works, I put forward a hypothesis that

the information may refer to ‘two books for children, published at the end of 1902 by J. Guranowski, signed as ‘Janusz’, which Korczak used at that time as his pen name: *Tylko dla grzecznych dzieci, powiastki i wierszyki* and *Króciutkie powiastki*’ (ibid. 522). Unfortunately, in spite of searches in the Polish and Russian libraries, it was impossible to find the copies of these items. Julian Guranowski, a publisher of calendars and books for children, was also the editor of „Wędrowiec”, where the *Ollendorff monstre* humorous tale was published. Would he also this time be related to an unknown text by Korczak?

Into his late autobiographical novel entitled *Zostało z uczty bogów* (*It Remains of the Feast of the Gods*), Igor Newerly incorporated several fragments of his first larger piece, the chronicle of a unit of Ataman Kotowski written in 1924 in Russian. The first fragment bears the title *Komsek Johannes der Dritte* (*Ivanov Trzeci*) and is a linguistic observation; it recounts the story of a commissar from Kotowski’s brigade, who believes in an imminent war with the Germans and learns German from ‘Ollendorf phrase book’ and rebukes his subordinates in this language: ‘The sentences were correct, yet uttered in a mode as if they were read from a text written with Russian letters’.

Several years ago, the author of this paper managed to find the chronicle, entitled *Kotowszczyzna*, in one of the Russian magazines published before the war in Warsaw. The third chapter is entitled *O tym, co wielkie, poprzez drobiazgi* (*On What is Great via the Sundries*) It includes the above-mentioned anecdote about Komsek Johannes ‘der Dritte’ reading phrases from an Ollendorff phrase book. I tried to translate this piece, even though I am aware that its whole charm is in the version written in Cyrillic, when it is read by somebody who knows both Russian and German: ‘He carefully flicked through the green book and was happy when he found something in it: »Remember that only at war das gebot der warhaftigkajt (and he continued melodiously in inspired recitation) wi zo file andre zittengebote ferliirt zajne gultigkajt im krige!«’. (In the footnote, Abugov/Newerly provides the actual meaning of the sentence in Russian: ‘The commandment of veracity, similarly to many other ethical orders, loses its significance during war’)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> In this place, I am using relevant fragments of Newerly’s biography (Zieliński 2012) with minor changes.

## SŁONIMSKI – PARANDOWSKI

Antoni Słonimski, in the adventure novel published in 1925 and entitled *Pod zwrotnikami. Dziennik okrętowy (Under the Tropics. The Ship Diary)* included the following *passus*:

Apart from it, the Englishman entertains little Françoise with boring questions that smell like conversations from Ollendorff's phrase books: 'Can you tell me which fruit do you like the most? Pears, plums or nuts?' According to Ollendorff, the girl should answer: 'There are many apples in my uncle's garden'. Françoise simply says that she does not like fruit. The Englishman became silent and sat without a word through the whole dinner, but when fruit was served after dessert, he grabbed an apple from Françoise's place and said giggling: 'As you said that you did not like apples, I will eat your apple'. It seems to me that he is not an idiot, but I may be mistaken. In any case, the English jokes that I adore are quite eccentric (Słonimski 1925: 135).

In the novel *The King of Life* written between 1928 and 1929, where Oscar Wilde is the main character, Jan Parandowski introduced a comparison to Ollendorff's phrase books when discussing the language of the play *Salomé*, written in French. He quotes the question of Stuart Merrill '(...) don't you think that the characters in your play speak like English children who had a French tutor?' and the author's reaction:

Wilde smiled.

'You talk like a true friend'.

He took the manuscript, said goodbye, and left. He knew what to think about it. His prose was simple; he knew that he should not get entangled in lengthy sentences, but he did not take it from Ollendorff's phrase books. He took it from Maeterlinck's *The Seven Princesses* and was happy that Merrill did not look through it (Parandowski 1955: 247)<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> These names may be found in Robert Ross' foreword to the English edition: 'Our old friend, Ollendorff, definitely comes to mind when you read Wilde's French writings; similarly to any other early plays of Mr. Maeterlinck' (Wilde 1912). Moreover, it is known that in prison, Wilde read *Faustus* with Ollendorff's phrase book in hand.

This example testifies to the ambiguous relations between some literary texts, written in languages other than the native ones, and the style of Ollendorff's phrase books.

## WINAWER – STEMPOWSKI

In 1932, Bruno Winawer, a writer and promoter of science, in an article entitled *Drugi sąd nad Sokratesem* (*The Second Socrates' Trial*) wrote, referring to the book of Alexander Moszkowski *Sokrates, der Idiot*, about the style of Plato's dialogues and their 'non-academic nature':

Who is going to carefully read such lengthy sentences as: 'You conceded, Crito, that death is born from life and life results from death, thus you also have to concede'... etc. calls after Moszkowski, calls after the kind Xanthippe, after Aristophanes: amen to that! Socrates was a truly noisy machine, set for slow motion (*Leerlauf*), he did not perform any work, his questions and answers resemble the famous conversations from Ollendorff's phrase books or arguments of lawyers in Dickens' books... (Winawer 1932: 1).

In 1961, Jerzy Stempowski entitled one of his pieces in the *Notatnik niespiesznego przechodnia*' series, published in the Parisian „Kultura” under the pseudonym of Paweł Hostowiec, *Rozmówki Ollendorfa* (*Ollendorff's Phrase Books*). This title serves as a pretext, due to the fact that the actual subject matter of the piece is the Polish and Russian dialogue during emigration; however, in the context of our subject matter, it is worth quoting the beginning of Stempowski's text:

A number of years ago – I remember vaguely – phrase books created by one Ollendorff were used to learn German; they were the source of fun for both young and old people. The conversations in these phrase books, initially terrifyingly banal, became weird as the learner's vocabulary expanded, as if taken from some difficult-to-imagine situations. 'Where is our neighbor?' – 'Our neighbor is on the roof'. – 'What did your nephew sit on?' – 'Your nephew sat on your wig'. In other circumstances, exchanging such statements would upset some, yet in this case the content of questions and answers was eventually indifferent; it was about learning a certain amount of words and phrases which could later be used for an actual conversation.

Every time I think about Polish and Russian conversations at emigration, Ollendorff's phrase books come to my mind (Stempowski 2012: 242)<sup>10</sup>.

Stempowski's procedure consists in referring the current situation to the phenomenon drawn from a distant, but personally experienced past and, taking this opportunity, re-living that phenomenon, as well as many others with respect to which he had a feeling that he might possibly be the last person who remembers them. Certain cultural mechanisms are activated here; there is also a feeling of uniqueness of the experience resulting from longevity and richness of multicultural experiences.

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As commonly known, Proust's works were eventually published by Gallimard. Nevertheless, this was not always the case and the story could have taken a different turn. The history of ties with the Ollendorff family from Rawicz shows various aspects of Proust's works in a new light and induces one to wonder which other Polish threads could have possibly appeared in a more open and explicit mode in the *In Search of Lost Time* if the title page of individual volumes bore the printer's device with the 'PO' letters, stylized to resemble old font. PO meaning Pologne.



Fig. 1. The signet of the Paul Ollendorff's publishing house

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that Jerzy Timoszewicz reprinted two other articles from this issue – *Gdzie umieścić Czytca* and *Do Kazimierza Wierzyńskiego* – in earlier selections of Stempowski's essays (1988, 2001), whereas the above-quoted one waited for the reprint for over half a century.

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## Summary

The first part of the paper discusses the meanders of collaboration between Marcel Proust and Paris-based publisher Paul Ollendorff that spanned over twenty years (1893-1913). Further on, Western expansion of the Ollendorff family from Rawicz, Poland, is briefly sketched. Another passage concerns a Maeterlinck pastiche by Proust (*Echo*, 1911), seen in the context of Ollendorff's conversation-based method of learning foreign languages. The author suggests Proust was using this method to learn English himself. The paper ends with a survey of several references to the Ollendorff method in the twentieth century Polish prose.

**Keywords:** Proust, the Ollendorffs, self-study guides, phrase books, conversational method, pastiche, comparative literature.





# INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL MEDIUM ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW INTERDEPENDENCIES BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGE

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As the subject of my comparative analysis I posit texts and images which appear on a monitor screen via web pages. I treat text and image as the primary components of a message, to varying extent conditioned by technological, semiotic and aesthetic aspects. Both types of messages constitute a mediation of sorts, providing the form and matter to in the case of the former – language, and of the latter – internal<sup>1</sup> images.

I assume the form to constitute a visual-image phenomenon, i.e. a layout of the basic elements of a graphical representation – of writing and images – in the surface of a digital page. The notion of form that I put forth is multilayered and complex, as it entails both single components and their mutual compositional interdependencies and even complicated layouts within the presentational space, e.g. a graphical interface of the code editor – for HTML<sup>2</sup> documents and the graphical interface of WWW pages and browsers – for the appearance of a web page. That is why text, analogically to image, is treated both in the context of the notions of visuality and imagery.

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<sup>1</sup> The indicated internal categories mediate in perception, i.e. in the acts related to receiving, storing and processing data. See: Arnheim 1969: 24.

<sup>2</sup> There are several related formats of notation: HTML in its standardized 4.01 version, XHTML, which defines the rules of HTML 4 in a manner congruent with XML, lastly the most up to date standard of HTML5, which marks a further development of HTML4 along with its XML variety.

The form is partly conditioned by the matter, in the case of the net – the digital matter it is made of, that is why it enters into a series of interdependencies with it. Writing, image, as well as sound – the basic elements of a website – at the input stage of generating a digital message, i.e. on the physical, material level, constitute a strictly binary (zero and one) system. Light and sound waves are assigned digits – abstract symbols<sup>3</sup>. A computer differs from devices such as a typewriter or a paintbrush for creating an artwork, but it operates as a simulator of text and image. The CPU, which only recognizes a binary code, treats letters, colors, shapes and sounds just like any other alphanumeric symbols, i.e. it simulates them (see: Gwóźdź 2004: 102)<sup>4</sup>. For a machine, the ontological status of text and image is identical; hence, they may both undergo analogical processes of coding by way of mathematical algorithms.

The described relationships between digital matter and form result in a variety of processes and rules that mediate the shaping of a textual and visual message at the level of their further generation as well as their final projection. The form and matter construct the notion of a medium which I approach on the one side as a means for communication transfer, while on the other – as a means of cultural production, incorporated into a specific technique or technology<sup>5</sup>. I shall add, for the sake of a larger research

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<sup>3</sup> What happens here is not an analogous transformation of input data into different objects or material spaces. Therefore the digital notation does not involve conversion of material data into on/off binary data, instead requiring that they should be assigned numeric values. A technical medium stores digits without grouping them in defined wholes, whereas a digit identifies only the number and not the amount of matter.

<sup>4</sup> A comparable situation occurs on the subsequent levels of either loading data – from the point of view of the sender or of its unpacking – from that of the recipient. All of those along with the rules assigned to them and the processes of data transmission further determine the specific nature of the Internet as a medium. The basic mechanism of operation of digital media consists in continuous restoring and processing of coded signs, on their reconstruction regardless of their actual location in space and time.

<sup>5</sup> See the notion of communication techniques as found in: Szczęśna 2008: 21-30. The technological aspect of the medium is discussed for instance by: Gwóźdź 2001: 7; Lister [et al.] 2003: 123-158.

project, that it is a technology of visibility, defined both by the intermediary (the medium of the Internet, the medium of website apps, the medium of a web site), as well as by a digital machine. The digital device is not treated as solely mechanical, but also as a subject-object system, thus also a form of a physical medium. Such a broad understanding of the notion of medium is informed by a variety of research studies; additionally, it benefits from the theory of perception, in which a medium serves mainly as matter, from the theory of language, in which it is beheld as a structured form of thought and presentation, lastly, from communication technologies, which perceive medium in terms of the category of efficiency<sup>6</sup>.

For the above reason, I do not focus my research on well-established word/image forms, but on the processes currently underway, e.g. the iconification of writing, the literate image<sup>7</sup> as well as picturization (*Web Studies* 2010) of both these media. In the latter procedure, I recognize unique features, as stemming from their graphical and digital coding, of messages mediated by the Internet. The digital image and word are subjects to a different sender-receiver logic from the schemes assigned to them in the analogue world: in the case of the former – of a perspectival representation, continuous tonality and chiaroscuro, in the case of the latter – a linear notation of typographical symbols, where both forms of communication are ‘imprisoned’ in a material, static medium: a canvas stretcher or a piece of paper. Whereas the logic of digital media is characterized by: constellation, modularity, automatization, variations and most diverse graphical forms (Hudzik 2017: 191-192), and most of all – processes. Hence, my suggestion to dissent from

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<sup>6</sup> Seen in such wide perspective, the medium becomes a sort of communication practice, dependant on various conditions, including: perception, cognition and technology, modeled in turn by social, historical, cultural and political influences. See: Hudzik 2017: 97-160.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Sandbothe (1998) acknowledges that heretofore separate media-relay in the digital context of the hypertext undergo transformation of their specific features and enter into new combinations – digital intertwining of four variations: picturization of writing, orality of writing, iconification of writing and literate image. What transpires through these transformative tendencies is the transmedial nature of the Web, where all the respective media create combined systems, integral units in terms of their form and meaning. See also: Bolter 2001: 26-55.

the classical understanding of theory which associates scientific status with reconstruction of older forms and notions in new phenomena<sup>8</sup> and instead to concentrate on the interdependencies between digital word and image typical for the medium of a website. An inspiring element within this framework is provided in the typology of the word/image relationship suggested by Aron K. Varga (1989), whereas at the level of the subject matter in the criterion of form. I find the latter interesting for it is understood as 'a spatial layout of visual and verbal objects' (Chesher 1997: 151)<sup>9</sup>. In that synthetic definition I suggest to replace the word 'visual' with 'image' and 'spatial' with 'surface.' Firstly, a graphic layout of a letter is perceived using the sense of sight, i.e. visually. Secondly, the notion of space defines a three-dimensional area in which every point is defined by three coordinates.

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<sup>8</sup> Ewa Szczęsna (2007: 210) suggested that potentially 'the direction of changes which have occurred (and are still occurring) in the contemporary culture requires a certain level of freedom and courage to reevaluate notions, to modify their range of meaning and their emotional content'. Whereas I propose, encouraged by Sandbothe's (1998) postulate, a more fundamental change: not a mere correction of idiom, but an entirely new one, not the methodological distance, but the rejection of the current methodology created for the purposes of analyzing the analogue media. It seems that science should not only keep up to date, but also precede the civilizational change in order to be able to model it. Today, such transformation is introduced by IT, on the one hand associated with the progress in information technology; on the other – with the changes in the processes of thought, perception and the manner of acquiring data, in a word of experiencing reality. In thus defined perspective, the closest to my research becomes the open methodological formula of comparative studies, on one hand based upon empirical data, precision, logical arguments and academic terminology on the other benefitting from the energy of far reaching comparisons, daring associations, introducing in that manner a tinge of creativity. See also: Vajda 1997; Kasperski 2010.

<sup>9</sup> New, digital user practices differ qualitatively from the analogous ones. In real space, every object can be found at its proper address, i.e. in a particular place, in the digital environment data are located together with their address. The appearance of a unit occurs by way of it being named. An URL address for any given WWW document is both its name and, at the same time, its actual address, while the introduction thereof is of evocative nature and is related rather with the category of time than of space.

However, a digital medium – a website – at the point of its presentation constitutes a flat, two-dimensional surface. Also in terms of the process of generating the message all the activities entailed by digital construction of signs and their retrieval as data occur temporarily, i.e. outside the natural limitations of a three-dimensional physical space. The defined procedures organize data in complex layers of code, where at the level transferring the data below a separate heading is added – the formatting information.

The perspective of the receiver's perception assumed by Varga enabled him to stay clear of the methodologically determining matrix, which would reduce the indicated word/image relationship to the existing assumptions of aesthetics or semiotics, leading to predetermined effects of analyses. Much like Varga, I treat the basic media-relays (word, external image) on one hand as primarily existing in a relatively independent form; on the other as interacting with one another on many levels, e.g. generating and representation of digital messages or entering into interaction with the user. However, from the point of view of the operation of a machine, word and image become identical. Such dependence proves consequential for the work of graphics editors (e.g. Adobe Photoshop, GIMP), which generate the respective components of web pages. These introduce three fundamental processes which determine the word/image relations-processes: the picturization of writing, graphical nature of image, and self-reflexivity of either procedure. The first operation, approaching the idea of iconification (M. Sandbothe), means the written word is treated as an image (fig. 1). The effect is introduced with the *Text* tool, which creates and helps edit layers of writing, setting it horizontally or vertically, changing the distance between the lines, words, signs; it can even model the height and width of a typeface using percentages and also the color of their filling (RGB, CMYK, Pantone colors, patterns), it suggests font anti-aliasing (sharp, smooth, crisp, strong) or even the distortion of text (by bending it into the shape of a shell, flag, wave, fish, fisheye, etc.).

Using the *Layers* tool one may change the level of transparency of color and the display mode, e.g. 'soft light' and 'sharp light' or add an effect (e.g. shadow, inner glow, phasing, texture, contour, gradient overlay, etc.). More complex operations on written words are also available: aligning a text along a path; converting it into a path; transforming it into a highlighted section. The word – treated as an element of graphics – has always had its visual

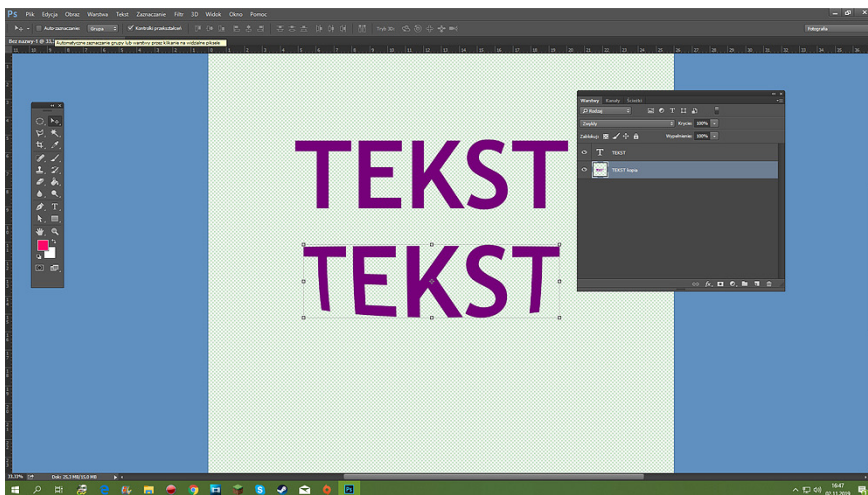


Fig. 1. Screenshot. Writing altered in a graphic editor (own source)

dimension; however, digital media only helped to understand that aspect fully and emphasize it. Here, the visuality of the word was additionally replaced with image visuality of the graphics type. Another process, consisting in graphical nature of an image (literate image – according to Sandbothe) can be carried out in graphics editors by modifying images in a manner analogous to texts, i.e. most of all highlighting (there is a whole range of options here), minimizing, enlarging, duplicating, transforming (rotations, reflections) and scaling. The process was defined by Sandboth as ‘editing’ (fig. 2).

Lastly, the third process entailing self-reflexivity of both the above operations, which results in word and image becoming identical, i.e. they both undergo internal transformations (fig. 3).

Analogically to image, text starts to represent something. However, this process is not subject to the laws of reference to an external object, but to self-reference. Such relation can be achieved by applying the function of graphics editor programs consisting in an irreversible transformation of a text into a shape (Adobe Photoshop) or of a text into curves with edition of points enabled, incl. their adding and removing (Adobe Illustrator, GIMP). As a result of applying such operation, the text may subsequently undergo a range of visual effects, such as adjusting (auto-level, auto-contrast,

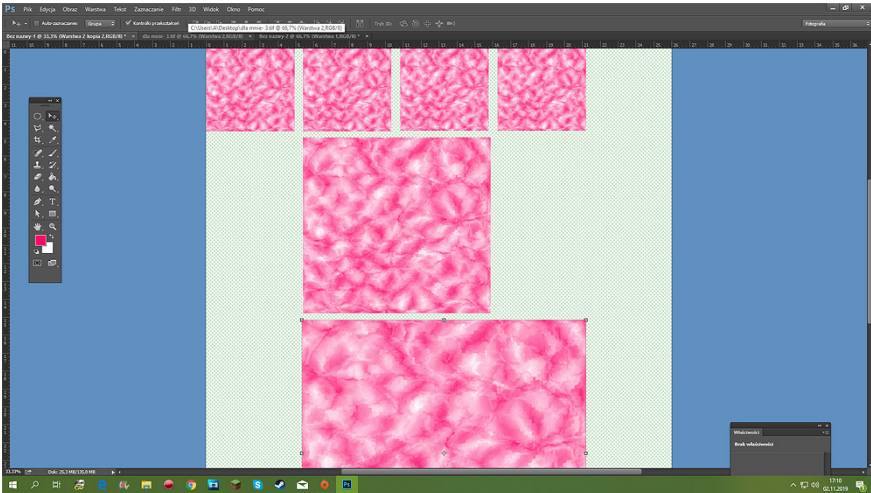


Fig. 2. Screenshot. An image altered in a graphics editor (own source)

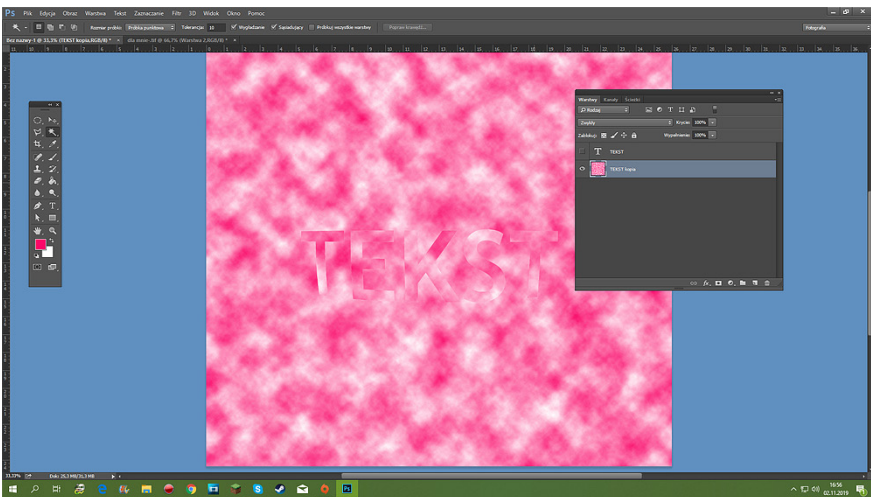


Fig. 3. Screenshot. Word and image refer to each other reflexively (own source)

auto-color, balance of colors, brightness/color, color/saturation, channel mixing and others) as well as filters (artistic, paintbrush, pixelating, blurring, style, noise, texture, video). In graphic editor programs one can also convert graphic image of text using the *Brush* tool, which we

may later use as a paintbrush to paint on the surface of the document. The sheer number of available graphical operations may oftentimes lead to a situation when the purpose of a representation no longer refers to the outside reality of a given digital image, instead focusing on that very representation and its diverging modifications. 'This concerns the whole universe of the digital, where the binarism of 0 and 1 leaves room only for an operational universe of figures (...). Integral calculus, integrated circuits. Distance is obliterated, both external distance from the real world and the internal distance specific to the sign' (Baudrillard 2006: 69). However, the process does not lead to 'the decline' of sign and representation, but it continues the era of the figural (Rodowick 1990: 12), which indeed happens to be contrasted against the sign reference, but the latter treated in terms of visual laws as a motivated reference to the reality outside of the image. Graphical environments construct alternative, virtual image-worlds by endowing them with their own meaning and significance. For the receiver, the process leads to a 'separation' of the image from its function of reflecting the outside reality. An image is 'read-watched' as a textual sign referring to itself or to other signs, performing the latter not only semantically, but also pragmatically (through a mouse-click). Thus understood image sign becomes 'the scene of representation, of seduction, of language: in language, signs seduce one another beyond meaning and, in their very architecture, signifier and signified are in a dual relation of seduction' (Baudrillard 2006: 69) and the boundary between them is blurred.

The centre of my analytical interest is the medium of the World Wide Web<sup>10</sup>, as its graphical structure results in the deepest redefinition of the division between digital text and image<sup>11</sup>, constructing adumbrations of new digital

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<sup>10</sup> I do not focus, however, on other media of the Internet such as: e-mail, blogs, newsgroups and e-mailing lists, chats, tweets, as they still function within the linear model of writing and to a large extent reflect the well-established habits of perception. In their case the 'new media' are perceived and used still according to the 'old' rules.

<sup>11</sup> The patterns of vision and perception, consolidated through the historical norms of habits are imposed upon the cognition of web pages. Thus, I tentatively accept the post-structuralist principle that it is neither the language nor the mental image that pre-describe a given reality, in this case the virtual one, but that it can



forms-system-processes. A site becomes an intermediary medium for their existence. It is considered both a means of communication and a manner of presentation, obviously integrated into a particular technology. Within the proposed wide research program it constitutes, therefore, at the point of sending of the content: an HTML<sup>12</sup> document, made available in the Internet through a WWW server, which on the side of the users is opened and displayed using a web browser in the form of an image of a WWW page. The first layer, generating the message for WWW is constructed in a digital environment with the use of the Internet<sup>13</sup> and WWW applications, which in turn are themselves created by programs, devices, applications and their principles of operation. The operation procedures of the media in question are important from the point of view of the machine, i.e. the side sending the message, as they make the websites visible. They also have a major influence on the design processes and the content of pages in that they model the second level – the receiving relations.

While browsing websites, we notice varied data-media: text, graphics, photographs, animations, dynamic menus. It gives the impression of large complexity, on the contrary, the basic structure of a website is an ordinary document of text, hypertext to be exact, and all the other elements – media of various genres – are provided in separate files. In fact, the whole operating

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only be cognized through them. This means that on the one hand, the language with its own rules, and on the other – the mental imagery with its own principles impose upon us the perception and understanding of a digital message. I invoke the ‘traditional’ structures of thought in order to consequently demonstrate their incompatibility and inefficiency for perceiving digital interdependencies present in web pages.

<sup>12</sup> (HyperText Markup Language) – a language of markups used for creating documents intended for circulation in WWW.

<sup>13</sup> The Internet as a computer network operates on the basis of a five-layer model of the TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol), meaning that text and image appearing in a web page are – from the perspective of the machine – respectively: 1. a set of signals (physical layer), 2. frame data (link layer of the networking interface data), 3. packets (Internet layer), 4. datagrams, segments (transport layer), 5. HTML message (application layer) and ultimately the actual web page. It is only the application layer that the user has direct access to. See: Freedman 1999.

principle of World Wide Web<sup>14</sup> application was founded upon the idea of a hypertext. It involves a system of interactive navigation performed between connected fragments of the same document or HTML documents located on other Internet servers. The procedure was made possible due to the separation of the program storing the textual information from the program displaying it – the GUI<sup>15</sup> as well as due to a very specific interface between the manner of storing and recording data and the representation thereof. This way, the Internet was transformed from a sophisticated ‘writing’ system of communication accessible only to a narrow group of specialists into a mass-scale, visual and graphical medium.

The sites of the Web 2.0 era do not merely serve to present content or images, they are far from being ‘read only’, instead they open the phase of active participation, having been designed to ‘meet the needs of’ users; hence, they include blogs, chats, photo and video albums, access to social networks. In order to ensure effective and efficient communication, CSS styles were originally introduced and later visual systems of managing the content of CMS and SEO. I am going to discuss the first of these solutions in detail below, the second one constitutes program enabling simple creation of a WWW site as well as its later updating and development by the user, understood here as ‘not technically educated’. An example of such program is the most popular modular system of WordPress, yet, they also include Drupal and Joomla! The third technical solution serves to optimize the Internet websites for the needs of search engines, in the so-called process of positioning. The current stage in the development of websites additionally opens the era of wide accessibility to the Internet through mobile devices – smartphones, tablets and laptops. The development of the Mobile Web Design receives support from the HTML5, which is oriented towards popular multimedia, accessibility and web page service as well as automatic search. Mobile websites dedicated exclusively to mobile devices are the ‘lighter’ versions (containing only the basic pieces of information and less graphics)

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<sup>14</sup> HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) – a set of procedures allowing for sending hypertext information between computers in a network; URL (Uniform Resource Locator) — the Internet address of a resource in the WWW. The term ‘hypertext’ was used in two out of three procedures establishing the digital network.

<sup>15</sup> Graphical User Interface, the graphical environment.

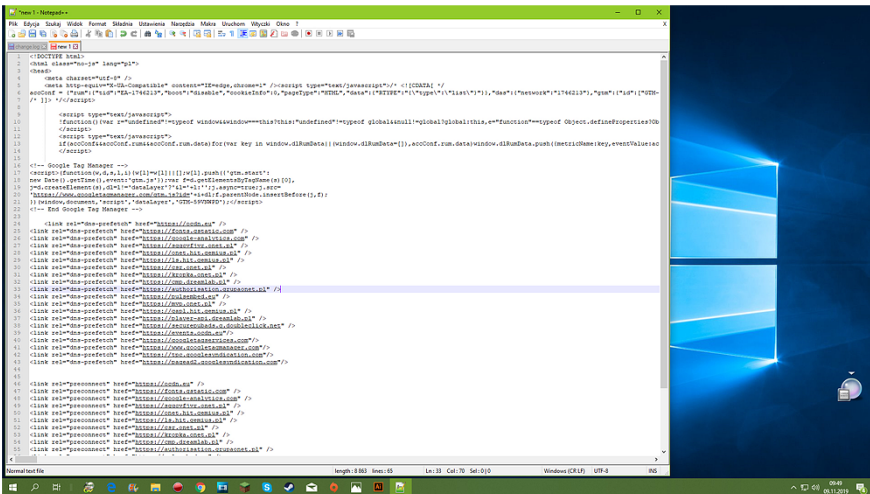


Fig. 4. Screenshot. Notepad++ Interface of an HTML code editor

of desktop Internet sites. Meanwhile, the responsive web design automatically adjusts itself to the device and its resolution – the same page is displayed on both stationary and mobile devices.

Regardless of the visual technique used in creating websites, the process of their coding (fig. 4) always consists in writing, which always occurs according to the command prompt and can be summed up as choosing commands from a strictly designated set with a predefined syntax. These procedures pertain both to text and to images (uploaded graphics, tables, forms, graphs, animations, videos). Whereas the semantic code of HTML is responsible for the structure and organization of data in a web page, the CSS<sup>16</sup> styles define its presentation (see: Meyer 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Cascading Style Sheets appeared circa the year 2000 as an answer to the growing expectations users had form the source code for generating websites. In that period, designers wanted the code to fulfill three fundamental functions: define the page content, determine its look and content, as well as control the activity of the content and its interactions with the user. The growing expectations from the generating language resulted in its fragmentation and specification. Web pages were designed in such a way that they would ensure storing these three types of code separately. Hence, a return to the original assumptions behind the HTML

Cascading Style Sheets, analogically to the HTML, contain a list of directives defining the manner in which an Internet browser is to display a given element of the HTML. In this manner all the parameters of display of Internet forms can be defined. The use of external CSS enables one to change the appearance of multiple pages at the same time without disturbing the HTML code itself, for the sheets may be shared by many documents. From the research standpoint assumed, a significant functionality provided by the CSS is its ability to create ‘responsive web’ through varied rendering of the site, meaning a presentation of the data in a form most suitable for the environment applied – the medium-carrier (e.g. visually, incl. on screen and in print or by sounds).

The structure of an HTML document opens with a common and mandatory element, namely the declaration of the document type. In the case of the HTML5<sup>17</sup>, the entry proves rather simple: `<!DOCTYPE html>`. The entire document is further created by superior elements, defined by starting markers: `<html>`, `<head>` and `<body>`, along with their counterpart endings `</html>`, `</head>`, `</body>`, such is the case of almost every marker. Meta-markers concern the manner of coding `<meta charset="UTF-8" />`, the title `<title>`, the title of the page `</title>`, the description of the content of the site and its keywords. In the ‘head’ section we can also include other meta-markers and CSS. The markers can be divided into two groups: block (e.g., `<h1>`, `<p>`, `<blockquote>`, `<div>`) and line ones (`<i>`, `<b>`). The former cover the entire accessible surface of the page and define segments of texts, titles, sub-titles, paragraphs, layers, blocks of quotes, lists and tables. With the exception of block quote, they contain other line elements. In the HTML5

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was noted, as it was to be structural, i.e. descriptive and structuring of the content. The CSS on the other hand were used to format the appearance of sites, while Java – to interact with the receiver. That stage of web page development saw the beginning of a focus not only on the semantics of the content, but also on its attractive, functional semiotics (e.g. a practical layout of components, intuitive navigation), which allowed for efficient browsing through the resources of the Internet. In the centre of attention was the usability and accessibility aspects of digital content, the UX.

<sup>17</sup> For HTML 4.0.1 it was, for instance, `<!DOCTYPE HTML PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD HTML 4.01//EN">`.

the marker `<div>` loses its importance to: `<header>` `<main>` `<article>` `<aside>` `<footer>` `<nav>`, other added elements are i.a. `<canvas>` `<figure>` `<details>` `<summary>`. Also the `<span>` element is to be less used in favor of `<mark>` `<output>` `<var>` `<u>` `<s>`. At the same time, new linear markers should not appear in standardized version of the HTML5, whereas attempts are made at substituting italics and bold with structural markers of emphasis: `<i>` – `<em>`, and the latter: `<b>` – `<strong>`<sup>18</sup>. The emphasis is to differ from ordinary, visual bold and italics in that it would additionally introduce semantic information.

Photographs, infographics, diagrams, presentations, drawings, logos and others, all of these are introduced with a line marker `<img>`, it is content free and requires several attributes, e.g., `src` (indicating the file with the image), `width` (of the image), `height` (of the image) and `alt` (alternative description of the image). This short profile is what appears instead of the image in text-based web browsers. Meanwhile in graphical web browsers it is displayed instead of the intended image when its name has been misspelled or when it has been removed from the server, alternatively, when displaying graphics has been disabled. The alternative text consists of a single word which should describe the image accurately. Omitting the 'alt' attribute will not result in the image not being displayed on the website, it will, however, make it less clear for text-based browsers. The marker `<img>` is not a block element but a linear one; hence, it has to be included for instance into the layer defined as `<div>`. Therefore, even if we want our website to display a single image exclusively, we still have to introduce it into a block element. The marker `<img>`, as a line component, enables one to put several images in a single line. In the notation: `<a href="resource_address"> text </a>`, the 'href' indicates the location of the file that is to be linked to, whereas the text between the opening marker `<a>` and the closing one `</a>` will be displayed in the page as a hyperlink. The address of the resource is not seen in the link; however, it will be provided in the status bar of the browser.

The basis of operation of the application and hypertext documents are cross-references, links, which at the level of web page presentation point to another resource of the net than the one currently browsed, whereas at

<sup>18</sup> See: [https://www.w3schools.com/html/html5\\_intro.asp](https://www.w3schools.com/html/html5_intro.asp) [accessed: 10.06.2018].

the level of interaction, having been clicked, they load the data indicated. The links<sup>19</sup> are introduced with the marker `<a>`, which in the previous installments of the HTML created a line element so it could not appear independently on a website but only within a block component. However, in the HTML5, the marker `<a>` if it is not itself contained by an element displayed in a line, may also encompass block elements, except the interactive ones with the chosen attribute. Hyperlinks may refer to any type of documents, incl. another website, a document (PDF), an executable file (EXE), a piece of music (e.g. MP3) or graphics (JPG, static and dynamic GIF, PNG) (see: Lis 2010: 128-139); that is to both textual, visual and also audio, multimedia (animations, videos) information or to a different page. The fact that the procedures applied to invoke word and image are the same is a testament to the fact that at the level of WWW application their status is also identical. In the case of the `<img>` marker and a link referring to a photograph or a drawing another dependency emerges – significant from the point of view of the current comparative analysis – a written code becomes an element generating among other things static or dynamic images.

A line when it generates digital message takes up: on one hand the space available to it horizontally of an HTML document (similarly to analogue messages, e.g. in books), on the other – it is subject to and inscribed into the surface of a three dimensional rectangle (the aggregate of lines is to create an image intended to be seen as a shape). That relationship was further reinforced with the rule of structuring the page components according

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<sup>19</sup> In order for them to be easy to find textual links on a web page are either identified with color or with underlining. When hovering the cursor over them, we cause it to change its shape usually into an icon of a hand with a pointed finger. The manner of link identification depends on the web browser, although most of them currently apply the same pattern, i.e. they introduce four states for any reference items: 1. *link* – standard, unvisited (blue) one; 2. *active* – opening in progress (red), it usually goes unnoticed as the color change lasts for a very short time; 3. *visited* – a reference which has already been used (purple); 4. *hover* – the indicated one, when the mouse cursor is above it. The colors of links may be changed in the CSS in order for them to match the site's aesthetics. An image can also be used as a link, it is then marked with a frame, its color according with the textual links; a URL address can also be made a link.

to CSS box model<sup>20</sup>. Each element of the site when generated consists of: the frame, the outer margin, the internal spacing and the content. The text (content) means in this case a visual form inscribed into a rectangular box of pre-defined properties: its height and width with indicated distance from the frame and from the external margin, predefined color and the image of its background. The structure of the entire document comprises many analogous rectangles. They are visually correlated with the overriding shape of the screen, the graphical user interface and edit dialog boxes. Their sizes result from precise mathematical computation ensuring they fully fit in the windows of the browser. Other computer media: the Internet, the WWW application and the website are treated as carriers, their visual properties both determined and clear. In that case, the procedure of a linear text is based rather on a 'cartographic' sign of an HTML document with its location – than on a strictly 'semantic' one.

It turns out that the visual aspect of a web page from the point of view of its semantic, incl. its structural coding in a HTML document and its visual coding in a CSS document, is a precisely defined logical object: it takes into account the size of the browser window, the occurrence and interrelation of specific items and presentation points. At the same time, as it appears to the user, i.e. through the GUI, it constitutes a flat surface, fully transposed, available for process, interaction (fig. 5).

When appearing to the user of a digital content, the website is the fundamental element of a WWW application. From among other Internet media it is distinguished by the rules of its operation<sup>21</sup>, whereas its

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<sup>20</sup> See: <https://www.w3.org/TR/2007/WD-css3-box-20070809/> [accessed: 10.06.2019].

<sup>21</sup> Magdalena Karciarz and Maciej Dutko (2008) identified ten indicators of a web page functionality: consistence (the use of uniform elements in various parts of an Internet site); use of shortcuts; feedback (every action performed by the user must result in a reaction from the system); task grouping; reversibility of actions; mastery of the system; coherence of the interface; adaptability (interface's ability to adjust to various user groups); economical pathways (providing any activity with the smallest number of steps); structuring of the content. In the case of contemporary web pages, one has to additionally consider their mobile use and responsiveness.

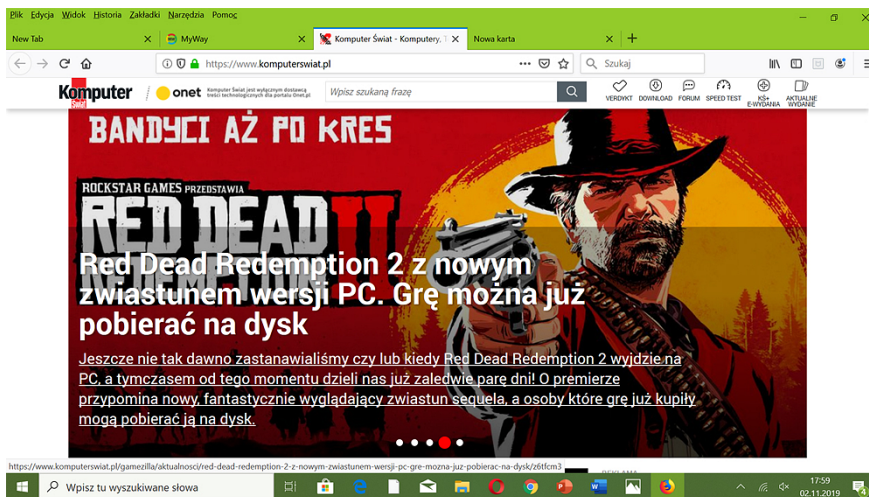


Fig. 5. Screenshot. The interface of a web browser Firefox and a web page (<https://www.komputerswiat.pl/> [accessed: 2.06.2019])

programmatic software and hardware elements, which create the Internet and the WWW application, are so to speak ‘hidden’ under the two-dimensional surface of a web page, presented through the graphical user interface<sup>22</sup>. The GUI, also referred to as the graphical environment, defines the visual manner of presenting data (word and image) by the computer as well as its interactions with the user, incl. drawing with an input device (a mouse, a trackball, a touchpad), input-output one (touchscreen) and the control of widgets.

Websites can be presented to users with the use of a web browser – to with another medium – in the form of two interdependent ingredients: its

<sup>22</sup> The history of the emergence of the GUI for Internet sites is directly related to the developments in interfaces of web browsers and indirectly also of operating systems. For exactly that reason, Bernes Lee, wishing to publish the first web page in the Internet, had to create the Nexus web browser for the NextStep platform. Originally, it only worked on NeXT computers and with monochromatic graphics as well as with web documents, which can therefore be considered the predecessors of today’s web pages. Its interface, which displayed data in separate windows, was rather similar to the early Windows operating systems.



source code – the interface of an HTML document and the image of a web page, generated on the basis of the code. Conventionally, it is the latter type of projection that can be seen on the screen, the former being in a way hidden from the user, although there is a functionality of invoking it, using the ‘Show source’ option.

Internet browsers such as Mozilla FireFox, Google Chrome, Internet Explorer, Opera, Safari, much like the editors of HTML source code, construct the digital form of separate embedding already at the level of their graphical interface. The page thence becomes a surface for emergence of words, images, maps, games, films, etc. Its frame is regarded as the boundary separating it from the outside space, such as the desktop, screen bezel, and from the internal one – the browser’s window. The issue of graphical organization is predominantly of compositional, presentational and functional nature. In the first of these aspects, it usually takes up the entire screen space (full screen view) or only a part of it. It may also be minimized to take the form of a marker on the status bar. The form of separate embedding of text into image, at the level of its appearance, becomes the overriding system organizing the graphical interface both of source code editors and of web browsers. It subsequently splits into smaller micro-presentations – according to the same rule – a series of bars, incl. menu bar, favorites, command, status, Easy-WebPrint, Google Toolbar, Adobe PDF. Further functions of web browsers are being developed, shaping the presentation and user-interactions of these subsystems: bookmarks (favorites); application of skins (themes); personalization of the interface to the user’s needs and preferences; tab view; blocking of pop-up windows; managing personal information (cookies, browsing history, forms, passwords, etc.); ad blockers; zooming in of the text, images or the entire content of the site; speed dial; privacy mode. Within each of the listed components of web browser interface, there appears a series of button-icons and link-icons. These provide us with a good example of a whole scope of word/image forms: ranging from their complete visual or functional identification, through separate coexistence. In the first case, the words of the command function of the interface are transformed into graphics icons, while their graphical visualization – or picturization to be more precise – hides the textual forms of commands and informs of various actions in progress, e.g. printing, searches, found items, etc. If an action is

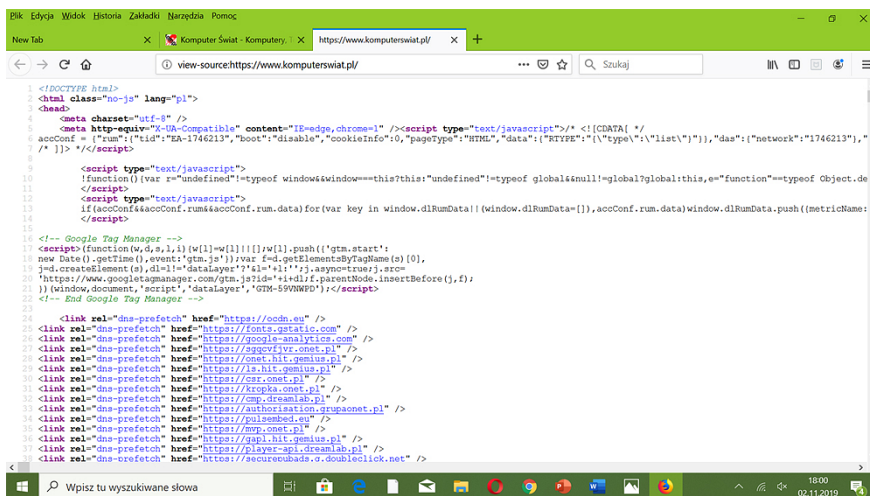


Fig. 6. Screenshot. Web browser Firefox and HTML document interface (<https://www.komputerswiat.pl/> [accessed: 2.06.2019])

not provided with a graphical form, it is certainly not intended for standard, mass use. In the second case, the icon combines the visual and textual elements, hence word and image coexist within a single graphical sign. The appearance of a link-icon in the 'favorites bar' can be personalized using one of the options: icon, icon and a short text, icon and a long text.

Analogical form of separate embedding of word into image appears at the level of source code – the HTML document. It sets the image as merely a surface for the exclusive presentation of text. Here, too, the overarching layout breaks down, though more incidentally into ever smaller, analogically structured components such as 'copy' and 'find' and also 'select all.' The interface of an HTML document enables only two basic graphical operations on text: 'word wrapping' and 'changing font size.' They do, however, appear to the user as multi-colored (with various colors identifying specific markers), their lines numbered and blocs of text separated; with 'syntax highlighting' also possible to be disabled (fig. 6).

Additionally, the source of a web page can be downloaded in the format 'Web Page, complete', 'Web Page, HTML only', or as 'Text files'. When re-opened, it will either appear in a new tab of the browser or with the use of 'quick-view' – in a thumbnail of the website, next to it. In the first

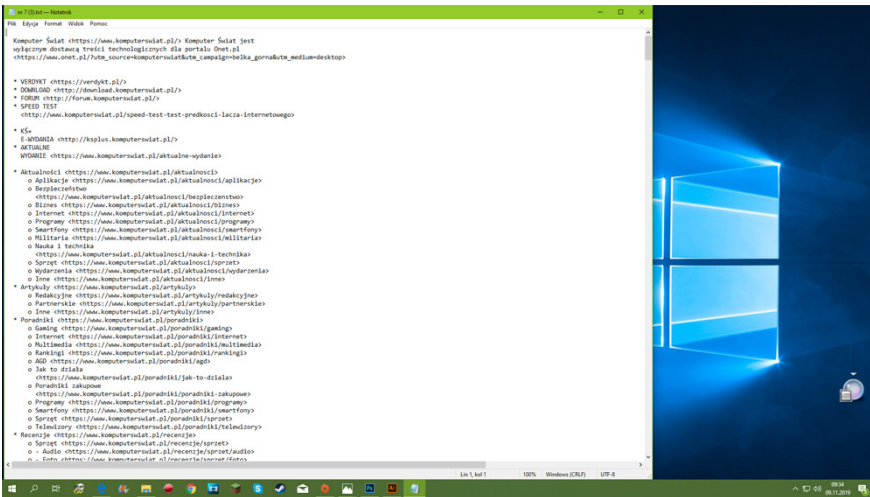


Fig 7. Screenshot. Text file (own source)

case, the HTML file may undergo additional modifications suggested by the browser, such as 'zoom in', in the third one, advanced edition in WordPad is possible (fig. 7).

When opening the code editor and source of the website using the interface of a web browser, we encounter a situation typical for 'analogue culture' – writing is both the element structuring and transferring the message.

Meanwhile, when contrasting the source code with the web page generated according to it, an important novelty transpires – functional and presentational subordination of linear syntax of the HTML to the CSS visual layout of the interface of the website (fig. 8). Additionally, every web page provides information on Web Accessibility (fig. 9).

What emerges is a functional form of identification, which within the digital environment works as a mutual reference of word and image. The difference between text and image is abolished in favor of: electronic writing of the image from the point of view of code generation and presentation and the image of text from the point of view of web browser showing web pages. The discussed situation once again shows that identification of word with image does not only function as the tension between visual and verbal order of communication, but rather stems from mathematical

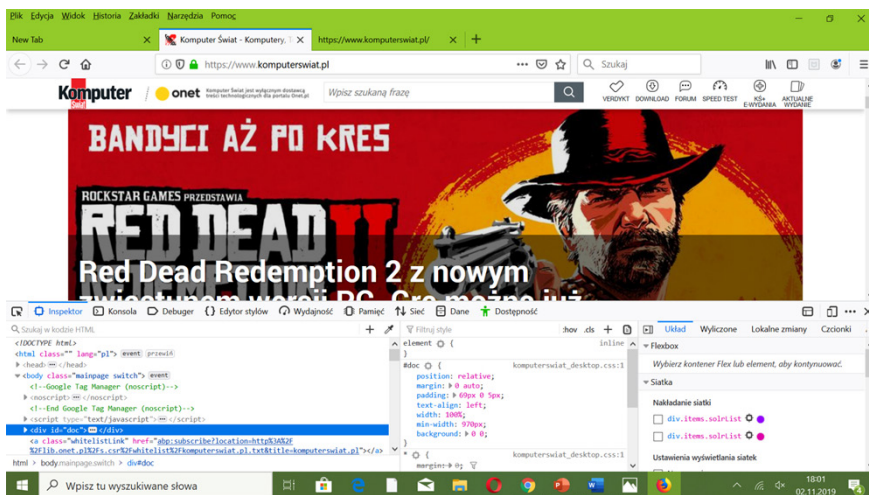


Fig. 8. Screenshot. The interface of a web browser Firefox, web page and an HTML document (own source)

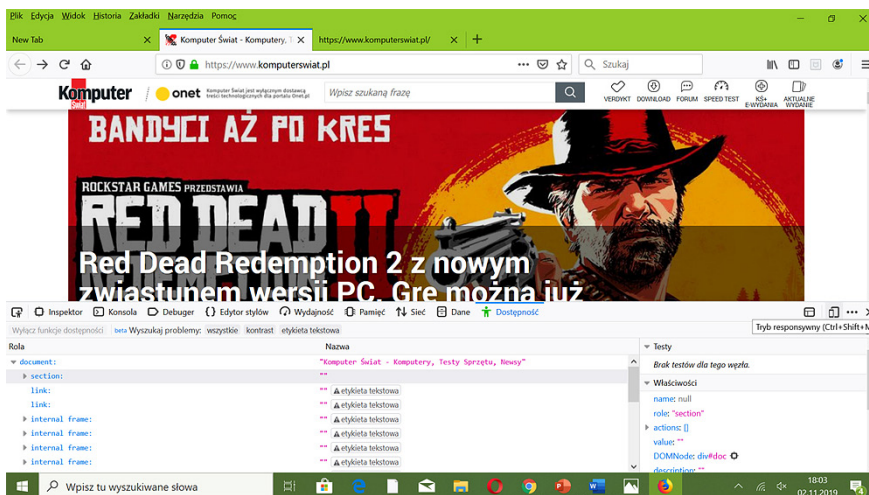


Fig. 9. Screenshot. The interface of a web browser Firefox, web page and Web Accessibility (own source)

procedures and technological solutions<sup>23</sup>. Similar attempts at combining word and image, on the basis of deeper structure interconnecting them, have been apparent in culture for a long time, for instance in conceptual, concrete and formist poetry. They could never be realized, however, due to the lack of technologies enabling the transformation of word into image. Additionally, every web page provides tools for developers, which can be used by the administrators thereof.

Digital word and image have become on one hand identical, inseparably merged, interdependent, on the other hand – they still retain the right to be visually separated, which can be achieved by opening the source code of the website next to its layout. However, even then, while using a web browser and presenting both as images, it is rather problematic to perceive, collate and compare them using the methodological tools we know. The issue becomes even more apparent when we realize that an HTML document can only be saved as text, website as a text file, and its layout as an image in .png or .bmp (bitmap) file.

## CONCLUSIONS

For the duality of form identifying word and image discussed above I am unable to provide an analogous prototype, for it is inherently connected to digital coding, dependent of the technological solutions. Picturisation creates not only static figures, it has also the potential for processuality. In the latter case, it is used for visualizing the progress of file-transfer, page loading, program opening, downloading e-mails, i.e. it is a proof of the actual operation of icons, in which ‘to see is to know,’ meaning that ‘to observe is to understand the operation of digital environment.’ The discussed procedure may provide the mass user with the sense of control over the visible layer of operating systems, and even over the textual applications and binary digital technology hidden beneath it. Obviously, that power is extremely illusory, as we wield it only from the level of programming languages and

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<sup>23</sup> At this point another research limitation becomes apparent. This time it pertains to the presentation manner of the material of our comparative analysis. In a page of a printed publication it is only possible to present word/image forms according to the already known, analogue relations. The systems typical for digital messages requires a digital environment.

parts from the level of scripted languages, such as the HTML. The need for visualizations most likely results from our attachment to the world of images in which facts and processes do not exist unless they have a visual representation (see: Heidegger 1977; Celiński 2006). Thus, computer graphical interfaces become a both static and dynamic form, as well as the content of new, digital media, and set up another state for dissemination of image domination. The most significant change consists in perceiving the web not as a mere system of static data, but as a user-driven tool and an environment of communication. In the case of responsive web pages we are dealing with genuinely dynamic images-projection which variably adjust their content and form in order to 'reflect' the user's predilections, as well as to fit in with the specification of the device they are being displayed on.

Word and image, through being ascribed numerical values are easy to transform with the use of mathematical processes of addition, subtraction, etc. through the algorithms inherent in the programs. The processes of data transmission determine the character of the Internet as a medium. Web browser translates text – HTML code into image – a web page, while for the interested parties also to an image of a coding document and even developers' tools. What does not occur here however is the transformation of input data to any other sort of data, whether writing into images or the other way around. Both components can be identified with one another, but not replaced, they retain their right to be juxtaposed next to one another. At the current stage of technological development of web pages, the analogue difference between the word and image they are constituted by breaks down at the level of generating the digital message – the medium of the Internet, WWW applications, web pages, browsers. The 'material' identity of writing and image, understood as assigning numeric values to both, is reflected on the functional level, i.e. the level of the means of communication.

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### Summary

The difference between word and image, known from the analogue culture, ‘breaks down’ at the level of generating digital transmission – in the Internet media, web applications, websites, web browsers. The suggested identity of the ‘material’ aspect of writing and image, defined as the assignment of digits to both, finds its consequences at the operational level, that is, in means of communication.

**Keywords:** medium, source code, website, writing/image, comparative studies, digital graphics, the iconification of writing, the literate image



# FROM PRECISE OBJECTIVITY TO THE BORDERLAND OF REALITY – REFLECTION ON STEFAN WOJNECKI'S EARLY WORKS<sup>1</sup>

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## THE STEP FROM WHICH IT ALL STARTED

1957, Poznań, the salon of the Polish Photographic Society. Already at the doorstep of the seat of the Society located at Paderewskiego Street, under the lucky number seven, there is an atmosphere of energetic preparations. Entering this space saturated with artistic fever means a clash with an exceptional number of pictures. Everything is surrounded by a heterogeneous, black-and-white mosaic of genres and the possibility of interpreting the 'modern' idiom. Five hundred and twenty-one photographs by Polish authors, from which a selection should be made<sup>2</sup>. However, a critical and insightful eye quickly recognizes that this diversity is only apparent.

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<sup>1</sup> This article would not have been possible without the heartfelt support of Professor Stefan Wojnecki, who not only agreed to give me an extensive interview, but also gave me numerous materials and reproductions from his private archive. I am truly grateful to this outstanding artist for a very warm welcome and for sharing his knowledge, experience and memories with me.

<sup>2</sup> Sixty-six works by thirty-nine Polish authors were finally accepted for the exhibition *A Step into Modernity* (Poznan, 1957). In addition, ninety-three works by forty-two photographers representing eleven other countries were also presented: Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, the Netherlands, East Germany, West Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Great Britain and Italy. See: *Wystawa fotografii...* 1957.

The vast majority of artists chose not to exceed the safe pictorial<sup>3</sup> landscape formula of interwar origin, sanctioned by the environment. Countless sentimental images of nature reflected in the sheets of water or luminous impressions depicting winding country roads and alleys surrounded by high poplars have been submitted for the exhibition. These photographs were characterized by a deliberate blurring of contours, wide tonal range and soft drawing. Against the background of these ethereal, painterly visions, only two works proudly manifested the desire to concentrate on the world of objects and the reality of the concrete. Contrary to the majority of the proposals submitted to the exhibition *A Step into Modernity (Krok w nowoczesność)*<sup>4</sup>, Stefan Wojnecki's (b. 1929) works were characterized by brutal realism and abstracting the essence of everyday life. Surprising graphics, lack of soft taint,

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<sup>3</sup> Pictorialism – a trend in artistic photography that flourished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the aim of which was to give the photograph the character of a painting. The main postulate of pictorialists was their opposition to sharp images faithfully representing the reality. As a result, they accepted strong interference in the photographic print, giving it a unique character. The final effect of this free artistic expression was to confirm that photography should occupy the same place in the pantheon of art as other fields of artistic creation. In interwar Poland, pictorialism which came from France (as propagated by Robert Demachy or Constant Puyo) took on a special meaning, as it became an important element of the programme formulated by the 'father of Polish photography', Jan Bulhak (1876-1950). The concept of 'native photography' acquired the role of a well-established theoretical proposal in the minds of his contemporaries. Socially engaged photography, emphasising the beauty of the country, was consistently popularized in Polish literature. The solid intellectual background gave it a stronger position than that which is associated with the (usually short-term) popularity of certain stylistic forms. The rapidly progressing supremacy of this Polish, 'indigenous' pictorialism, based on atmospherically blurred images with a patriotic function, could not be easily overcome by foreign, uninvolved modern photography.

<sup>4</sup> The exhibition of Artistic Photography *A Step into Modernity* (May-June 1957) was organized by the Polish Photographic Society in Poznan and was presented in the salon of the Polish Photographic Society (7 Paderewskiego Street). Bronisław Schlabs was the exhibition's commissioner. Apart from Schlabs, the Selection Committee included Zygmunt Obrąpalski, Fortunata Obrąpalska and Janusz Kubanek.

an unprecedented clarity of details – already the first works of this artist drew attention in the photographic environment of the 1950s. Suggestive, clear and expressive prints persuasively demonstrated their identity, breaking with the still present sense of inferiority of the medium of photography in relation to other fields of art. The participation of this outstanding artist in the Poznań intellectual ferment cannot be overestimated, as he contributed to the crystallization of avant-garde attitudes, so important for the post-war changes in Polish photography.

Stefan Wojnecki overthrew the sanctioned ways of perception, using the power of *verismo*, immanently inscribed in the photographic medium, in a surprising manner. Thus, he defied a generation of pictorialists, who considered the precision of the camera to be a soulless, automatic factor that needed to be overcome (e.g. through the so-called noble techniques) in order to achieve an image of artistic status. Rejecting atmospheric symbolism, Wojnecki focused on discovering the unexpected aspects of ordinary objects. He explored the mechanisms of everyday life and penetrated the world of commonplace things. Two of his works, *Immersion Heater (Grzałka)* and *Slide Rule and Stone (Suwak i kamień)*, presented at the exhibition *A Step into Modernity*, perfectly illustrate how the Poznań artist skilfully juggled with the ambiguity of the category of ‘realism’, reaching for the best traditions of New Reality (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). Paradoxically, thanks to very simple measures, such as appropriate approximation of the lens to objects rather devoid of any metaphorical connotations, Wojnecki managed to obtain ambiguous, almost poetic compositions.

In the case of the work *Slide Rule and Stone* Wojnecki used his education in physics and skills of an engineer, consciously giving the glass graphic plate the function of a negative and thus obtaining an extremely sharp image. The contours, the surface texture, the digits and the markings sharply emerge and attack the eye like Buñuel’s razor.

From today’s perspective, this photograph may seem like a documentary because of the way it was shot: the lens has been positioned almost perfectly parallel to the photographed surface. As a result, there is no spatial depth, the objects are static against a dark background. When confronted with this work, the viewer’s imagination may activate a vision of a workshop with an archaeologist, who meticulously measures and documents the relics of the past. Meanwhile, in this photograph, Wojnecki juxtaposed

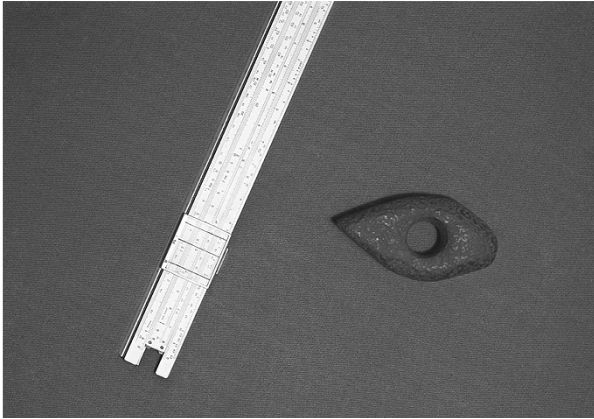


Fig. 1. Stefan Wojnecki, *Slide Rule and Stone*, 1957 (photograph-positive)

the prehistoric stone, product of human hands, with the most modern at that time, hard to access, calculation tool – a logarithmic slider. We see the eternal motif of confrontation between culture, focused on cultivating tradition, and science – focused on the future. The archaic meets the symptom of modernity. At the same time, however, the relativity of all categories relating to the issue of time can be seen here: they turn out to be impermanent and constantly changing. Wojnecki focuses on one of the strangest words known in language, according to Wisława Szymborska. The artist supports the opinion of the Polish Nobel Prize winner expressed in a very meaningful phrase: ‘When I pronounce the word Future, the first syllable already belongs to the past’ (quoted after: Nyczek 2000: 46). The product of the latest technology will soon become obsolete and will be replaced by more advanced solutions. On the other hand, a product which is an emblem of material cultural heritage will gradually gain in value due to its unique nature, as a testimony to the transformation of civilization.

The use of the strictly defined objects constituting the work *Slide Rule and Stone* – this untypical still life – suggests, in the narrative layer, the possibility of interpreting this photograph in the context of the opposition: old – new, although this motif does not exhaust the wide range of interpretations of the analysed photograph. Wojnecki demonstrates the ripe fruit of his reflection, derived from the achievements of the ‘front guard’, the first harbinger of which were the futuristic ‘words in freedom’ – a catalyst for

the development of subsequent trends in 20<sup>th</sup>-century art (Gazda 1978: 120-125). The title of the work itself – in theory exclusively descriptive and informative, attempting to describe the image neutrally and indifferently – contains a certain avant-garde perversity (Śliwiński 2004: 6). Two alien and incompatible objects meet in this title, as in the legendary Dadaistic ‘game’ consisting in subjecting oneself to the will of chance in juxtaposing subsequent words or elements of a collage (see: Richter 1986). The Poznań-based artist plays a game with the viewer, winks at the viewer, like the artists from the dada circle, full of youthful bravura. Various styles seem to coexist in Wojnecki’s work. The artist enters into a dialogue with the avant-garde, creatively reinterpreting the pluralistic language of imaging, which is its effect. Apart from the Dadaistic perversity, in the case of this photograph one can also sense the echoes (filtered through surrealism) of the ‘definition’ of beauty by Comte de Lautréamont, who claimed that beauty is ‘an accidental meeting on the dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella’ (quoted after: Bréchom 1973: 148). Wojnecki emphasizes not only the status and meaning of individual objects, but above all he builds tension between the photographed objects, provoking the viewer’s imagination to discover unexpected meanings in the surrounding reality. This raises the question whether the artist is problematizing (thus confirming Peter Bürger’s [1984] theses), or maybe continuing (or rather, as Stefan Morawski put it – complementing [after: Wilkoszewska 2006: 8]) the activities of pre-war movements. In this essay I only allow myself to stress that Wojnecki takes up the theme of a certain unrealistic specificity of imaging; the genetic relations between the language of Polish post-war photography and the surrealist trend are still an open chapter in our native art history, which needs to be elaborated<sup>5</sup>.

Moreover, the transparent world of still, seemingly inertly arranged objects acquires a fascinating exoticism thanks to a thoroughly thought-out composition, full of directional tensions. The viewer’s gaze begins its journey

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<sup>5</sup> Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowska (2005), among others, wrote about the inspiration with surrealism in the work of Zdzisław Beksiński and Jerzy Lewczyński, who, like Wojnecki, operated in the 1950s in a language marked only by a certain echo of surrealistic origin.



Fig. 2. An element of visual identification of the exhibition *A Step into Modernity*

in one of the so-called strong points<sup>6</sup> of the photograph – the beginning of a clear path of mathematical divisions and markings, diagonally crossing the frame. It resembles a snapshot of a comet's ethereal fire, which will disappear in a moment, as promised by the stone tear next to it. The whole gives the impression of a creative reinterpretation of the symbol of an almond-shaped eye, looking uncertainly into the future, the motif of which was the basic element of the visual setting of the above-mentioned exposition *A Step into Modernity*.

Both works by Stefan Wojnecki presented at one of the most important post-war Polish photographic exhibitions were based on antagonistic juxtapositions. In the case of the *Immersion Heater*, the artist juxtaposed the forces of nature – the two basic elements – with an element of the world of technology. The coiled line of a shining industrial device is surrounded by dancing, shaking air bubbles, which vibrate as if ‘on command’ of the rising temperature of the water. Formless substances are materialized in the photograph thanks to the use of an uncomplicated home device. The liquid, the colourless and the ethereal are formed; the transparent

<sup>6</sup> For more information on how to shape composition in photography: divisions of the image sections and the principle of direction, see: Wójcik 2007: 37-41, 64-69.

depth becomes haptic. In the photograph, the artist manages to depict the water and the air set in motion, and at the same time, he sublimates the meaning of the title heater. He creates a visual poem in honour of the of manifestation of 'reality of the lowest rank' (Kantor: 2005: 17) and in a masterful way expands the area of photographic art to include what was wrongly considered ugly or devoid of expression. An uninteresting object unexpectedly changes its status thanks to a gesture of artistic legitimacy. Wojnecki blurs the boundaries between everyday life and 'high culture'; the common denominator of both photographs is the need to use and restore meaning to matter, previously defined by society as common or average.

The photographer monumentalizes his private microcosm, relativizing our perception habits. A seemingly insignificant, trivial and usually unnoticed object, in the artist's vision quite unexpectedly acquires dignity, 'causative power', and can also become an object of visual admiration. The borders between the *sacrum* and *profanum* are blurred, as in the *Grey Eminences of Rapture* (*Szare eminencje zachwytu*) by Miron Białoszewski. The photographer emphasizes the flickering ambiguity of the heater, and the master of the pen – the 'depth' of a colander spoon. 'A poet is a wordmaker who does not trust words, who attacks the existing linguistic compounds, cuts right through them and organizes new word associations' – Julian Przyboś's (1959: 8) comments about the Białoszewski turn out to be valid also in the context of the bold solutions proposed by Wojnecki. The artist 'is surprised' by the objects and aims at disturbing the *a priori* established hierarchies, which in turn refers to the ideas of such theoreticians as Bruno Latour (2005) – individual, seemingly silent objects turn out to be active actors of the social scene, causing certain effects.

## BREAKING WITH THE CONVENTIONS

The work entitled *Tree*, dating back to 1959, proves that Wojnecki not only revalued the meaning of the sphere of banal objects, but was also able to extract a new visual quality from the motifs that had already been familiar. In the photograph mentioned above, the branches emerging from a thick trunk are completely abstracted from the context that originally accompanied them. On the positive, which is much bigger than the final intended image, the photographer painted (removed) all the unnecessary details of the background by hand using ink. Thanks to the later reproduction



Fig. 3. *Stefan Wojnecki, Immersion Heater, 1957 (photograph-positive)*



Fig. 4. *Stefan Wojnecki, Tree, 1959 (photograph-positive)*

of the modified work (but in a smaller format), the artist consciously maintained excellent quality, sharpness and clarity of forms and blurred the traces of retouch. In this way, a fragment of nature, so far captured by Polish photographers in a charming and melancholy way, acquires a depressing character.



Wojnecki creatively reverses (in a pessimistic way) the traditional symbolism of the tree, usually associated with the axis (understood as the source and beginning) of life (see: Eliade 1975). Manual intervention and black paint allowed him to obtain a strong contrast between the main motif and the background devoid of any information, thanks to which the final effect is a perfect example of the functioning of the so-called negative areas – places (apparently) empty, unfilled, yet extremely important for the creation of the visual image. Naked, leafless branches, the bark marked by ugly bulges, emerge from nothingness. Confronted with this unique vision of an inhabitant of a gloomy, mysterious forest, and led by an incomprehensible instinct – we want to touch the rough texture. The uniquely illuminated, unnaturally whitened tree seems to be almost on fire. The many branches should guarantee its vitality, but they are devoid of flowers or fruit. The tree is probably already withered, like a dead coral thrown to the shore. Or maybe fossilised in stillness like a paralysed old man, burdened with experience?

The characteristic feature of Stefan Wojnecki's early work is the combination of avant-garde means of creative expression with ambiguous symbolism implying existential content. This is how, for example, the work *Gauze (Gaza)* can be interpreted. It was made with the use of the non-camera technique of luxography (Latin: *lux* – 'light', Greek: *gráphein* – 'write'), often applied by the artist. The enlarger cassette, usually containing a negative, included only a fragment of the material whose image was directly projected onto the photographic paper. In this way a unique, individual record of the momentary appearance of the object was created – the artist 'imprinted' its trace. Thus, the image was created without the use of the camera, but exclusively due to manual measures and meticulous staging in the darkroom.

Thanks to a specific arrangement of the object and achieving a small depth of focus, the photographer has built several spatial plans and a spectacular perspective. The convexity of the intricately bent gauze makes it appear as almost moving or undulating. By registering the shape of an ineffective object in such an unusual way, Wojnecki undertakes a sophisticated polemic with traditional photographic genres. Penetrating the fibres, the structure of the material brings to mind close-ups in which the whole frame is filled

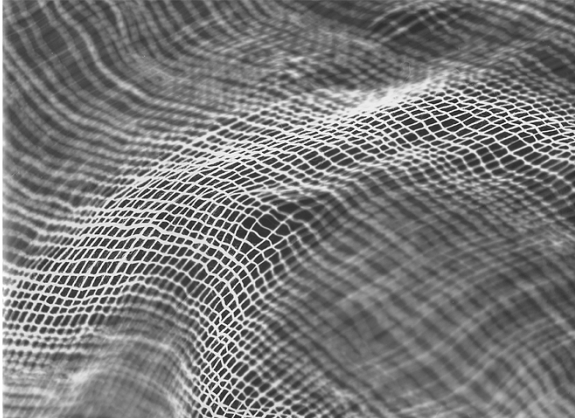


Fig. 5. Stefan Wojnecki, *Gauze*, 1959 (luxography)

with naked human skin<sup>7</sup>. The convexity, which is the central element of *Gauze* reminds us of the subtle way of showing selected, most imaginative aspects of the female body, typical of the act. The lyrical depiction of nudity in photography often led to a sophisticated association of fragments of anatomy with the natural unevenness of Mother Earth's terrain. The presentation of carnality was often based on connotations with a female element hidden in a panoramic, mountainous landscape. The reversal of the natural distribution of white and black, as well as the reduction of semitones, characteristic for luxography, introduce an element of anxiety to Wojnecki's work. The bright pore net presented by the artist takes on a vanitas character. Instead of sensuality, Wojnecki creates with virtuosity a metaphorical reference to a decaying corpse. This feeling is intensified by the title of the work, which refers to the material used primarily to stop bleeding and dressing wounds. The dadaistic idiom contained in the technique of luxography<sup>8</sup> is used to present the biological theme characteristic of post-war art (see: Morris 1993).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Zbigniew Dłubak's intricate realizations.

<sup>8</sup> This method was known from the very beginning of photography (which is confirmed by the works of William Fox Talbot or Anna Atkins), but it was Man Ray who fully explored the artistic potential of this technique.

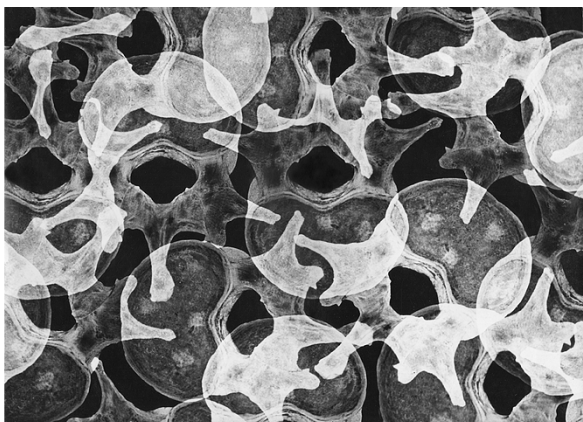


Fig. 6. Stefan Wojnecki, *Vertebrae*, 1958 (luxography)

*Vertebrae (Kregi)*, also created using luxography, manifest their association with the subject of a dysfunctional, dead human organism in a more ostentatious way. In this shocking 'lesson of anatomy', man is reduced to an emblematic fragment: the inner flesh, usually hidden under the surface of the muscles. The selected element of the skeleton is multiplied, thus creating a kaleidoscopic blaze of forms tightly filling the frame. Traces of human remains partially overlap. The points of contact are less exposed to the process of illumination, and as a result, they are brighter, which makes the representation more nuanced in terms of value. From among translucent tissues with a porous structure, spots of the ideal black of the illuminated photographic base emerge. The multiplication of a single motif alleviates the 'fear of emptiness'.

The Latin source of the term 'abstraction' (*abstractio* – 'detachment') acquires a special meaning in the context of this photograph. The bone (although undeniably burdened with biological concreteness) becomes a contribution to the creation of a vision that breaks with the traditional category of *mimesis*. The vertebra is a component devoid of its original context, isolated – i.e. detached from man. In the history of photography, the unusual configuration of the camera's gaze has often been used to create images that refer to non-representational art. Examples include the works of Aaron Siskind (1903-1991) or Brassai (1899-1984), who showed the uncanny

visual potential of the surrounding reality, reducing it to an abstract model<sup>9</sup>. The clearly pessimistic, existential character of these works includes them in one artistic tradition, together with Wojnecki's *Vertebra*. However, Siskind and Brassai, when selecting and framing fragments of façades of destroyed buildings or remnants of advertising posters on fences with great expertise, used different means of expression than the artist from Poznań. Wojnecki was more and more interested in the free creation of a photographic image. This dictated the choice of luxography as a working method to create the poignant image of human remains scattered at the bottom of the ocean.

The photograph *Under the Surface (Pod powierzchnią)* could be an excellent example of transfer and adaptation of the modernist tradition of geometric abstraction<sup>10</sup> for the use of photography, as the image is filled with intricate, regular divisions of a repeatable pattern. The idea of reproducing the surrounding reality has been abandoned in favour of the unique creation of an alternative cosmogony. However, the ideal vision of an orderly, almost neoplastic structure is disturbed by the irregular loosening of the formal rigour, and the viewer feels unsettled by the expressive bulges and whirls. The emulsion of a glass negative with a multiplied texture was locally moistened and then heated. After tilting the film, the substance started to trickle down, creating new, but still crippled organisms under the surface of the texture. The artist's manual interference consisting of the deliberate disintegration of the material used bears the hallmarks of self-reflection on the course and character of the creative process. By eroding traditional methods of work, the artist poses a question about the limits of endurance of the convention of the medium itself. Wojnecki declares that this theme in his work is an answer to the self-thematic current of 'generative' art, which searches for identity and studies the very essence of photography. At the same time, however, one can say that the Poznan photographer creates a new iconography of suffering, unique for this medium; as poignant as the one which Andrzej Wróblewski once developed on the basis of visual arts thanks to suggestive gouaches (Lachowski 2013: 238-245).

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<sup>9</sup> To this day, finding and capturing certain geometric patterns from the surrounding reality is one of the classic photographic tasks.

<sup>10</sup> For interpretations of other works by Wojnecki, which use this kind of poetics, see: Kanicki 2015: 73-86.

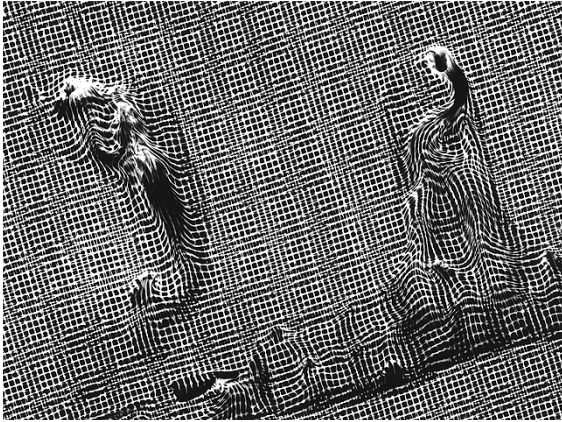


Fig. 7. Stefan Wojnecki, *Under the Surface*, 1958 (photograph-positive)

A dramatic spectacle takes place, without any explanation, right in front of the viewer's eyes, confronted with the work by Wojnecki entitled *Under the Surface*. The origin of the centrifugal force disintegrating the image remains unknown to us, we cannot read it from the work itself – the lyrical beauty of the apocalypse takes on a universal character. The static, clear language of harmonized geometry is undermined and the image becomes a catastrophic metaphor for the process of destruction. The connotation between the vibration of forms and movement and a negative factor, a symptom of disappearance or disintegration, is also visible in Wojnecki's other works, such as *Indistinctness of Movement* (*Nieostrość ruchu*, 1958), *W kosmos* (*Into Space*, 1958) or *Structure* (*Struktura*, 1962).

## CONCLUSION

Stefan Wojnecki's artistic practice is, in a way, in contrast to the artist's education, because he rejects the rational attitude, characterized by the conviction of the power and cognitive capabilities of human reason. The photographer from Poznań seems to manifest the ridiculousness and insufficiency of precise scientific data in the face of the problems of cognition, penetration into the world of human emotions. Logic cannot cope with the task of explaining and organizing the laws of functioning of the most important phenomena or categories for humanity. By reviving the freedom of photography, rejecting restrictions on the freedom of the medium,

Wojnecki describes the world of human desires and unfulfilled hopes. How to tame and illustrate such a difficult subject as the existential situation of an individual? Stefan Wojnecki's sublime answer is included in his photographs which, on the one hand, balance on the borderline of reality, and on the other hand, make man and his emotions the central element of their narration<sup>11</sup>.

*All illustrations are published courtesy of the Professor Stefan Wojnecki.*

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<sup>11</sup> Wojnecki develops these problems and presents them in a new way in his later conceptual work, which is the main focus of interest for researchers. For more information on the transformations of visual forms used by the artist see: Sobota 1999: 10-15.

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## Summary

The main aim of this study is to analyse the selected photographs created by Stefan Wojnecki in the 1950s. The selected materials diversify and enrich the widely accepted image of the artist, who is known primarily for his later conceptual realizations. The essay attempts to characterize those photographs, in which the individual and his existential situation constitutes the crucial subject. The study is based primarily on the material collected during the interview with the artist himself.

**Keywords:** neo-avant-garde photography, New Objectivity, Polish post-war photography, Stefan Wojnecki





## THEATRE ON THE WATER. THE AQUATIC ELEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY POLISH THEATRE

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The introduction of water to the stage is certainly not a frequently used theatrical procedure. This is hardly surprising, because the use of this means of theatrical expression significantly increases the production costs of a performance. A few years ago, when the premiere of Richard Wagner's famous 'marine' opera *The Flying Dutchman* (*Latający Holender*)<sup>1</sup>, directed by Mariusz Treliński was being prepared at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw, it became necessary to build a huge 26 by 20 meter tank. It was intended to hold the water (the set designer mentioned as many as 70 thousand liters of water) (see: Dębowska 2012) which poured down on the stage during the performance. The problem was both the size of the tank and its effective insulation. Apparently, the company which offered the lowest bid in the tender valued the performance of this service at 900 000 PLN. Eventually, the tank was built much cheaper, with the help of the theatre workshops (see: Dębowska 2014)

The technical team of the Dramatic Theatre in Warsaw faced a similar task earlier in the performance of Krystian Lupa's *Unfinished Work for an Actor* (*Niedokończony utwór na aktora*)<sup>2</sup>. In order for the lake planned by the director to appear on stage, it was necessary to commission an expert opinion assessing the strength of the floor. The deepest part of the tank (up to 1.5 meters) had to be supported by six metal pillars. The actor, who was to immerse himself completely in the water in one of the scenes, talked about his experiences during rehearsals:

<sup>1</sup> The premiere of *The Flying Dutchman* took place in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The performance had its premiere in 2004.

When I'm in the middle of the show, I forget that it's an artificial water reservoir. I have the impression that it's a pleasant summer evening and I'm bathing in a warm lake. (...) The director wants Jakub's [the character from the play – M.K.R.] bathing in the lake not only to illustrate the text, but also to say something more. To show the beauty of theatre, its magic and at the same time its imperfection. We can conjure up a lake in the theatre, and yet it will never be a real lake, at the most, it will be a flooded theatre (quoted after: Wyżyńska 2004).

I quoted this somewhat perverse statement because it reflects well the ambivalent nature of water as an element of the theatrical spectacle. Water is a very special stage material. It seems to identify the very essence of theatricality to a greater degree than others, which consists in the constant oscillation between illusion and reality. The physicality of the water introduced to the stage does not allow us to forget about the dichotomy of artificial stage creation and material literality of the materials. Of course, all forms of water elements – sea, rain, storm – can be effectively articulated with the use of the whole palette of equivalents, i.e. light, color or sound. Such means were used by Robert Wilson in his phenomenal, poetic spectacle *The Lady from the Sea (Kobieta z morza)*<sup>3</sup>. This lyrical story, derived from Scandinavian legends, was inscribed by the director into a sublime, ascetic space filled with sea noises, light effects and colors flooding the stage.

Yet the effect of water, not the metaphorical, but the real one – so limited by technical constraints (as has already been mentioned), and in consequence always artificial to some extent – has one decisive advantage over the mentioned equivalents. This advantage is the spectacular potential, which is difficult to substitute. One can find out about it by observing the performances of theatres staged exclusively in/on the water, for which water is not only a stage medium, but above all the determinant of the genre, a consciously applied convention. The traditional Vietnamese puppet theatre on the water, which is actually one of Hanoi's main tourist attractions, is one of the companies that uses it (fig. 1-4). The uniqueness of these spectacles is illustrated by the description of Đạm Vân Anh (2010):

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<sup>3</sup> The performance premiered at the Dramatic Theatre in Warsaw in 2005.

Already more than a thousand years ago, the inhabitants of the Mekong Delta, cultivating the ever-present rice, saw the potential of the water element not only as a basis for cultivation, but also as a stage on which folk tales and legends could be recreated. (...) The water hid the arms that moved the puppets and enabled the creation of additional, exciting effects such as rough waves and jets of water shooting upwards. (...) The stage for the performances of water theatre is currently a construction in the form of a swimming pool with an area of about 4 square meters. Behind a bamboo model reflecting the front of a typical Vietnamese temple there are up to eight actors who, by moving special rods, bring to life the puppets attached to them. (...) The puppets appear on the water stage, sliding out from both sides of the model hiding the actors or, to the delight of the audience, greeting them, emerging unexpectedly from the water.

The original type of the Vietnamese puppet theatre on water originates from the local folk tradition dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. An example of a contemporary model of a show performed in water are the performances of the French group Ilotopie. The artists themselves declare that, in their practices, ‘water is a new field of contemporary theatre experience’<sup>4</sup>, an experiment that uses a specific ‘energy’ of the element. Polish audiences had an opportunity to see spectacular performances of the company. In 2001, the performance of *Narcisse quette* from the Ilotopie repertoire was included in the program of the 11th International Malta Theatre Festival in Poznań. Dominique Noël explained the ‘water’ concept of the show that referred to the mythological history of Narcissus: ‘Water was the first mirror of humanity, and that’s why we want to present our performance about the myth of Narcissus on water. It will be a game of illusion and mirror reflections’ (cited after: Wprost 2011). During the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of the FETA International Street and Open-Air Theatres Festival in Gdańsk in 2011, the group presented the performance *Water Fools (Fous de Bassin)* (fig. 5-8). The spectacle, prepared with great scope, was one of the most expensive ever presented at the festival. It began with a scene with a car passing through the water, followed by a cyclist, a ‘sailing’ bed, a cleaner with a broom and a garbage bin, as well as a woman with a baby stroller. The unusual scenery

<sup>4</sup> <http://ilotopie.com/spectacles/?lang=fr> [accessed: 23.08.2019].



Fig. 1-4. Vietnamese puppet theatre on water (photo: Alicja Rapsiewicz, LosWiaheros.pl)

extracted a new, metaphorical sense from the sequences of ordinary, everyday actions. As one could read in the description of the performance, water played the role of ‘a factor revealing the fragility of the human condition’ (see: Institut Français, 2011).

An unquestionable attribute of great open-air performances is the possibility of including a real reservoir in the show. However, they represent a separate, self-ruled species. In a classical repertoire theatre, located in a building without such a possibility, water appears in different, but equally interesting scenographic variants and configurations. If the strictly technical categories of quantity and type of water source were to be used, the three most frequently used varieties would have to be classified. The first is to use a relatively limited amount of water poured out of a tap, hose or vessel. The second option is to place smaller and larger containers or whole tanks on stage. The last model introduces the effect of water falling from above and flooding the stage.

In the case of the first variant, which uses water as a single theatrical sign, the symbolism of such a sign turns out to be particularly dense precisely because it concerns only a small component of the stage action. Therefore, it is difficult to deny it a semiotic ‘equipment’ essential for the meanings of the performance. However, the principle conventionally described by the formula of ‘theatre on water’ does not apply to this type of treatment. Since a single aquatic element is not the dominant motif, it cannot be treated as a strategy – scenographically and semantically – that identifies the whole of the stage message. But, what is worth noting, this type of theatrical sign is certainly a special sign in the sense that its artificiality seems to be relatively least ‘artificial’. In the audience’s perception, the illusion of ‘real’ water, for example, poured out of a mug on stage – in contrast to water poured out in the form of rain, for example – remains, of course, a full illusion. It is not disturbed by the impression (described in the statement by an actor from Lupa’s performance quoted above) of communing with the ‘fabricated’ effect, which is a strictly theatrical creation.

I will mention only two such scenes on the basis of illustration, seemingly similar, and yet absolutely opposite in their significance. The first example is Father Peter’s monologue from Paweł Wodziński’s *Mickiewicz*.

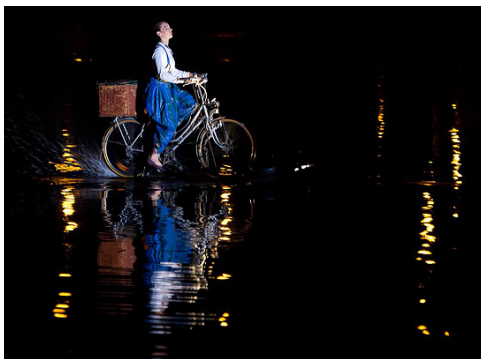


Fig. 5-8. Water Fouls, *Compagnie Ilotopie* (photo: Tomasz Tarnowski)

*Forefathers' Eve. Performance (Mickiewicz. Dziady. Performance)*<sup>5</sup>. Amidst scenery resembling a dormitory rather than a prison of Polish patriots, the splash of water (poured straight from a metal cup) on a face underscored the visionary story of the judgment and torture of Christ, i.e. Poland – so it had a messianic, purifying sense. On the other hand, in the legendary staging of Grzegorz Jarzyna's *2007: Macbeth*<sup>6</sup>, staged in post-industrial interiors of the no longer existing Waryński Works in the Wola district of Warsaw, a strong accent was the scene of Lady Macbeth spraying a blood-stained floor with water from a hose. In Jarzyna's work, the water juxtaposed with the blood was not – as in Wodziński's play – resuscitative or purifying, it was inscribed in the circle of crime, intrigue, war and death.

The first category – let's call it a 'minimalistic variant' – means therefore the creation of quite expressive (if not predictable) stage signs. However, in the context of my subject matter, the most important productions seem to be those whose creators decided on 'bulky' solutions and introduced a lot of water to the stage, organizing with this procedure an acting space most frequently (and 'out of necessity') for the entire performance.

I will start with an unusual example in the sense that the tank did not have to be built on stage, because the director used an existing space had such an object at his disposal. In Jan Klata's *H.*<sup>7</sup>, because that is the performance discussed here, a strategy appropriate to the already mentioned genre of the open-air show was applied. The performance, like Jarzyna's *Macbeth*, was staged in post-industrial surroundings (see: Kostaszuk-Romanowska 2012). Such a 'natural' plain-air was the area of the ruined Gdańsk Shipyard. The scene of Ophelia's suicide (or rather the scene of her body being recovered from the water), which was added to the Shakespeare play, took place in the harbor pool. Of course, in the theatre, it matters whether the viewers learn about the death of Ophelia – as in Shakespeare's words – from the words of the Queen, or whether they can themselves enter the role of curious onlookers who gather at the edge of the pool and, although they

<sup>5</sup> The premiere of the performance took place in the Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz in 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Performance staged by TR Warszawa in 2005.

<sup>7</sup> A performance based on William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, prepared by the Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk in 2004.

stand behind police tape, they follow the action of the body being fished out and then put into a black plastic body bag. An action, it should be said, taken as if live from the crime chronicles. It was this style that brutally deconstructed possible references to the paintings of Eugène Delacroix or John Everett Millais, though, for a moment, the pose of the dead Ophelia, lying still in the water, clearly evoked associations with the latter's work.

The figure of Ophelia – a drowned woman who 'gave her young life to water', certainly inspired the authors of another performance – *Riverbank* (*Przyrzeczce*), staged at the Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz<sup>8</sup>. The musical monodrama is based on excerpts from Virginia Woolf's diary<sup>9</sup>, who, let us recall, committed suicide by jumping into a river. Although the performance was performed 'traditionally', it proposed definitely 'non-traditional' scenographic solutions (fig. 9-11). In the Bydgoszcz staging, there was a large aquarium with a multifunctional, as it turned out, use:

The great idea for a stage design – a cuboid filled with water is extremely attractive for the main character in many respects. At times, it is a source of sounds, referring to the power of nature so close to the woman, while at other times it becomes a space [she] is afraid to enter, standing on the edge, looking at it with fear and interest, evoking associations with a suicide attempt. Sometimes it is also a place of infantile games, highlighting the beauty of human development from a joyful child to a sensual woman (Blanca 2012).

'Playing' with scenographic elements belongs to the basic repertoire of acting means. In the case of *Riverbank*, a rather special object placed on the set was at the same time an instrument used by the actress – an instrument, let us add, also in the literal sense of the word. 'Water tempts and makes one take risks', wrote Szymon Spichalski (2012). The protagonist experimented with the matter of water – she touched it, jumped into it, immersed herself. The sounds emitted by the water during

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<sup>8</sup> The premiere took place in 2012. The authors of the concept were Agata Skwarczyńska, Aneta Jankowska and Karolina Adamczyk, who appeared in the performance.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to Virginia Woolf's diaries, the authors were inspired by the lyrics of the British singer PJ Harvey.



these activities were conveyed by a microphone placed inside the aquarium. The ‘penetration’ of water, spectacular in itself, actually became – which was emphasized in the aforementioned review – a metaphor for the mental state of the protagonist. Among the many senses of this metaphor, one seemed particularly dark. It expressed – one may say – the heroine’s gradual locking herself away in the neurotic world of her own psyche. In it, like under water, all of life – existing above the surface of water – is invalidated. The visually altered figure, which the viewers could observe through the walls of the aquarium, at times actually resembled a drowned corpse. At the same time, the multidimensionally exploited element of water ultimately remained an element that was not fully understood, giving the possibility of various, contradictory, but also complementary readings. As Agnieszka Serlikowska (2012) noted:

The authors of the project mentioned in their announcements the allegorical motif of the drowned Ophelia, the attempt to investigate the mystery of the woman’s drowning. In my opinion, the river does not have to be associated with death in all the stories presented in the performance. It can also be a symbol of women’s liberation, knowledge of the world or existential peace.

*Riverbank* was an interesting example of theatrical exploration of water – discovering its material texture, giving it sound, stimulating its multi-sensory potential. This effect occurs when water appears as the actor’s stage partner in the performance. This is, of course, only one of the possible applications of the aquatic motif, which works especially in focused, intimate performances, trying to face the mystery of the human psyche.

Placing water objects on the stage is always a proxemic endeavor, which was also shown in the spectacle *Riverbank*. The water surfaces, of course, build up the set, equip the stage space with an additional dimension. They also become quasi-natural screens – they absorb light and colors, reflect the silhouettes of characters. They structure and at the same time valorize the visual composition of the stage. This type of effect was used in the staging of Shakespeare’s drama *Antony and Cleopatra* (*Antoniusz i Kleopatra*) by

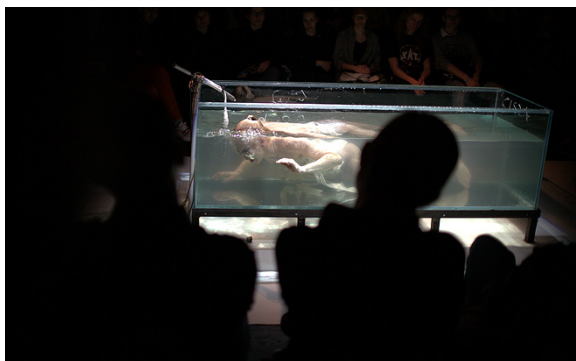


Fig. 9-II. Riverbank, H. Konieczko Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz, concept: Agata Skwarczyńska, Aneta Jankowska, Karolina Adamczyk (photo: Paulina Stranz)

Wojciech Faruga<sup>10</sup> – a rather brutal spectacle with an interesting, minimalist set design. One of the reviewers, Piotr Olkusz (2016), described it as follows:

Visually, it is a very nice spectacle. A large ramp of wavy hills slopes gently towards the audience, passing by a large water tank. We are looking at black Africa beyond the sea. Literally black, because instead of sparkling with gold, the sand looks as if an attempt was made to cover it with tar.

The water element used by the artists actually seemed to contrast with the moon landscape of the land. But both motifs did not build a simple opposition. The life-giving element of water did not oppose the deadness of the earth. Water on stage evoked associations with the sea, but also with the Nile. However, it did not seem to be a river – as Anna Tomaszewicz (2016) rightly pointed out – ‘which rebels against its own shores in order to give a seed of a new life’. The water element – in the form of a long canal, crowning the front of the stage – emphasized rather than denied the impression of deadness inscribed in the whole scenographic vision. It suggested, as the reviewer argued, that ‘the Hellenistic kingdom is a barren land’ (ibid.). In some sense this symbolic ‘Nile’ became a river of death. One of the scenes depicting a metaphorical image of the Battle of Actium was a particular indication of this. It used an interesting solution consisting in combining two elements, water and fire – small, paper ships set on fire with an oxygen torch moving on the water, burning picturesquely.

Movement (of the water and in the water) – a natural attribute of the element – becomes in the theatre an obvious means of expression that dynamizes spatial composition. Modeling the stage plan using water motifs is, therefore – as Jerzy Limon (2006: 181) puts it – ‘chronotypic’ in nature. With this concept, the scholar describes one of the variants of shaping space in the performance. The action is superimposed on the set design, and with it the stage movement and gestures made by the characters. The changeability that characterizes the dramaturgy of the story told in the performance is not only a development in time – it can also concern the spatial dimension. It is not about the obvious procedure of changing the decoration, but about the dynamism written into it, strongly connected with the action. This

<sup>10</sup> The performance was staged at the Stefan Jaracz Theatre in Łódź in 2016.

dynamic scenery is defined by Limon's own (or more precisely: transferred from literary studies) term, 'chronography':

Therefore, I will consider as a chronography those stage works in which the changeability of the scenographic composition (also the one built with light) is not only a background, but an important element of the action and takes place within one scene (i.e. not only as a change of decoration between scenes or acts). The changes in the scenery (now: chronography) shown in front of the audience are connected with the events on the stage, or they create the events themselves. In other words, it is a special case when the set design also 'acts' in the sense of movement (ibid.: 256).

It seems that the use of an aquatic motif in the staging not only allows, but also guarantees the above-mentioned effect. Water as an element implies movement, changeability, dynamics proper to its nature. The water accumulated on the stage – of course, in a sufficiently large amount – by its very nature has the potential for movement and changeability. Offering the possibility of creating – with the use of color and light – more and more new visual (but also audio) qualities, it creates its own course of events. At the same time, it stimulates the proper stage action. 'Acting', it takes on the role of a special over-actor, and also provokes, or even forces the actions of 'living' actors.

This is where the problem arises – the motif, which may be an asset of the staging, may also turn out to be its weakness. The director, deciding to use water in a performance, does not always have a good idea of what and why the actor should do with this water (and more often: in the water). In the Łódź performance, for example, water was the obvious context of erotic scenes. But not all 'water actions' seemed to be equally convincingly motivated. This is indicated by the statement of one of the reviewers: 'This element of the set design would have been a really good idea had it not been for the fact that most of the episodes using it are based on pointless and unjustified jumping into the water' (Herłazińska 2016). Olkusz (2016), on the other hand, concluded his description of the set design with the following reflection: 'It is a pretty picture. I suppose, however, that Wojciech Faruga did not direct *Antony and Cleopatra* so that the first thing that will come to the viewer's mind about this performance was visual art'.



Fig. 12-13. *Flying Dutchman*, Grand Theatre – National Opera in Warsaw, dir. Mariusz Treliński (photo: Krzysztof Bieliński)

The performance I mentioned at the beginning also did not avoid similar accusations. The creators of *The Flying Dutchman* (*Latający Holender*) quite precisely explained the concept of staging. Boris Kudlička, the set designer, explained: ‘I wanted to create the impression of a black abyss, a depth’ (quoted after: Dębowska 2012). Authentic cataclysms – tsunamis and floods were the inspiration. Wagner himself, as we know, wrote his opera under the influence of a dramatic experience – a storm in the North Sea. In fact, on the stage of the Grand Theatre, a vision of an infinite ocean, a true *mare*

*tenebrarum*, was conjured up, although it seemed almost impossible<sup>11</sup>. It was amplified by multiple, overlapping images of water. Spectators could observe the intersecting surfaces of rain, splashed sheets of water and hazy fog. The dark scenery expressed the symbolism of loneliness, suffering and death.

The phenomenal images created by Kudlička were recognized by critics who appreciated their aesthetic mastery, expressive power and consistently built, metaphorical message. 'It is the darkness, light and water' – emphasized Olgierd Pisarenko (2012):

that perfectly organize the space of the drama through opalescent, cool colors and moving textures, built of fog, water vapor, rain drops and streams, splashes and reflections on the wavy, black surface of the water. The world of straits and fjords of the North, created on the stage of the National Opera, seems uncomfortable, cold and abstract, yet, these images have at the same time a fascinating, nostalgic beauty and something of the atmosphere of black-and-white expressionist films of the 1920s.

The very idea of introducing hectoliters of water to the stage in the case of this particular work did not raise any doubts. However, there were statements questioning not so much the legitimacy of the use of 'maritime' scenery, as its role in building the drama of the performance. Creators were accused of over-submission to 'water logistics' (Hawryluk 2012), which, as some wrote, 'stole the show' (Raś 2012). It dominated the staging, subordinated it to itself, but it did not bear all its meanings. Jacek Hawryluk (2012) even spoke about the 'drowning' of the concept, adding that 'none of the elements of the set design enter into a dialogue with the water, and even if it tries, it rather 'disturbs' it'. Other commentators (who, like Hawryluk, generally appreciated the aesthetic qualities of the performance) probably had similar impressions. Just titles of the reviews said plenty – *Wet Work* (*Mokra robota*), *Watery Thinking* (*Wodochciejstwo*) or *Aquapark on Stage* (*Aquapark na scenie*).

Treliński's staging showed that the element of water is an extremely attractive, but also extremely difficult material in theatre. Moreover, it is its attractiveness that determines its problematic nature. It carries the risk

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<sup>11</sup> Kudlička admitted: 'During the implementation of this idea, I was moving on the verge of technical possibilities' (quoted after: Dębowska 2012).

of making the motif autonomous, which, as Hawryluk rightly pointed out, must 'cooperate' with other elements of the stage universe. The 'spatial proximity' of these elements established in the spectacle – stresses Limon (2001: 154) – 'causes mutual permeation and change of value'. The process of semiotization – giving meaning to everything that will be on the set of the game – characteristic of a theatrical work makes it necessary to agree on many signs which are mobile by their scenic nature.

The conclusion seems obvious. Water in the theatre undoubtedly gives an opportunity to create extremely spectacular, almost glamorous images, but at the same time it forces scenographic asceticism. The immanent spectacularity, offering a whole set of almost 'ready' effects, requires enormous staging discipline and great dramatic precision in constructing the whole of the stage vision. After all, to put it metaphorically, in the theatre – just like in nature – the water element can easily slip out of control.

This principle applies not only to the aesthetic, but also to the semantic values of the initial material. The creators of productions using aquatic motifs – especially in the 'rich' versions – have to make a difficult choice every time, and then an equally difficult stage translation of the cultural connotations of water into signs and symbols of a specific performance. The repertoire of such connotations is – as the aforementioned performances prove – exceptionally large, but it is also marked by insurmountable ambivalence. The cultural tropes of water – stretched between the polar opposites of a life-giving, purifying, liberating force and a dangerous, difficult to control, deadly element, material finiteness and metaphysical, unguessed infinity – make it a truly 'high risk' stage material.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning one more reflection. Water in theatre, this time in contrast to water in nature, of which theatre creators are probably aware, in spite of everything it can simply fend for itself.

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### Summary

In view of theatrical performances, water is not only an important cultural trajectory, but also an attractive, though very particular, stage material. The author draws attention to the ambivalent character of water as an element of the spectacle. Water identifies the very essence of theatricality, which consists of the constant oscillation between illusion and reality. The effect of real water – limited by technical restrictions and in effect artificial to some extent – has an unquestionable value in the spectacle. The author recalls selected performances whose creators chose large-scale solutions and introduced a large amount of water to the stage. In this way, she shows how they create the symbolic value of aquatic motives, how they use their semantic and sensual potential in the process of translating the cultural connotations of water into signs and meanings of a particular show.

**Keywords:** water, theatre, spectacle, stage material



## THE STORY OF ONE THEME – ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JEWELLERY AND ARCHITECTURE

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When talking about architecture in goldsmithing, especially jewellery, first of all, the term ‘theme’ used in the title of this study must be clarified, and for the needs of the analyses below it should be understood as various architectural forms defined by the term ‘microarchitecture’. Therefore one speaks of treating the whole building as a goldsmith’s work, as in the case of medieval reliquaries, monstrances or thurbiles taking the form of the Heavenly Jerusalem imagined in the shape of a Christian temple<sup>1</sup>, as well as Jewish ritual rings depicting a house or temple in Jerusalem. We are not talking about microarchitecture as a representation of real architecture, as in the case of Pelplin feretory of St. Barbara described by Kinga Szczepkowska-Naliwajek (depicting the tower – the holy attribute), but the pattern understood as an artistic idea for the entire goldsmith object, in this case – jewellery, especially rings.

In addition, any architectural fragment should be considered an architectural form, including architectural detail, which forms the basis of the entire goldsmith’s work. The use of this element – detail or decoration appearing in the architecture of a given era – in jewellery or, more generally, in goldsmith, poses many problems to the researcher. The most difficult thing to resolve is whether the pattern for a goldsmith’s work is in this case

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<sup>1</sup> The microarchitecture in reliquaries is mentioned by Kinga Szczepkowska-Naliwajek several times in her publications on goldsmiths (1987, 1996a, 1996b, 2002). On the theme of Heavenly Jerusalem as a model for the goldsmith’s implementation of medieval thurbiles, see: Kobielius 1989.

architecture, or perhaps both of the arts – architecture and goldsmithing – have adopted some decorative themes typical of a given time. An example of this second situation can certainly be the tracery decorations of Gothic pastorals or Neo-gothic triangles found in cast-iron sentimental jewellery produced in Germany in the years 1800-1860<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, with the term from the title, you can relate various references to structures used in architecture. It seems that in the modern sense – as indicated by the descriptions of jewellery made in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century – the term ‘architectural’ means simply ‘built’ in jewellery. It refers not only to forms modelled on specific architecture, but also to the simple, clear and transparent structure of a given object. This applies especially to minimalist jewellery, devoid of a decorative detail, whose principle is a form constructed like in the case of architectural work. It is, of course, a contractual term, and perhaps even colloquial, which is therefore difficult to define, because it is based on the perception of the recipient rather than on the specific features of the subject. A great example of this way of using architectural forms in jewellery is the work of the marvellous and admired in Europe Japanese artist Mariko Sumioka, who is inspired by both the traditional architecture of her country and its transparent construction as well as the diversification of materials (fig. 1)<sup>3</sup>.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the image of real architecture (the entire work or its fragment) or imaginary one is used in jewellery products, which since the 1980s have gained huge popularity in Europe. One cannot, however, consider the subject of contemporary products without analysing, even briefly, the history of the discussed phenomenon, which is by no means a novelty created in the past century. Architectural forms have been

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<sup>2</sup> Cast-iron jewellery produced in Prussian manufactories during the Napoleonic wars gains the symbolic importance of resistance to the French invaders in the years 1815-1816. Its neoclassical forms, present in the first decade of the nineteenth century, after 1815 will replace the Neo-Gothic stylistics of tracery leaves, an example of which are, for example, cast-iron earrings from the Prussian manufactory, dated 1820-1830 and stored in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (inventory No.: 96C&D-1906). See: E. Dębowska 2001; 2011.

<sup>3</sup> [www.marikosumioka.com/#!about/aboutPage](http://www.marikosumioka.com/#!about/aboutPage) [accessed: 7.04.2019]. See: Ross 2012.

appearing in jewels since antiquity. Above all, it is worth mentioning the objects modelled on city fortifications: *corona muralis* and *corona vallaris*. Crowns with an element of city walls and defensive towers decorated the heads of the Greek deities Tyche and the Roman Cybele, which are, among other things, town patrons. That is probably why they appear at the temples of the personification of countries and cities in the *Iconography* of Cesare Ripa (let us mention for example the personification of Italy, which 'has a crown with the towers and walls' [Ripa 1998: 49], and this crown – as the author further says – is supposed to indicate the 'ornamentation and dignity of the Cities, Lands, Castles and Towns' [ibid.: 51]). *Corona muralis* is not only an attribute of goddesses or personification – in ancient Rome, alongside the crown of the *vallaris* or the crown of *castrensis*, it was the prize for the legion officer who first defeated the fortifications of the besieged city. The testimony of this tradition are the images of Roman emperors on coins minted on the occasion of won victories, on which coins there are crowns with towers and defensive walls (*muralis*) or palisade (*vallaris*).

Architectural forms in women's jewellery will appear for the first time during the Merovian dynasty (481-751). In many museums around the world are stored rings found in women's tombs, dated to the V-VII century, whose simple ring is decorated with an object resembling a building on the central plan. Three interesting objects with different complexity of decorations can be found in the private collection of Benjamin Zucker<sup>4</sup> presented in October and December 2014 in the Les Enluminures gallery in New York, Paris and Chicago at the exhibition entitled *Cycles of Life: Rings from the Benjamin Zucker Family Collection* (fig. 2-4).

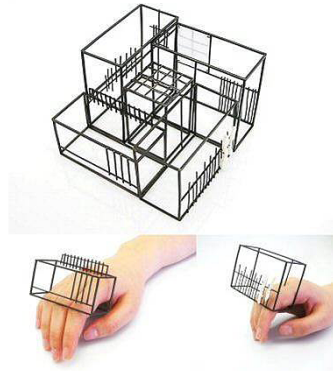


Fig. 1. Mariko Sumioka, Tea House

<sup>4</sup> [www.artstolife.com/arts-to-life/benjaminzucker.php](http://www.artstolife.com/arts-to-life/benjaminzucker.php) [accessed: 12.05.2019].



*Fig. 2. Merovingian ring from the collection of Benjamin Zucker, around 500 AD (origin: France), on the deposit of the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 1985-2013*

*Fig. 3. Merovingian ring from the collection of Benjamin Zucker, the end of 6<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (origin: France, Gaul), on the deposit of the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 1985-2013*

*Fig. 4. Merovingian ring from the collection of Benjamin Zucker, the end of 6<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (origin: France, Gaul), on the deposit of the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 1985-2013*

The authors of the catalogue of the exhibition derive an architectural form of decoration of the presented artefacts from the shape of a baptistery or reliquary, although none of the Merovingian rings has inscriptions that would confirm their connection with Christian symbolism. The cylindrical form decorating the wedding ring has not been identified unambiguously to this day. Nor was it convincing enough to justify its symbolic meaning, read in the context of marriage as an image of a house or the House of God, as in the case of Jewish wedding rings. Some researchers, such as Diana Scarisbrick (1993), believe that this is just a type of decoration without any symbolic function.

In British Museum there are also two, slightly older than the Merovingian, rings with the image of architecture (British Museum, inventory No. AF.482 and 1872.0604.245), found in Lombardy, dating from the 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century. Although the representation of the building on the ring of these – probably Ostrogothic or Early Byzantine – rings is clearly associated with the form of the temple, also in this case it has not been possible to unambiguously confirm its symbolic meaning (fig 5-6).



Fig. 5. Architectural Lombardish ring (?), Early Byzantine (?), British Museum, inventory No.: 1872,0604.245, 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century (place of finding: Lombardia)



Fig. 6. Architectural ring Ostrogocki (?), Early Byzantine (?), British Museum, inventory No.: AF.482, 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century (place of finding: Lombardy, Milan)



Fig. 7. The ritual ring from the treasury of Erfurt, from before the mid-fourteenth century

Rings with the image of the building, whose symbolic function is not in doubt, begin to appear only from the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Ward et al. 1981: 104). As ritual rings, they will serve the Jewish community. The most beautiful example of such a building is the Gothic ring found in 1998 during archaeological works in the centre of Erfurt among items belonging to the so-called Treasury of the Zadadis, buried in 1349 (fig. 7) (Cambpell 2009).

It is worth mentioning that the wedding ring of the Jews is an important symbolic element of the marriage ceremony in the Judaic tradition. The groom gives it to the bride, saying the words: ‘Here you are devoted to me with this ring’. The act of putting it on the pointing finger of the right hand of the bride begins the ceremony of marriage.

The shape of the ring, referring to a simple house or a richly decorated temple, has a twofold significance. First of all, it indicates the purpose of the marriage, which is to build a house, understood as a symbol of family ties (the ring is usually inscribed with the wish of happiness: ‘Mazel Tow!’). Secondly, the richly ornamented building decorating the ring is also

an image of the Jerusalem temple, which, according to Jewish tradition, should always be remembered.

The rings in question have been worn since the medieval times. They were usually made of precious materials, without stones. They had a more or less complex form, although some of the rabbis recommended simplicity to symbolize the equality of all before the law.

In the Victoria and Albert Museum in London there is a large collection of Jewish rings dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, coming from the rich sets acquired in 1871 from Edmund Waterton. The provenance of these artefacts is not certain, presumably – as the owner said – the place where they were made was Italy (fig. 8-9). Some researchers, analysing the features of their style (rich decoration with colourful enamel), point to the Venetian workshops (Ward et al. 1981: 104).



Fig. 8. Jewish wedding ring, V&A Museum, London, inventory No.: 863-1871

Fig. 9. Jewish wedding ring, V&A Museum, London, inventory No.: 866-1871

It should be noted that as early as in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish wedding rings with the house or temple of Solomon – like the Erfurt ring – have added motif of intertwined palms from the decoration of *fede* rings, present in Europe since ancient times<sup>5</sup>. It is also worth noting that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>5</sup> On the subject of *fede* rings, see: Wrześniak 2015.



their decoration reveals borrowings from European jewellery, especially sentimental – from engagement rings with the motif of turquoise forget-me-not, popular in Victorian England.

By signalling only a wide subject of fashion changes in Jewish rings, one cannot fail to mention one of the most interesting objects in the Victoria and Albert Museum (inventory No. M.35-1939). The ring in question was designed by Charles Ricketts (1866-1931) and made by the London jeweller Carlo Giuliano (1826-1895) in the years 1899-1903 for the artist May Morris, daughter of William Morris. This work combines the style of the Middle Ages in a very interesting way (filling a pomegranate cabochon) and the Jewish ritual ring (building) (fig. 10).

When talking about architecture and jewellery, one cannot ignore a significant group of objects made in *mosaico minuto romano* – Roman



Fig. 10. May Morris's ring, daughter of William Morris, 1899-1903, project: Charles Ricketts (1866-1931), goldsmith: Carlo Giuliano (1826-1895), inventory No.: M.35-1939

micro-mosaics, whose appearance in jewellery Maria Grazia Branchetti (1986: 21-25)<sup>6</sup>, the subject matter expert, dates back to 1775. It was then that for the first time Giacomo Raffelli<sup>7</sup> presented in his workshop in Rome ornaments decorated with *smalti filati* (see: *ibid.*: 21; Petochi, Alfieri, Branchetti 1981; Gabriel 2000). Mosaics from the microscopic tessera, whose large-scale production in Vatican workshops (operating from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century) began at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, served primarily to decorate small utility objects such as snuff boxes, cans and caskets, often the gifts of the Pope to distinguished guests of the Vatican (see: Branchetti 1986: 23; Gere, Rudoe 2010: 409-410). At the time, that is in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, gold, silver and even base

<sup>6</sup> The author refers to Giovanni Moroni's *Dizionario di Educazione Storico-Ecclesiastica*, published in 1840-1861, who gives the year 1775 as the date of displaying the first objects of the micro-mosaic jewellery by Giacom Raffelli. See: Moroni 1846: 78.

<sup>7</sup> More about Giacom Raffelli, see: Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska 2015: 249-256.

metal jewellery, decorated with micro-mosaics, was made on an almost massive scale. According to Branchetti, the iconography of these ornaments had its source in recently discovered Pompeian frescoes, and perfectly fit into the love of antiquity that characterized the neoclassical period. Apart from mythological themes, animal and plant representations, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the most popular were ornaments decorated with views of the ancient Roman ruins. These facilities were particularly sought after by travellers visiting the Eternal City (Letkiewicz 2015: 309), who were supplying souvenirs at the workshops at Piazza di Spagna (Branchetti 1986: 25). Jewellery from *mosaico minuto romano* became – due to its low cost of production – a popular Roman speciality, which in 1810 was presented at the exhibition of Roman crafts on Capitol Hill (see: *Monstra capitolina...* 1910: 407; Branchetti 1986: 25). It is this popularity among travellers that will become, over time, as Massimo Alfieri (1986: 38) claims, the cause of the degradation of this labour-intensive technique and the final collapse of it with the beginning of the last century. According to the author, jewellery and small objects decorated with micro-mosaics, often with the image of the ancient (ruins of the Roman Forum, the Pyramid of Cestius, the Pantheon, the Coliseum) or the modern architecture of the Eternal City (St. Peter) embodying the Pagan Roma or the Christian Roma, in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century become objects of a very low artistic class. Brooches, bracelets, necklaces or earrings, decorated with massive micro-mosaics plaques from ever larger longitudinal tessers, with time will lose their wide (still in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) repertoire of topics (fig. 11). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it will be limited only to a few popular motifs used today, mostly images of a young girl. Laborious depictions of Roman architecture, which were interpreted as a symbol of the city visited, will go almost into oblivion. It is worth paying attention to the fact that it is these popular objects that owe the beginning of the perception of jewellery with the image of architecture as a symbol of the city. This perception is also today widely present (as will be discussed later in this study), however, in most cases the connections between architecture and jewellery are limited only to recreate an architectural object in a goldsmith's work, without its artistic, creative processing.

In the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture appears in jewellery in a completely new version. The first creator using this kind of motifs in

jewellery – especially in rings – was a Florentine goldsmith Alessandro Dari (see: Wrześniak 2016), who has created more than nine hundred works inspired by architecture, especially originating from Italy.

In the initial phase of his creative work, in the collections of the *Crown*<sup>8</sup> and the *Churches*, artist used a geometrized and strongly simplified form which was a synthesis of the architecture of the Gothic churches of Tuscany. He tried to reflect the essence of a given building, using only one of its elements. There were domes, windows and other details that Dari discovered in the Veneto architecture (*Venice* collection). In the *Churches*, a sacral building becomes a synthesis of elegance, faith and harmony. Jewellery is a symbol of spirit and moral integrity for Dari, which is why, for example, the *Santa Maria del Fiore* ring, inspired by the Florence Duomo, does not represent the real building, but its essence – the most important symbolic meaning of faith, symbolized here by a camera-coated diamond ball. Brunelleschi's dome is therefore a visualization of the church, whose treasure is the light of faith, expressed by shimmering stones (fig. 12).



Fig. 11. Roman micromosaic (private collection, Rome)



Fig. 12. The *Santa Maria del Fiore* ring from the collection of *Churches*

<sup>8</sup> Since 1991, the already mentioned *Crown* collection is being created. It is worth mentioning that most of the rings from this collection are miniature crowns referring to the form of ancient crowns *muralis* and *vallaris, castensis*.

Architecture, especially sharp verticalism, means for Alessandro Dari a spiritual element, an element of sanctity. In turn, in the *Love* collection, the tower symbolically refers to a man, signifying his stability, strength and protection that he provides to a woman (fig. 13-14).



Fig. 13-14. Alessandro Dari, rings from the *Love* collection (Crown, symbolizing the spiritual element, refers to a woman, Tower – symbolizes the stability of a man)

It is also worth mentioning the ring dedicated to Pia de' Tolomei – mentioned in the fifth song of *Purgatory* from the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, wife of Baldo d'Aldobrandino de'Tolomei, the owner of Castel di Pietra in Maremma (fig. 15). The legendary story of Pia refers to the event from the end of the XIII century, whose essence is a combination of love, betrayal and death. The woman was to fall in love with a man passing by near her home, which caused her to be pushed out of the window by her newly married spouse. In rings dedicated to Pia Alessandro Dari under a stone or a pearl – referring to the name of the Baldo castle (It. *pietra* – 'stone') – places a row of Gothic windows that symbolize love and death at the same time.

Jewellery with architectural forms, which comes out of the hand of Alessandro Dari, refers to the building in three ways. The first of them is a distant inspiration that results in a synthetic vision of architecture, as in the first collection of *Churches*. The second is an inspiration of architectural elements, for example a Gothic sharp arch, especially in the *Venice* collection. The third is the symbolic meaning of the tower, castle, fortress



Fig. 15. Alessandro Dari, Pia de' Tolomei's ring from collection Giardino dell'anima

as a reflection of femininity or masculinity. Finally, Dari uses the masterpieces of world architecture as a decorative element, but above all as a symbol of the cities in which they are located (to mention only two examples: the dome of St. Peter in the Vatican and the Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul [fig. 16-17]). However, this is not just an imitation of the architectural form of the object, because the combination of real architecture, included in the micro-scale, with the coral often used by the artist, which symbolizes fertility, should be understood as a representation of the idea of a city – a centre with creative abilities, especially in the sphere of culture.

In the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the workshop of the second outstanding Florentine goldsmith master – Paolo Penko, was created. He was the one who created a very interesting collection of jewellery referring to works of art (including architecture) (Valentini 2010). Particularly interesting from the perspective of this study projects, are objects from the collection *Gioielli nell'Arte (dall'Architettura)*. Goldsmith is inspired by the mosaic ornaments of the façade of the church of Santa Maria Novella and Tempietto San Sepolcro, which carries on the openwork forms of hangers, and the rusticated texture of the Florentine palaces: Palazzo Rucellai, Palazzo Medici-Ricardi



Fig. 16-17. Alessandro Dari, rings from the collection of Churches

and Palazzo Pitti (fig. 18-19). Paolo Penko plaques, using only one element of architecture, become almost abstract objects, whose beauty is determined by the diversity of texture, while their architectural design is treated as a pretext to create interesting realizations, which in no case are copies of existing buildings but the source of a completely new quality<sup>9</sup>. This is especially evident in the case of the stones from the Palazzo Pitti façade, which have been copied as a simple, economical in the form of a pendant. This minimalism conceals the romantic legend of a Florentine curiosity: in the façade of the palace, there is the longest and shortest stone next to each other. The first, whose length is almost 11 meters, and the second of 33 centimetres. It is assumed that the first owner of Palazzo Pitti, Luca Pitti, was to order the laying of stones, whose symbolic significance referred to him as the greatest among the Florentine nobles, and his enemies who were marginalized (Macchiabelli 2014).



*Fig. 18-19. Paolo Penko, stones from the façade of Palazzo Pitti*

Among artists operating outside of Florence, who use architectural forms in contemporary luxury jewellery, the leaders are: operating in France Jean Boggio, Briton Theo Fennel and Sevan Bıçakçı working in Istanbul, whose projects can be included in a common collection of very rich forms referring to specific architecture, varied by additional elements creating

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<sup>9</sup> To the character of Paolo Penko's creation, combining old techniques and patterns with contemporary sensitivity and modern, minimalistic taste, draws attention the author of the catalogue of contemporary jewellery exhibition, Ornella Casazza (2007: 80).

the atmosphere of fairy-tale splendour. The works of the first of them are a distinct borrowing from the works of Alessandro Dari. Some objects could even be considered as copies of Dari's works, as for example the *Ravenna* ring, which is a clear reference to the rings dedicated to Pia de' Tolomei. However, Boggio<sup>10</sup>, who works in Lyon, creates a magical, colourful world of decorations without symbolic subtext (in contrast to the Florentine master). A fun, joyful world filled with dancing figures, spinning merry-go-rounds, trinkets and architectural objects that represent the image of a fairy tale castle in a wonderful garden (rings from the *Garden of Delights* series) (de La Rochefoucauld 2014). French designer often gets inspired by specific architectural objects, however, he does not directly copy their forms, giving only a general impression of the architectural form of the building (*Ca' d'Oro* rings or *Palladian Villa*) (fig. 20).



Fig. 20. Jean Boggio, *Ravenna*

Creations of Theo Fennell<sup>11</sup> are similar in expression. His workshop began in London in 1982, to soon open branches in the largest department stores in England, including the most exclusive – Harrods. Among the artistic inspirations of the English artist, architecture appears as – it can be said – a project base that has several views or layers of meaning. Apart from the direct references to such architectural masterpieces as the Coliseum or the Egyptian pyramids<sup>12</sup>, an architectural object, especially a defensive wall or stronghold, serves

the artist to organize a small, valuable object that is a synthesis of the world around us or an imaginary world of a fairy-tale origin. In his projects, the artist most often uses the metaphor of a wall hiding a wonderful garden behind the gate. A permanent element of the rings are gates,

<sup>10</sup> <https://jeanboggiofrance.com/> [accessed: 27.05.2019].

<sup>11</sup> Theo Fennell – British artist born in Egypt, studied at The Byam Shaw (now Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design); [www.theofennell.com/about-tf](http://www.theofennell.com/about-tf) [accessed: 28.04.2019].

<sup>12</sup> See opened ring-pyramid with sarcophagus and mummy inside and ring-coliseum with killed gladiator in the arena on the artist's website: [www.theofennell.com](http://www.theofennell.com) [accessed: 28.04.2019].

doors, drawbridges that open to reveal the secret – garden, road or some wonderful place. Under an expensive stone, often decorating the cover of a can decorating a ring, there are miniature objects referring to history, which the ring illustrates – like a pot with gold in a ring with a graceful name *At the End of a Rainbow* or an emerald castle in a ring inspired by the story of the Wizard of Oz (fig. 21-22). One could say that Theo Fennell's rings are a microcosm enclosed in a miniature stronghold or hidden under a bowl of a glass sphere, while the use of architectural motifs is not only a formal operation organizing the space of the work, but above all a symbolic image of a wonderful world where miniature doors lead – like those which led to the mysterious garden from the novel of Frances Hodgson Burnett (*Secret Garden*, released for the first time in 1911 in London). All you have to do is open them to move to a dreamland straight from childhood dreams. The inspiration for a British artist is not a specific work, but a synthetic idea of a mysterious castle, whose sources should be sought not only in children's literature, but also in memories of childhood spent by an artist in Egypt, Pakistan and Singapore.



Fig. 21-22. Theo Fennell, *At the End of the Rainbow* and *The Wizard of Oz*

The creations of Sevan Biçakçı, a Turkish artist (of Armenian descent) called the 'Jeweller of stars'<sup>13</sup>, relate to the aesthetics of the miraculous garden from the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Using various goldsmithing techniques, as well as micro-mosaics, ceramic polychrome tessers and

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.sevanbicakci.com/collection> [accessed: 28.04.2019].



*intaglio* in semi-precious stones<sup>14</sup>, Biçakçı creates rings with cabochon images of sacred objects (especially Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque) and secular objects (Topkapi Sarai) of Istanbul (fig. 23). Architecture is here only one of the decorative elements referring to the present in the city of the Byzantine or Ottoman heritage, which is a constant source of inspiration for a Turkish jeweller (Fowler 2014).

Next to the Turkish master, the most popular artist jeweller designing decorative micro-architecture is Philippe Tournaire<sup>15</sup>, working in Paris, the author of city rings (fig. 24). The most creative realizations of the Parisian artist are the collections of *Archipolis* and *Metropolis*, in which the city has been included in a synthetic image of various buildings made of gold and expensive stones (these are not copies of specific cities, but rather a synthesis of the city, giving the general impression of the urban agglomeration in the micro version). *The Love Temple* collection is equally interesting and creative, in which the artist refers to the forms of the Merovingian architectural rings.



Fig. 23. Sevan Biçakçı, Laleli Ring

Fig. 24. Rings by Philippe Tournaire

<sup>14</sup> Sevan Biçakçı drills semi-precious cabochons in a deep *intaglio* technique using dental drills. See: Fowler 2014.

<sup>15</sup> [www.philippetournaire.com/fr/](http://www.philippetournaire.com/fr/) [accessed: 12.05.2019].

It is also worth paying attention to the ring with the charming name of the *French Kiss*, in the form referring to the inverted Eiffel Tower (fig. 25). The aesthetics of Philippe Tournaire's creation is economical and simple compared to the works of the artists mentioned above, while the architectural forms are reduced to the minimum needed to recognize the object. This is a modern approach, based only on the association with the work of architecture, and omitting small details. The artist uses architecture in two ways: as a decorative element of the ring symbolizing the city in which it is located, and as a construction element – as in the mentioned engagement ring, which is based on the inverted Eiffel Tower.

We find a similar use of microarchitecture in jewellery designed by British artist Vicky Ambery Smith, whose realizations are primarily micro-copies of famous objects (fig. 26). Rings and brooches created in her goldsmith's workshop are even more economical in form, more synthetic, almost minimalistic. This is facilitated by the fact that Smith is keenly inspired by modern architecture.



Fig. 25. Philippe Tournaire, French Kiss



Fig. 26. Vicky Ambery Smith, Opera

Microarchitecture is currently appearing in large-scale jewellery, and in addition to specific buildings, artists are keenly inspired by their entire teams. Over the ocean, the most-used motif is the urban landscape, or actually the objects accumulated in it. We should mention two American artists: Christina Elleni, who creates flat silver and plexiglass jewellery in San Francisco, using the contours of the characteristic urban buildings

(fig. 27), and Sharon Massey – an American art doctor at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, whose *Streetview* collection is a visualization of urban tenement houses (fig. 28). Both artists are interested in the urban tissue, the contour of which is determined by buildings of different heights, illuminated or remaining in the shade.

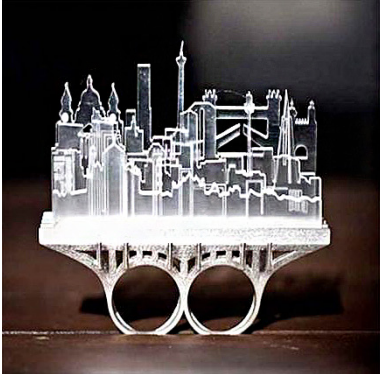


Fig. 27. Jewellery by Cristina Elleni



Fig. 28. Jewellery by Sharon Massey

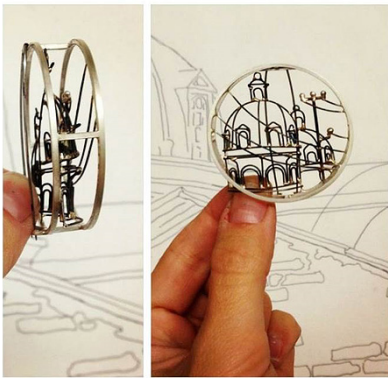


Fig. 29. Jewellery by Caitie Sellers

The city is also an inspiration for the works of the American artist Caitie Sellers (fig. 29), who creates jewellery collections from soldered metal wires reminiscent of sketches of city views.

It is worth mentioning one more way of mapping architectural forms in jewellery – this is the use of architectural detail in the micro scale, known for example from 19<sup>th</sup>-century iron jewellery, also used by the aforementioned Caitie Sellers in bracelets resembling balustrades

or fences. Donna Veverka from Boston performs massive silver jewellery inspired by ancient architecture (theatres and amphitheatres) and modern detaFig. The artist has made a collection of jewellery decorated with

miniature copies of fragments of grooved column shafts, which refers to the phenomenon of secondary use commonly found in art, so-called spolises (fig. 30-32).



Fig. 30-32. Jewellery by Donna Veverka

Architectural detail is also the subject of interest in the creation of Joshua Ryan de Monte in Baltimore, who uses the latest technology to make jewellery printed on 3D printers in macro size. This jewellery is actually a reference to the seventeenth-century orifice, which in the artist's realizations takes an architectural form patterned mainly on the Italian Gothic and Renaissance buildings (fig. 33).

\* \* \*

The brief overview of jewellery workshops presented above shows that at present, goldsmith artists eagerly reach for the commonly known pattern, which is architectural work. They copy its appearance or creatively process it. In this way, micro-copies of masterpieces of architecture, recognizable objects, associated almost instantaneously with a specific city, have become in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and remain to this day an excellent souvenir from travels. It seems that the last, the simplest view of architecture, based only on the emotional perception of an object considered perfect, is common to many contemporary artists, such as Giampiero Alcozer<sup>16</sup> or Giulia Nardi<sup>17</sup>. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, souvenir jewellery with the image of architecture is

<sup>16</sup> <https://it.alcozershop.com/> [accessed: 23.05.2019].

<sup>17</sup> [www.nardi-venezia.com/gioielleria.php](http://www.nardi-venezia.com/gioielleria.php) [accessed: 24.05.2019].



Fig. 33. Jewellery by Joshua R. de Monte

common in Europe, especially bracelets with Rome architecture made of interconnected cameos or metal plaques, or perhaps chains with tags – mini-replicas of buildings or sculptures. Objects of this type appear relatively frequently on online auctions on Etsy and eBay portals, where they are referred to as ‘vintage jewellery from Rome’ and dated mostly in the middle of the last century. In addition to high-class artistic works, a huge number of items are produced by small goldsmiths, design companies, and even mass produced by so-called chainstores, among which the Pandora

brand – leading on the European market – producing beads or tags of alleged collector value.

Among the architectural objects undoubtedly the most often reproduced in Europe are goldsmiths copies of the Roman Coliseum and the Paris Eiffel Tower. The image of the amphitheatre fascinates many jewellers who – like already mentioned Giampiero Alcozer or Theo Fennell – make rings with this most recognizable European building. It is incorporated in the collections of not only Italian jewellers (e.g. Damiano Tacchi<sup>18</sup>), but also Donna Veverka from Great Britain, Vicki Ambery Smith and Zara Simon (collection *Metropolis*<sup>19</sup>). The Coliseum, regarded as an emblem of a gladiator, was also used by the Australian jeweller Stewart Hornibrook<sup>20</sup>, who makes rings with copies of ancient gems, often of his own invention. Contemporary jewellers are especially fond of Gothic and Renaissance objects, especially Italian ones – for example, a Venetian *palazzo* with a decorative Gothic window is repeated in many projects in various ways.

Jewellers and jewellery designers in the United States and the British Isles eagerly reach for the image of skyscrapers from Manhattan (also in individual realizations referring to the Chrysler Building or Brooklyn

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gigarte.com/damianotacchi/home> [accessed: 24.05.2019].

<sup>19</sup> <http://zarasimon.com/shop/precious-collection-metropolis.html> [accessed: 24.05.2019].

<sup>20</sup> [www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000470301728&fref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000470301728&fref=ts) [accessed: 24.05.2019].

Bridge), which in a strongly simplified, geometrized version is promoted as an ideal jewellery for modern residents of large agglomerations urban areas. It is worth mentioning the *Urban Dimension* collection created in 2015 by Shlomit Ofir, a designer working in Tel Aviv, who used geometrical forms of skyscrapers in a set of minimalist jewellery called *Manhattan*<sup>21</sup>, and simple rings of the Charlotte Reid<sup>22</sup> project.

All these projects, whether in an exclusive or popular, cheaper version, if they do not carry a deeper symbolic charge, have a sentimental aspect referring to a journey – held or desired, sometimes travelling to an imaginary world of fairy tales, like Theo Fennell’s rings. This travelling aspect of architectural jewellery is very often used by designers as a marketing gimmick based on the fame of masterpieces and the desire to have even their replicas. The artists reach for the fixed design, corresponding to the general tastes, generally recognized as good. References to the glorified past, the remains of which are Roman ruins, innovative at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century construction of the Eiffel Tower, arousing curiosity and admiration achievements of the human mind, such as the Venice built on the water with a lace braided Gothic arches or modern buildings that are tangible proof of architectural genius – all this for about two hundred years is a guarantee of commercial success of great artists and small craftsmen. The number of artists who create jewellery on the forms referring to the appearance of the architecture or the entire urban plan as well as the constantly emerging craft workshops boasting of old goldsmith techniques or the production of jewellery, which can be described after its first creators (Roman goldsmiths from the Castellani family [see: Munn 1984; Weber Soros, Walker 2004; Gere, Rudoe 2010: 398-411; Lipczik 2015]) as archaeological, show how effective this technique is.

The analysis presented in this study – however preliminary it is – would be incomplete if it did not touch another aspect of jewellery creativity using architectural motifs: a technical aspect that is undoubtedly a limitation of the creators of this interesting jewellery. It is worth noting that artists are constantly moving around the same fixed repertoire of forms suited

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.shlomitofir.com/product/long-manhattan-necklace-2/> [accessed: 24.05.2019].

<sup>22</sup> [www.charlottereid.com](http://www.charlottereid.com) [accessed: 24.05.2019].

not only to technical requirements, but also utility objects. In rings as a decorative element, the architectural object with the central plan is most often used; it is often a dome (frequently movable) decorated with a micro-mosaic or semiprecious stone. Many artists create rings with opened cans (in the shape of an architectural object) containing additional symbolic elements, for example Alessandro Dari, Theo Fennell or Barbara Walters. In bracelet designs most often, there is an architectural detail, flat plaques with the image of architecture or hangovers with buildings in the micro scale. Many artists, while creating bracelets, necklaces or brooches, use a series of tenement houses representing the buildings erected along the street. In earrings – which cannot be too heavy – most often an openwork Gothic window appears, rarely encrusted.

Everything starts with observing the city, from fascination with urban planning, view, architecture... and everything leads to the city. Concluding the reflections on the relationships of architecture and jewellery, one must mention – referring to this fascination – the artistic activities of Liesbeth Bussche, acting, as it would seem, in opposition to all the creators discussed above. Anonymous artists creating jewellery in Merovingian times, craftsmen performing Jewish wedding rings or contemporary goldsmiths borrowed architectural works or urban landscape and created their miniature models to wear. Liesbeth Bussche, on the other hand, a street artist, ‘clothes’ Amsterdam in macro size jewellery (fig. 34). Analysing her artistic activities, one can refer to the theory of everyday aesthetics: the artist treats jewellery



Fig. 34. *Urban jewellery by Liesbeth Bussche*

as a decoration that beautifies the city – a living organism. Decorates it with large earrings, necklaces, chains. Strange, new, surprising action? However, justified by the centuries-long tradition. The city is, in the end, a woman from ancient times, and among the personifications in Cesare Ripa's *Iconology* (1998) – richly clad, with a *muralis* crown on her head.

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- Fig. 33. [www.joshuademonte.com/#!emotional/clt44](http://www.joshuademonte.com/#!emotional/clt44).
- Fig. 34. <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/97/25/81/972581efd98b8950d6d9fa3c6d84a901.jpg>.

## Summary

The hereby text is a short study on the relationship between architecture and jewellery. In the first part, it presents the history of occurrence of architectural forms in jewellery from antiquity to present day in the European culture. The second part delivers the examples of contemporary artefacts, particularly rings with microarchitecture. The analysis of the collected examples proves that architecture – its form, construction and detail – is a motive of decoration willingly used in jewellery design, often of a symbolic meaning related to the household or the temple (wedding rings, ritual rings). Nowadays, especially in the 21st century, microarchitecture in jewellery often emerges with reference to the place of origin, i.e. the famous building being, most frequently, the commemoration of a journey, able to bring back the memory of a visited city.

The architectural jewellery, whose meanings and functions are the subject of the hereby study, has undergone many transformations throughout history. Even though it has transitioned from simple to complicated and decorative forms, from precious and rare to cheap and popular objects of mass production presenting the miniature replicas of buildings, the jewellery nearly always symbolises the city. Much less often the jewellery

design occurs with reference to the metaphorical meanings of buildings as a representation of permanency (the tower in Alessandro Dari's jewellery) or marital union (the house and the temple in Jewish rings).

**Keywords:** microarchitecture, architectural jewellery, history of jewellery, ritual ring, symbolic meaning of jewellery, jewellery in culture