

Poor but Sexy

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## O Mystical East

### East European Orientalism

*Oh mystical East,  
You've lost your way  
Your rising sun shall rise again  
My Western world gives out her hand  
A victor's help to your fallen land*

*This is my Western promise!  
Ultravox, Western Promise*

### To despair is to be Romanian

"It's awful to be Romanian; serious people smile at you dismissively. When they see you're smart, they think you're a cheat." – so wrote the philosopher and essayist Emile Cioran in his diary in 1933. While Cioran may not be the best name to be associated with, because of his various involvements with Romanian fascism, his position faithfully and possibly most fully shows the place of an intellectual or an artist from the periphery, when he comes to the West. As a result of his feeling of insignificance, he decides to shake off all the signifiers of his previous existence: his language (he writes entirely in French, an act, some say, of "unwriting" his previous Romanian books) and dreams "to become a stranger", resisting the "temptation to exist". "All my life I wanted to be something else, anything but that I already were". Being and exile is now a vocation, and he starts specializing in theorizing this position. Was part of that a shame because of the specifically brutal forms that anti-Semitism and the Holocaust took in Romania, or really, something so petty as a self indulgent, self-regarding,

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3.1 FEMEN, on their annual protest against the regular summer hot water switch off in Kiev.

solitary cry of “me me me” sounding there, in the dark? Definitely a sense of shame at one’s crimes can be transformed into less officially disturbing senses of shame. One may think there’s something wrong with their looks, with some small elements of their appearance. With their brains, talent, skills. Provinciality is part of them.

“To despair is to be Romanian”, “I’m ashamed to be a Romanian.” “Romania will never become a culture (nation).” “They can’t blame anyone but themselves for being a total historic failure.” It recalls the complaints of many bourgeois intellectuals, incapable of contributing to their own culture. But also it’s said with the exasperation of someone whose ego doesn’t allow him to withdraw for a bit and think that he and his experience may not be representative.

At the same time, this man, whose aphoristic writing never achieved nor strove to find a traditional coherence of prose, is perfectly attuned to the smallest shivers of his soul that provoke his weird logorrhoea. But it was precisely Cioran’s capability to endlessly dwell on the catastrophe that made him, despite or maybe because of his uprootedness, good material for a post-war thinker “of ruins”, of a fallen civilization, and of the margins – his

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own marginality helped his writing talent to flourish. If you construct your whole life as an exile in the world, then you model it as sick, and then you parasitically live off the sickness. A weird hubris is feeding this as well: everything, starvation, blasphemy, only not to become a “poor, unknown stranger”. This was a fear of another exile, a poet, who we couldn’t polarize enough against Cioran, the Shoah survivor and a fellow Romanian (although not of choice) and Jew, Paul Celan. Living at the very same time in Paris, Celan had similar thoughts and anxieties, feeling trapped within a world that was meaningless to him, with his language for his only homeland – and that was German, which precisely was the most sublime tool of his torture. He never could write in any other language, but thanks to this he is now a poet of the canon – would that be the case, if he had chosen to write in Romanian or in Yiddish?

Cioran enjoys today an ambivalent fame, to a degree like Louis Ferdinand Celine, as a thinker with whom the difficulty is that his brilliance cannot be distinguished from his despicable racist views. He died in 1995, never wanted to go back to Romania, for a few years before his death already “freed” from the Ceaușescu regime. What would he see, a character in every possible way from a different era, looking at the country he abandoned in shame, after years of its destruction and marginalization? Cioran, no doubt the least likely hero for any positive political post-socialist movement, someone who was banned under Ceaușescu, is interesting, as looking through him we discover suppressed truths.

Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, the author of his only English biography, herself a political, though self-imposed exile, left Romania in the 70s with an attempt to break completely with the past. In the 1990s, wanting to write on her hero, she had to come back and she’s obsessed with finding the downfall in anything: the plane is full of smelly, Securitate-like unpleasant men, making rude jokes. Everything is dilapidated, as if two, not one natural disasters came upon the country. Cities are dirty, she chokes with fumes,

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drivers are irresponsible. Streets are Dickensian. "I live in a slum. The whole country looks like an extended slum." She can only compare herself to a Proust, when stumbling upon a pothole. The country "looks like a vast apartment that has just been ransacked by the Securitate and left in shambles. Heaps of junk, piles of garbage, stones, earth broken pipes, and other machinery. Broken down cars everywhere." Everything is "chaos", wheeling and dealing. The mafia do their trafficking, "gypsies" beg and peasant babushkas do their business in the market. She goes to see their old flat, but can't photograph it, as it would break her mother's heart. The mafia is mushrooming, red Ferraris stand next to beggars and thieves. Bucharest, with its concrete towers, clearly disappoints her, she feels shame for being there, because she IS from there. Their shame is her shame. Sometimes she can see a glimpse of the old, less grim Bucharest, but then returns to her alienation.

It is an image of a country in ruins, no doubt, but ruined not only by its mad ex-dictator but also by the later neglect. As we've seen, post-communist economies almost entirely experienced a massive collapse in the early nineties, as they were seen only as a land ready for exploitation by foreign investors that didn't always come. Truly no-man's lands, looking towards the West, they gained only in as much that they were now exploited in the Western way.

Zarifopol sees everywhere sad, disillusioned, dejected, aggressive and despairing people – they were supposed to be like that before, not after the magical '89. In the face of all this she can only repeat her master's voice: how can one be Romanian? But is really an uprooted ex-fascist émigré the best guide to what Romania should be? The typical reaction of migrants who came back overlapped with the countries' own view of themselves: dismissal. We suck. We are poor. We failed. It is the West that is beautiful. Where the invisible hand cleans everything, without the help of human sweat. Zarifopol managed to interiorize the Western attitude and perceptions, but not completely, as the part of that is ashamed reveals a post-colonial subject. Also, the recent interest in



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Eastern European art could be easily qualified as orientalism, in the way the recent Western publications on Eastern European art define us and 'discover', as if we weren't just a few hundred kilometres from them. Interestingly enough, out of this feeling of dissolution, it was Romanians who created the most acute, accurate films about the transition, especially after the EU accession, presenting a country in flux, full of social tensions, new problems, for which there are not names yet.

Cioran creates a tension between the center, that is the West, Western thought, the Enlightenment, the dictatorship of the one and only Reason and the periphery. Modernism challenged that, but still, until quite recently, scholars had problems with placing "The East", which becomes a mythical and phantasmal, rather than geographically accurate place. This aura of the mystical, irrational east is still going on, despite the communist years, which from the perspective of the West were years of "disobedience". The province versus the center is also something that was and still is persecuting me. One of the most prevailing elements of that inferiority thinking would be: "there wouldn't be a center without the province" or "the province had to have it shitty, with all the perils of totalitarianism, communism, lack of democracy, so that the rich west could boast with their social democracy and regard for human life". This would be attractive, if it wasn't challenged by the existence of countries like Spain, Sweden or Norway, who despite being geographically and historically peripheral, managed to become affluent like the West and to remain culturally in the mainstream circuit.

Popular culture in the Western sense didn't make its way to us until the late 80s. If you ask me what was the major cultural feature of the socialist Poland, I'll tell you: high-mindedness. We also had our mass culture, but we didn't have permissiveness for schlock. Lacking that, we also, until the 1990s at least, didn't develop any postmodern easiness or ironic distance towards this schlock. The first thing that I observed, when I started being a regular user of the internet, was its capability to write on everything as if ideas were

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3.2 Malczewski's Polish Hamlet torn between two Polonias. the youthful and the old one, in chains.

lying in a supermarket. When I go to the former republics, I take the dilapidation for what it is: a sign of impoverishment, and that's it. There's too many people to blame. It wasn't always like that, though. Contact with 'the West' may still cause a shock by the level of consumption. My first trips abroad on my own, since I was 15, that is in 1998, were all to the West. London shocked me, then Italy – grand tour, France, mostly Paris. Blind towards my privilege, I saw myself there rather than in the streets of Moscow, which I must've imagined exactly as Zarifopol describes Bucharest. Then when I moved to England in the middle of the post-2008 crisis, nothing was more sobering. It was living in the overpriced, shabby and ratty flats of London, which more than anything resembled the inflation-mad, drowning, death-driven Weimar Berlin, dancing over a volcano which killed the idea of "the West" for me, as preserved by the Eastern European intelligentsia. And as if from the disgust of that image, I started travelling East. The East, that besides short school trips, I deliberately stayed away from. Yet the perhaps most important experience I took from these trips is that, of course, the Eastern and Western Europe still constitute an entity of the West in any comparison with the real east, like China. In

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every respect, Europe, this pitiful, self important tiny strip of land, culturally is connected in ways more intricate than we can imagine, and this we owe perhaps also to the Cold War. In this sense, even if throughout this book I use the expression 'former East', I can use it only parodically, ironically. I can use it to indicate financial and emigrational differences between them, yet still bearing in mind how restricted this view is. This book perhaps should be even ashamed of how little of our problems it manages to cover.

Can we turn the communist experience into an advantage? The popular response from historians and theorists is usually: no. For instance, Marci Shore's recent book *The Taste of Ashes* on the aftermath of communism in Europe, hesitates between the appreciation of basic facts (communism meant a lot of evil to a lot of people. Many suffered censorship and torture in it), and coming to terms with the stereotypes that are produced about it, finding herself unable to reject all of them. Current migration doesn't have the luxury of self-recognition, not being based on the previous class and cultural signifiers. Unlike the Polish or Russian emigration to the US or UK before, this emigration is equipped with less cultural capital, yet that doesn't limit its capacity of creating a meaningful relationship and domesticating their new home – perhaps to the contrary even. It is the end of migration as a privilege of the rich, intelligentsia or middle class.

### Not Really White

It is commonly believed among Westernized liberals, that "Russia is not Europe". Especially today, even speaking from diametrically different political stands, it's impossible not to criticize Russia, which embraced a criminal economy and heads towards nationalist theocracy. Yet this polarization of the East and West seems growingly a fantasy of the two sides previously involved in the Cold War conflict. On one hand, liberal pundits like Anne Applebaum still embrace an idea of the "West" which is strictly Cold War-like. Upon Margaret Thatcher's death, the late British PM

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got praise from Applebaum as someone who “understood the power of the West”; on the other hand, we have recurring projects of building the alternative, an Eastern European Union, a project vivid especially in right-wing circles. This inscribes into the thousands of years long rivalry between the East and the West, when any balanced values of one and another were crushed with the brutal Christianization, even upon peaceful Eastern civilizations. Since then, an image of the East persists, as in love with feudalism and despotism, subjugational, undemocratic “by nature”. Why not rather: permanently colonized by the West in a persisting Drang nach Osten?

Yet, despite both the influence of the west over the impoverished Bloc, and the subsequent westernization after 1989, for obvious economic and cultural reasons we often seem worlds apart. Recently the feminist Ukrainian collective Femen came to prominence, famously demonstrating half-naked in cases of women’s rights abuse, coming from a country with an extreme and enormous sex industry, abuse of women and patriarchy, and also third world levels of poverty. They’re known for their performances, often in Eastern European countries known for their lack of respect for human rights, like Belarus, where they were beaten and abducted, but also increasingly in the West, stopping various international summits and ceremonies. But then they started to ‘recruit’ young Muslim women in France, criticizing them for wearing headscarves as limiting their freedom as women, conflating, stereotypically, Islam and patriarchy/misogyny. But in doing so, they were not only racist, they neglected the meaning of years of struggle that are behind defending the rights of women from different than European/white background.

Expectedly, they were dismissed by Western feminists for crypto or even open racism and nudity-obsession, regardless of the context. In this case, both sides misunderstood the delicate circumstances. Intersectional, progressive Western feminists, concerned with the risks of racism and (post) colonialism, speak of Femen’s

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unhealthy obsession with nudity with suspicious disdain, not seeing that behind the admittedly “primitive” methods and controversial approach there’s a very specific reality that Femen are fighting.

Femen’s message and actions are not universal, and it would be good if the activists were aware of that. In a Guardian piece responding to critics, Inna Shevchenko gives a clear message of her obsession with Putin, his regime and Ukrainian situation. This is Femen’s context: the post-communist desert of sex industry, sex clubs, girls at your wish every minute of the night and day. When you check in a hotel, you’re totally expected to be interested in the wide offer of sex infrastructure, with “Gentlemen’s Clubs” at every step of the city centers. Their protests before and during the Euro 2012 football tournament alerted many to the degree that the event would increase the exploitation of Ukrainian women, whose bodies would be in high demand. It is common to present Eastern European women as a commodity: in the popular series *The Wire* we encounter a container stuffed full of Ukrainian women, who were sold and smuggled in those inhuman conditions for prostitution.

To this there’s the post-communist neglect or permissiveness to the worst kinds of women abuse. There were recently several cases that left the Ukrainian-only context, which shocked the public opinion. In one, Roman Landik, son of a renowned politician Volodimir Landik, was observed publicly beating a young woman for half an hour in a restaurant, to which nobody reacted. Later the comments in the media were basically suggesting the girl was “asking for it”. The other, much more serious case concerned Oksana Makar, young girl who was gang raped repeatedly and then burned alive. This terminally barbaric case ended in Oksana’s death and without any attempts at pursuing and catching the perpetrators, as, again, they were too prominent.

Easterners may be white Europeans but the Western feminists refuse to see varieties within that. For the first time in the UK

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actually, I heard that Eastern Europeans are not really considered white! Few Westerners see the abuses of post-communism. Femen are an example of an interesting strategy, powerful in its own right, which may outside of its context, go wrong. Their stripping not only makes them resemble the women who are exploited and who they're defending, they symbolize women's position in the society, whose presence and often meaning is reduced to their bodies. The terror on the politicians faces proves they manage to touch something visceral, something that they can't even openly address. Their fearlessness, or flippancy, disrupted and disclosed the hidden meaning of situations that otherwise would have gone undisturbed. Yet the latest clashes with the Muslim community in France reveal the limitations of a victim's position, who becomes selfish and wary only of its own suffering. Now it seems a typical case of mutual misunderstanding, with each side blind to each other's concerns: Femen doesn't see racism behind their calling patriarchy "Arab", and the Western pro-underprivileged women of color feminists see in Femen only the distasteful theatre of naked boobs, which overlooks their needs, not seeing how they remain blind to the post-communist reality Femen represent. How "intersectional" is that?

White doesn't always mean 'privileged' - especially for women in the UK, seeing how many Eastern European women are working in the sex industry in here, not having much other choice, or clean or serve in restaurants and do other unqualified jobs, despite often holding degrees in their native countries, And funnily enough, because of a similar experience of 'colonialism', though in a much wider sense than the obvious, those two groups should recognize the mutual underprivilege and abuse. Still, it's painful to see the notions of 'postcolonialism' only in the most obvious places. The post-communist "east" had and still has its own share of colonization and suffering, which should be recognized. The accusation that Femen are "fast-food feminism" suggests that those women come from some areas full of bling and money, when in

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fact this should stand only for how precarious they really are.

There's many reasons why the ex-Bloc may feel resentful towards the West, but does it mean we shall embrace any idea of nationalist East supremacism, building a mirror-empire? Not only does this idea appeal to many, but, already, Vladimir Putin, who once openly told Russians that "you and I live in the East, not the West", would much rather ally economically with China. The new Cold War, indeed, in the way we deserved it.

But is the answer building the counter-empire? The answer to that is no, of course, not only because the Western empire is visibly crumbling, as the desperate PR efforts from the Keep Calm Britain or American liberal pundits like Applebaum prove. We are witnessing what may be the final decline of the West, which, it can be said, has been in decay for the last several hundreds of years. A State of Permanent Crisis is something the West knows and indulges in for a very long time, needless to say, with splendid influence on culture. There are waves to this state: periods of aridness interweave with those of fruitfulness and richness. Yet the feeling of depression is now too overwhelming. As the economy shifts to the East, this process is too scary to even think of. The ways this shift may fertilize our dried out, dying culture remain yet in the dark. Yet, the intelligentsia, regardless of their economic class, shouldn't reject those "Western" values, that brought ideas of socialism, equality, tolerance, respect and protecting the weak. We're irreversibly children of this twentieth-century formation, and its gains should be kept.

### Misbaptized

We Poles have an overdeveloped psychotic factor. History is to us traumatology – we were beaten, enslaved, tortured, killed, humiliated. This traumatology becomes then a traumatophilia – if you tell us that someone has suffered more, like the Jews, we go into a competition of trauma. Is there a life beyond this 'Christ of nations'?

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3.3 National history as a delirium. Jacek Malczewski's *Melancholia*.

"History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." This sentence uttered by Stephen Dedalus from Joyce's *Ulysses* fits Poles like no one else. Czesław Miłosz wrote that Polish literature, and generally Polish culture, is like a "jacket with one sleeve for a dwarf, and the other one for a giant". The larger sleeve symbolises our ambitions of being a part of Europe, the smaller one is the expression of "the oppressed nation", fighting for Polishness. On the one hand, there is the idolization of the West, and on the other – contempt and a sense of superiority towards the East. Poles – for many decades bereft of their own statehood – are not happy to revise the elements that comprise their national identity. The writer who has devoted most energy to analysing Polish culture and its tensions, displacements and limitations kept hidden under its unrevealing cloak is the academic Maria Janion.

Janion deals with representations, apparitions, delusions, hoaxes, hallucinations, dreams, and illusions, and the impossibility of expressing them. She subjects history to revaluations, seeing the history of Poland as an amalgamation of disorderly narrations; full of cracks, tensions and displaced traumas. Thus frequent in her works are questions about the experience of transgression, about



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the bones of content in Polish identity, about the revival of meanings that have seemingly been classified. Hence the portrayal of the unnoticeable marginalizations and the focus on themes that have been glossed over in history.

In the latest link in her odyssey to the hidden history of Polish phantasms, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* (roughly translatable as 'Uncanny Slavism') Janion finds the source of Poland's complexes in the rejection of its specific heritage, meaning our Slavic identity, together with its mythology and beliefs, displaced due to the exceptionally brutal Christianization of the Polish lands that began in the tenth century and continued until the thirteenth. (There are still some sources that claim traces of pagan religions could be found in Poland as late as the seventeenth century). For Janion, the amputation of Slavic spirituality, and together with it, of a complex identity, founded on a dual Slavic-Christian pedigree, as well as the introduction of monotheist Christianity left Poles bereft of a founding myth, and at the same time forced us to seek a new one. Following the logic of a "libidinal economy", the wild nature displaced from the Slavic spirit and represented by the world of "primitive" beliefs was replaced with a nationalism that finds its fulfilment in the form of Polish Messianism. In this way, our suffering, inabilities, and lack of independence immediately gained a new meaning: Poland, in national poet Adam Mickiewicz's phrase, is 'the Christ of nations', suffering for millions. The identification of Christianity and the West with "civilisation" and the disdain for the "primitive" Slavic beliefs resulted in a rift in Polish spirituality, a wound that could not be healed or covered by scar tissue – a place "misbaptised." Devoid of their mythical origin, Poles became the orphans of Europe, marginalized in the West and unable to find themselves among the Slavic culture they lost. Naturally, they were helped in this by history: the tense relations with Russia and the Partitions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the lasting reluctance towards an East identified as Russia. The surrogate phantasm of Messianism that our national

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myths have fed on for centuries became necessary for the theodicy of Polish martyrdom. Janion sees in this a strategy of displacement, of being orphaned.

**Poland as a post-colonial country**

The most inspiring claim in Janion's disquisition is the portrayal of Poland as a country that is, in a sense, postcolonial. Inspired by Said's *Orientalism*, Janion presents Poland as a country of dual entanglement: colonized but at the same time colonizing (in Kresy, i.e. Borderlands, its 'eastern marches', an empire that once stretched across what is now Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus and western Russia). This duality and lack of statehood brought about the lack of a coherent identity. The subject is present in Witold Gombrowicz's prose, where the eternal Polish complexes go hand in hand with a lordly contempt for the otherness of the East. In Janion, colonialism intertwines with gender questions: Poland's masculine arrogance, brimming with a sense of superiority, juxtaposed against the image of it as a degraded female. It would be hard not to notice this gender moment; as in its iconography, Poland the Brave is always a woman. This "Logo Polonia" in manacles is heroic or melancholic as the Black Madonna, suffering and unhappy in 'Melancholia', the famous painting by Jacek Malczewski, in other iconic paintings chained to a rock, bound with a chain or put into stocks. A woman passes the test as a symbol due to her indefiniteness and lack of a permanent place in culture. In a natural way, the womanhood of Polonia also symbolizes her frailty.

What identity, after all, can we talk about here if the tradition of this state, besides Poles, is claimed also by Ukrainians, Belarussians, Lithuanians, Germans, Jews, Armenians, Karaims, and Tatars? The most tragic dimension of this lack of communication between the nations is naturally present in the Jewish community. Even such national heroes as the revolutionary nationalist Tadeusz Kościuszko hailed from Orthodox Ruthenian gentry.

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Mickiewicz's family had similar roots. It is interesting that in diagnosing our tendency to mythologize defeat, and falling into melancholia, we hardly ever notice how the Polish experience as mediator between the East and the West has been accompanied by a mysterious self-destructiveness. Our identity took shape in the no man's lands between a suppressed Slavic spirit and an assimilated Westernness, between rationality and "barbarianism", betraying later all the symptoms of the experienced trauma. Poland's ostentatious turning towards the past and the inability to live "in the present", which is always in this or that way unsatisfactory, has also made it impossible to get even with what has been suppressed. To hide away, to ham it up – this is "our" way of coping with trauma that every now and then come to the surface. It seems that the Polish tendency to fantasize themselves as 'Sarmatians' the ancient Iranian tribe that allegedly came to Poland and whose myth endures in the Polish aristocracy, the fantastic projects that sprang up from the minds of Polish writers and artists, took their source from a certain cultural deficiency. We endlessly play up our funerary ceremonies, traumatically repeating our defeats.

(A tragic-absurd epilogue to this was written on the April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010, when 93 Polish politicians, writers, heroes and dignitaries died in a plane crash over Smolensk, en route to the site of Polish martyrology, the Katyń forest, where thousands of Polish officers were killed by the Red Army in 1940. Accordingly, Smolensk has become a founding myth of the new far right in Poland. I say new, but it is actually very old. Mentally, this formation is precisely the un-dead of a Polish right-wing Catholic/Russophobe/anti-Semitic/homophobe formation, that haunted Poland since the regaining of independence in 1918. therefore the huge wave of reaction which is de facto a restoration of the interwar, chauvinistic Poland.).

No deeper analysis is needed here for the superficial symptoms of 'returning to the roots', as in for example the "peasant mania" of Young Poland (the Polish Art Nouveau movement) at the turn of

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the century, or the Zakopane Highland aesthetics in decorative arts. The true romantic mysticism, as in *Król-Duch* (King-Spirit) by the Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki, or Konrad's nihilism in the third part of Mickiewicz's play *Dziady* (The Forefathers' Eve) - a character, who in order to fight for Poland, has to change his identity into an evil one - finds a culmination in the decadent polymathic painter/poet/playwright Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele* (The Wedding), where it becomes stripped of any illusions. The mad Straw Man's dance, for a century a symbol of political and mental Polish futility, there is laid bare as a 'Sarmatian' melancholia, feigning the consciousness of defeat lodged somewhere deep in us. This image of melancholy, known from the iconic painted representations by Malczewski and Wyspiański, makes use of the uncanny and imagination for the a deliberate hiding of the rift between intention and action, typical for the melancholic Polish nature that is always – following the oft-repeated saying by Witold Gombrowicz – half-baked.

### The Polish Uncanny

Yet not all is lost. The suppressed demanded disclosure, and it was the (post)-Romantic literature and art that were most often haunted by the suppressed Slavic identity. It is not a coincidence that the blossoming of phantasms combining Polish identity with the Messianic mission took place in Romanticism, much like the interest in the Slavic. The theory of culture that emerges from the Polish Romantics' arguments from before 1830, a period when the Polish state was ruthlessly dismembered and oppressed by its neighbors, vests the perfection of the spiritual state only in the past. The past "was as if a natural state of poetry, clairvoyance, and unity with nature." (Janion) The romantic severance from the rule of Logos, the ideological dispute between the Romantics and the Classicists, was in Poland an additional battle for the definition of Polishness. The Polish Romantics were aware of the Slavs' past but, as Janion notices, romantic art continues to portray "this state of

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dolorous oblivion or non-recognition." The Slavic character returned in literature as a suppressed non-Latin inheritance. It would crop up in the forms of the secret rite (Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*), a drama about the chthonic powers of nature, interfering with the human world (Słowacki's *Balladyna*), a 'philosophy of genesis' and the fascination with the cruelty of the mythical rulers (by Słowacki, in *Król-Duch* (The Spirit King) and *Genesis z Ducha* (Genesis from the Spirit)). The uncanniness and horror inscribed into that heritage find their culmination in modernist authors: Wyspiański and Witkacy. Even the research into the "savage" conducted by Bronisław Malinowski can be a derivative of this.

Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* is the work of key importance for Polish culture, presenting its continuity as a "misconducted" *Zaduszki* (a Polish All Soul's Day ritual), which one cannot become liberated from. The connection between the living and the dead was severed, as a variety of skeletons are stuck in the closet, and the mourning work has either not been performed or held back. The fear of enlivening something considered dead is one of the most primary features of the uncanny in Freud's notion of the *Unheimlich*. Freud's aesthetics, e.g. his considerations on jokes, prove that his notion of the unconsciousness, the phantasmic, and the uncanny have their roots in romantic irrationality. Especially "the phantasm" - fantasy as defined by Freud-signifies the very core of "psychological reality", which is not the transparent self-knowledge of the subject but rather alienation from reality. The uncanny is manifested when what comes to light are the contents that, though hidden away from us, are not entirely alien to us. The condition for uncanniness is its previous "canniness" – what is familiar but pushed away into the realm of the unconscious. "The prefix un is a symptom of suppression."

The uncanny, for Freud, boils down to brushing with various forms of death. And the greatest anxiety of the living is that death does not occur fully. The Polish Romantics' predilection for the

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occult and the return to Slavic beliefs were like discovering a fissure: a crack in the image of the world that cannot be filled. The misburied dead drive the Polish Romantics to madness.

### The chimeras of Sarmatian melancholia

In her earlier book *Wampir: Biografia Symboliczna* (Vampire – A Symbolic Biography), Maria Janion followed the figure of the vampire, which may embody the displaced Slavic character and be the alternative self, a lost component of humanity. The popularity of the vampire as a protagonist of the literary canon is intriguing. It is enough to quote, besides *Forefathers' Eve*, Wladislaw Reymont's *Wampir* (Vampire), and Witkacy's *Matka* (Mother) making an allusion to sentencing the contemporary to vampirism and the loss of the prophetic gift. Janion mentions also the theme of vampirism

in the field of art, sucking the life forces from the artist. This was a well-known subject for the decadents of Young Poland, connecting in a peculiar manner with the Polish sense of impotence. In Malczewski's painting 'Zatrute studnie' (Poisoned Wells), the numerous Chimeras and other creatures haunting the artist's



3.4 Me, or not me. Spectral  
Witkacy, 1915.

imagination and rendering creation impossible are a personification of Polish ills. The figures in his famous 'Melancholia' appear as if they were lastingly detached from all reality, suspended in their passive comings and goings. Here, the space of the painting holds any potential movement at bay. This predominant passivity limits man even in open space: the limitless space of mountains brings no consolation to Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, the author of *The Tales of the Tatras*, who rather writes about pensiveness and melancholic 'osmętnice' – a neologism for the mythical 'sprites of sadness' of Polish mythology, who lingered in cemeteries, and killed men and women by kissing them.

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The iconography of melancholics usually presents male figures, while Malczewski portrays a woman's form, dark and veiled. Nothing would portray the withdrawal, so characteristic for the melancholic state, better than this veil of black. "The nothing that hurts", as literary critic and novelist Marek Bieńczyk put it in his book *Melancholia. On Those Who'll Never Regain the Loss*. What is unknowable, this deficiency, disrupts the cognitive process. A parallel, invisible, and hidden world is growing, defined in one of Malczewski's paintings as the 'Polski Hamlet'. Melancholia is born from the deficiency that, from its very essence, may not be satisfied. It is not a momentary disposition: one simply is a melancholic. Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia* describes it as the result of a turning away from reality, leading to the appearance of an attitude based on holding doggedly to the object. Melancholia is a pathological mourning: "in the case of mourning, it is the world that is desolate; in the case of melancholia – it was the very 'self' that became pauperised and desolate." Moreover, the state of melancholia is defined as a "withdrawal" into the depths of the self and the contemplation of the "self". Of key importance for the melancholic is the moment when the liberated libido (here perhaps the love of the fatherland) loses the object of anchoring and becomes withdrawn back to the "self" - a classic "Hamletism" of attitudes of Polish heroes. Possibly the most famous presentation of Polonia is contained in Malczewski, a portrait which provides a clearer allegory of Polish Hamletism, torn between the young and a revolution in manacles, symbolizing military defeats, returning to the subject of Polonia's eternal womanhood with persistence verging on obsession. There is in Malczewski's oeuvre an image of Polonia as a totally naked winged woman who shows the future with an energetic gesture of her hand - a unique, triumphant Polonia. Yet the Polish Hamlet in his own manner seems uninterested in any of these versions of history, and his eyes are melancholically turned to the contemplation of its own interior.

Where does this conviction about our weakness come from? We

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return to the cracked identity, limiting the Slavic character to the dimension of tedious sentimentalism, which easily turns into a certain 'Sarmatian' melancholia. 'Sarmatism' is our awkward imitation of power, shame displaced into the subconscious. One of the results of the mythicization of our defeats may be atmospheric art, immersed in symbolism. A similar threat was noticed by Wyspiański and it was also well seen by the early twentieth-century novelist and unorthodox Marxist philosopher Stanisław Brzozowski. We are aware that we neglected something, that we lost something never to regain it again. The internalized melancholia merges into a unity with the vaguely perceived "Slavic soul". Thus the Polish artist claims to communicate directly with the demons of the past. The grotesque ruled the imagination of Polish painters like Malczewski and Witkacy, as the symptom of a world that was falling apart before their very eyes.

The development of Polish art progressed nearly parallel to the acquisition of nationalism; hence it is inseparable from discussions on the shape of the national style, continuing especially during the two decades between the World Wars. The regaining of Polish independence in 1918 was followed by numerous initiatives to form social and artistic life anew. Literary life was flourishing, and a peculiar euphoria ruled. On the other hand, the programmes of "returning to nature" increasingly often became a part of state ideology.

It is worth remembering here one of the most bewildering Polish artists as a symptom of the unconscious background to those events. Stach z Warty Szukalski (1893–1987) has to this day remained an inconvenient person, hard to be dismissed with regular ideological criticism. Szukalski ostentatiously contested the ideals of the newly enlightened and modern Poland, and all the milieux contemporary to him. This son of a Polish blacksmith who spent his youth in the US, was a self-made ideologist playing a Renaissance artist, putting forth his vision of Sarmatism, allegedly undistorted by outside influences. According to his so-called



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Zermatism, predecessors of Poles hailed from Easter Island, via the isles of Lachia and Sarmatia, they travelled via the summit of Matterhorn and moved to Poland from the town of Zermatt. Analysing rock art (possibly the most ancient representation of man's artistic activity), he arrived at the conclusion that Poland was the first land to emerge from the Flood, and all the languages of the world took their origin from the primordial Polish vernacular. Much like Nietzsche, he delved into pre-Socratic Hellenism, believing that it is only by re-approaching the Greeks' tragic period that we shall discover something "of our own truth". Szukalski believed that Polish culture found itself in a state of collapse, with an alien element not only having taken away our statehood but also dictating cultural standards. He perceived traces of cultural purity in the pre-Slavic. Worried about the fate of all of Europe, he perceived an opportunity for its salvation in the establishment of an alternative, totalitarian vision of the continent, "Neurope", with the participation of all the states – apart from those spreading the worst corruption or immorality, namely, France, Germany, and England – under the aegis of a new reborn Poland. This Poland would profess its ancient and freshly invented mythologies and heroes. The Wawel castle in Krakow and Duchtynia (neologism for Temple of the Spirit), designed by Szukalski, would be its spiritual center, something akin to the Germanic Valhalla, with Marshal Jozef Piłsudski, the de facto dictator of Poland from 1925 to 1935, being the incarnation of the King-Spirit, his mythical creation 'Politwarus'. It was to be a monument to the 'Miracle on the Vistula', when Polish forces defeated the Red Army just outside Warsaw in the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, described by the author thus: "the linkage of three national emblems of Poland, Lithuania and Ruthenia, as the Nation and its Youth fought and died for our common geographic-historic Freedom".

Interestingly, despite being obsessed with the Slavic, Szukalski's iconography draws strongly from pan-German aesthetics - possibly the place where he unconsciously located the source of power. But

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3.5 Portrait Company of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz at your service. A Mr and Ms Nawroczy in the full paraphernalia.

by combining this with elements from Native American folklore, his work is strikingly harmonious with the notion of Polish post-colonialism. Szukalski's chauvinistic ideology is too ambiguous to be entirely dismissed. He dared to reach deeper than the woolly mountain mythologies that dominated interwar Poland. What he arrived at, however, was not a gentle vision of the Slavic but blood-spattered clashes of power and a struggle for domination, anarchy, and anti-Christianity. This sounds familiar when juxtaposed against Poland's history of 'noble anarchy', and the self-destruction of its nobility.

Since the authorities, not even necessarily totalitarian, discovered the political usefulness of references to nationalist ideologies of "blood and soil", the uncanny was capable of becoming a functional part of ideology. We could turn our attention to the Polish phenomenon of building mounds – by "the hand of the nation" – to great national heroes (like Kościuszko or Piłsudski). A certain culmination of the discussion of the national style between the two World Wars was the competition for the monument to Józef Piłsudski in Warsaw, announced just after the

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Marshal's death in 1935 (Szukalski sent in his design of Duchtynia from America). This death and the competition, whose winner faced an opportunity to be recorded for posterity, resulted in an extraordinary activation of national solemnity, Slavic myth, and symbolic and phantasmic representations of Polishness among the designers. Examined today, the designs dazzle with their bombastic nature, and as designs, they simply seem bizarre. The sublime was imagined in the typically Germanic, classicist style: "All of Poland is a pyramid rising from his (i.e. Piłsudski's) life," said General Wieniawa-Długoszowski on the occasion of the competition

### Catastrophism

Polish Romanticism would also inevitably run into its antithesis, namely positivism and the Galician myth, being the reverse of the mystic Zakopane style. Among the advocates of this other side of the coin was certainly Stanisław Brzozowski, although his attitude is among the more complex. One of Poland's few European-class intellectuals, in his *Legenda Młodej Polski* (Legend of Young Poland (1910)) he attacked Polish writers for yielding to pseudo-mysticisms. Young Poland was a movement where fin de siècle decadence mixed with mystical nationalism. As Brzozowski says, Poles want "to keep for ourselves the possibility of internal life outside the law, to outlaw the entire world. The logic of life and the logic of thought become outlawed and make every poorly fledged Polish 'self' gain over them Caesarial power in their own eyes. The cognitive infertility, inactivity in life and economy are always false even though they were to be found 'at the source of the Polish soul.'" Following a deeply traumatic experience in his youth (blackmailed by Tsarist police, he was forced to testify and incriminate his colleagues, and throughout the rest of his brief life was haunted by a sense of guilt), Brzozowski had an obsession with guilt and with struggling out from the gutter. In his philosophy, he would equally obsessively seek power in the place of the traditional Polish genealogy of defeat and weakness. As Cezary Michalski aptly

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noticed in his foreword to his *Głosy wśród nocy* (Voices in the Night) reissued after a nearly hundred years: "A reflection on individual subjectivity has always been weaker in Poland, when compared to the reflection over the collective subjectivity: as shallow as ritualised, as omnipresent and cornering." With all his work, Brzozowski aspired to restore a proper economy of Polish subjectivity, and fought for liberation from immaturity and impotence - for their "reworking". Initially, he saw the reasons for such a state of affairs in the cheap decadence of Polish aesthetics.

In his *Legend of Young Poland*, he charges this milieu with weakness and lassitude of will. But even Brzozowski's naturalism, positivism, his 'philosophy of work', and the called for intellectual fortitude were not free from a specifically Polish mysticism bearing fruition in the extraordinary mix of Bergson's vitalism, Sorel's philosophy of power, and the symbolism of the soil and the nation. Brzozowski was inspired at the same time by Nietzsche, Darwin, and Marx, and wanted to reconcile his fascination between Catholicism and Marxism, and cultural nationalism with literary modernism. The fact that, after his untimely death, he was read both by communists and nationalists with fascist inklings is a testimony to the ambiguity of his project. Michalski, for example, points at the person of Andrzej Trzebiński, the leader of *Sztuka i Naród* (Art and Nation) who would become engrossed in reading Brzozowski in occupied Warsaw, building at the same time grotesque dystopias in the style of Witkacy and Gombrowicz. As we shall see, Witkacy (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1885-1939) and Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969) actually undertook the same subjects of spectral and pompous Polishness, yet in an entirely new, grotesque manner.

With his vitalism and solemnity, Szukalski seemingly stands on the antipodes, and yet he becomes a part of the same decadence. Everything became mixed. His concepts were blatant contaminations without chronology or logic. His attacks on the academic system demanded a return to the spirit of the medieval guilds, and

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only the art of the medieval Piast era or with a folk pedigree deserved the notion of “pure”. One cannot discuss Szukalski’s entanglements at the level of sign or form. They are perfectly legible, much like his ideological grounds. What distorts an unambiguous assessment of the artist is rather his instability between the professed love of things Slavic and European orderliness. Our Slavic character is situated on the emotional plane, which partially explains the incoherence of positions, both of the Young Poland and the more Europe-oriented avant-gardists of the period between the two World Wars. The notion of the ‘Slavic soul’ disturbs the pure “aesthetic course” of inspiration and its conceptualization, and remains a burden on the advocates of Europeaness. Yet there is no art that would bring back the contact with the past. The attempts to return to our very deep roots, undertaken by Szukalski, discloses a deeply buried complex.

Between the wars, Piłsudski’s superoptimistic and nationalist vision of Poland “from sea to sea” went alongside a catastrophism, whose most distinct preacher was definitely the polymath Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, known by the pen-name Witkacy. Known for his dislike of Russia after he had seen the aftermath of the October Revolution, he distanced himself from the Slavic, as he believed it annihilated individualism – the only reason behind the existence of the Individual Being. He believed that there is something in ‘eastern mentality’ that predestines it to totalitarianism. The plot of his *Nienasyćenie* (Insatiability, 1932) takes us to a not-so-distant future. The protagonists are a gang of decadents and derelicts, representatives of the artistic Bohème, drowned in lethargy, drugs and mental illnesses. At the same time, there appears on the black market a pill created by the Mongolian philosopher, Murti Bing, which liberates the individual from any tormenting doubts of a metaphysical nature and turns him or her into a polite citizen devoid of any views. This takes place at the moment when the Chinese–Mongolian army that has already conquered the whole of Eastern Europe is just about to attack

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Poland and complete its Orientalization, which is tantamount to the annihilation of all and any individualism. Torn between politeness and anarchism, Witkacy's Poles confirm their schizophrenic condition.

The moral chaos that interwar society was plunging into was presented probably most insightfully by Bronisław Wojciech Linke, one of the most astonishing and original Polish artists of the first half of the twentieth century. An amalgam of the leftist politics and surreal imagination brought about a vision that was far closer to the delusions of symbolists, expressionism, *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Realism), and Goya's wartime cycles than to communist propaganda. The nervous line is what connects Linke to Witkacy. Linke's world of small towns becomes inundated in an increasing chaos, yielding to the domination of capitalism, and its degenerations. It was not a coincidence that Linke's favorite reading was symbolist Alfred Kubin's *Po Tamtej Stronie* (On the other Side), in which the German Expressionist described the blueprint for the Land of Dream, perceived as an ideological escape from Europe, engulfed at the time in class struggle, capitalism, poverty, and the growing power of totalitarianism. This new version of Europe does not provide, however, any relief even in art. Following Kubin, Linke is a pessimist and catastrophist, which does not diminish in any way the horrors of his cycles on Silesia and the Jewish Holocaust during the Second World War.

The romantic transgression portrayed "pathological" sexuality, clairvoyance, psychological illnesses, lunatic states, magnetism,



3.6 Stach z Warty  
Szukalski is forging the new national art. Here posing at an exhibition in Cracow, 1936

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doppelgangers, and vampires. This “dark side” has its geography: Count Dracula comes naturally from the East, which is the house of all evil, chaos, and unbridled lust. Gothicism was never present in Poland on a popular scale. A castle was the hero of many Gothic Romantic texts, enough to mention Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The Gothic personified the horrors of Romanticism, and negative aesthetic experience or the sublime were impossible without the addition of atrocities.

A significant example here is *Mściwy Karzeł i Masław, Książę mazowiecki* (*The Vindictive Dwarf and Masław the Mazovian Prince*), a Gothic novel by Zygmunt Krasiński, whose plot transports us to the vicinity of the family estate of Opinogóra. The book presents in a grotesque manner a downright cruel figure of a sadistic local chieftain, and weaves elements of exotic Transylvanian vampire legends into the Polish landscape. The Slavic lands are portrayed here as cruel, where the uncanny is discovered in a very homely countryside. Interventions of the grotesque and Gothic into the rational world are not innocent: they are rather a testimony to fundamental doubt. The world is managed by an impersonal, ruthless force, which simply does not need to be the “chaos” destroying order, but rather a force that reveals the permanent chaos onto which an illusory order was imposed. One does not need to go far to seek this, as chaos is already triumphant in Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve*, best described by literary scholar Ryszard Przybylski: “everything is unbelievable, mad, maddening. The living talk to the dead. In a cemetery chapel, the people together with the departed souls perform an opera for intellectuals. The frustrated specter falls into logomania and begins to talk as if he were paid for it. Clocks strike. Candles are extinguished. Existence caves in into the darkness. In prisons, between interrogations, the best of our youth exchange jokes and sing songs. An epileptic soars towards the stars. History shakes a fist at Transcendence. Waving his tail, the Devil takes pity over criminals. Forgetting about the crowd of victims, angels make fuss over a poet

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filled with vainglory. A visionary babbles something about numbers. A filthy villain sneers at the mother of a son tortured-to-death. Blasphemies, prayers, and helplessness. Conspirators, traitors, and martyrs. Half-rotten informers choke on the smouldering soil of the graves. A glimpse of a cavalcade of kibitkas (carrying away prisoners) between cemetery trees at dawn. Philosophic perambulations of the streets of Kyrgyz-Kazakh Babylon. Looks as cold as dagger blades, and silences are pregnant with events. All this is Polish, arch-Polish - to tears. As becomes the national specter, the work has a shape as misshapen as mysterious."

Poland can be neither parted nor unified. Our melancholic complex behaves as an open wound, drawing life energy from everywhere. The joy in self-flagellation means the satisfaction of sadistic and hateful tendencies, which have no-one to transfer themselves to. Poland is the ever-renewing wound, clotted into the state of melancholia and disallowing contact with the Real.

### Living with phantoms

This is where we could place the activity of Tomasz Kozak, the contemporary artist who may be the most intensive in trying to come to terms with romanticism and its exorcisms. His diabolic-grotesque rephrasing of Artur Grottger's prints is even too obvious a commentary on the Polish-Russian, or Polish-Eastern, relations. The January Rising of 1863 against Russia has been coded in the minds of successive generations of Poles in the form given to it by Grottger, becoming another link in the history of martyrdom. Kozak's murals approach our Messianism as a murderous grotesque. The enemies that our demonic fellow nationals stand to fight are the eternal Jew and the Bolshevik. In turn, in his *Yoga Lesson/Luciferian Lesson* diptych, Kozak wanted to touch upon the most demonic and ambiguous elements of the Polish psyche. The artist comes straightforwardly to contemporary art engrossed in shamming a variety of activities



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and art's dumbness resulting from anti-intellectual positions. The relief comes unexpectedly from the past from the emanations of anachronism, which derailed from the grooves of history, reveals its subversive face. Kozak is interested in compromised ideologies, which cause only embarrassment in the days of political correctness. Yet this moment of shame is most precious for us: it is a legible trace left after the displaced dream of power. The task behind the prophet's aureole and mysticism, as Kozak believed, was to transplant the Arian myth into Polish soil, combining it with the mysticism of the Tatras and with spiritual purism.

The 'Young Poland' writer Tadeusz Miciński's mythology is, besides Szukalski and numerous others, another version of identity compensation disclosing a terse commentary upon the chaos of identity in the contemporary Pole, lost in stereotypes. In Kozak's narration it becomes the elaborately edited shreds of a vision from which he still cannot awake. The avant-garde, and especially that of communist and revolutionary provenance tried to distance itself as much as possible from this infested discourse, as Kozak rightly noted. Our eternally unfulfilled longing finds expression in the elections won by the right wing. Again, we deal with a Nietzschean movement: Miciński fought against the dwarfing of culture, which disposes of its horror and tragic spirit appropriate for a bygone time. Kozak even uses Janion's phrase: "phantasmic criticism" against the simple call for involvement of art in social life and "political criticism" (as heralded by Artur Żmijewski, more on which in Chapter 4). Inspired partly by Benjamin he used film as the final personification of phantasms, making use of the "modern" methods of manipulating images, as for example editing.

Szukalski and Miciński both represent the many undiscovered paths of the canon that were marginalised, mostly for ideological reasons. Their political incorrectness is punished with a lack of presence (absence from textbooks and any other circulation), and given a hallucinatory existence. From here it is only a step to ghostliness and fantasticality, continuing as a sequence:

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invisibility–unburial–obliteration. This is a reverse strategy. Instead of entering the mainstream of official culture, and also – to quote Szukalski – the correct “sexless humanism” – it holes up even deeper under the hood of melancholia.

The subject of hiding away and shame was quite recently undertaken in an interesting manner by the project–book *Inhibition*. As its author, Roman Dziadkiewicz says, the inspiration for it was the discovery of non-canonical works in the archives of the National Museum in Krakow, and in those works, the displaced narratives of Polish art. “The project digs out the shameless emotions, at times charming, aristocratic, futuristic, and all of the sudden verging on fascism. Today they’re easily ridiculed by saying that they have survived in the caricatural form of the argot of right-wing politicians. Yet I am interested in what has become of them. Maybe the post-war, democratic, flattened culture failed to rework them and had them quickly displaced? And they were an important part of culture between the two world wars.” It is also a penetration of a toxic, contagious Kraków spirit in its numerous manifestations, as the symbol of Polish “culture” and “avant-garde”. Dziadkiewicz chose the person of Emil Zegadłowicz, an ambiguous writer of Young Poland, who knocks down our conventional thoughts on the era between the two World Wars. The Author of *Zmory (Nightmares)*, Zegadłowicz was perceived in his time as a leftist, but could also be associated with ‘National Democracy’, conservatism, praising the charms of the landowning lifestyle, rural character, and the specters of early Christianity. Dziadkiewicz “repeats” Zegadłowicz’s gesture through a book–reenactment, issuing a reprint of the “secret” erotic poem *Wrzoso (Heathers)* in five copies, repeating at the same time the artist’s gesture in making illegible his own strategy, so that the “modernist exaltations become a carrier of contemporary content, providing historical and psychological backgrounds.” Similarly, the anachronism of Kozak’s actions deciphers the works of Miciński and reverses the process of rendering his art illegible

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through a range of falsified readings of previous interpreters. It is only in this manner that the deep traditions – and these are the traditions in the plural form – can be “delved into”. There are many more sources of contemporary emotions than are presented in official culture. Some needs were simply displaced from official circulation, yet they remained in hiding and this is why they may come to life at all. As Dziadkiewicz says, “in the unmanaged strands, demons or hallucinations start to be born.”

In searching for the “other Traditions”, as American poet John Ashbery put it in the title of his book, the marginalized narrations that break up the canon, the reclaiming of the “untimely” artists, discovery is coupled not only with the unearthing of shameful content but also with the overcoming of shame, dressing the melancholic wound, and breaking away from the vicious circle of phantasms.

So it seems the miasma is our pathological, guilty pleasure, we continue to live like zombies, cultivating our martyrology, relishing in death. I seldom see my country as ravingly happy as when somebody dies, as if we were secretly waiting for it. Even when Margaret Thatcher died, there was something to the coverage and the politicians’ behaviour, as if they got a new spur in life, now planning to call squares after her and erect memorials. But in a greater sense this means a traumatophilia which doesn’t let us get over the past. The Other in Polish history and of the whole East are of course, its Jews.

But how can you psychoanalyze the whole nation? With history “visited by the smoke”, to use the expression of Polish feminist writer Agata Araszkiewicz, over and over, way too many times? In a city with a history of uprisings, and all of them lost? The painful method is to recall the tragically erased Jewish presence and its forms of life on the eastern European lands. There appear new attempts on behalf of the remaining Jewish community, shrunk now to 20,000 people, strategies to fight the noxious feeling induced by yet another Catholic feast of vainglory and vampirism in our

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states. Foreign minister and Bullingdon club member Radek Sikorski and his like go on non stop in the EU parliament about how Europe can only unify when Western Europeans will “feel our pain” from the twentieth century. We’re always willing to play the suffering card. And yes, to an extent it’s justified. Poles feel their history hasn’t been recognized enough in the world. Yet what we need is not another attempt to induce more Polish martyrology, we need more counter-attempts to ground it in the counter-history, to recall the forgotten Jewish past, then we’ll try to reconcile with it. To commemorate the Ghetto Uprising against an increasingly sickening stuffing of the Warsaw Uprising gives us more alternative heroes, more reassessment of the “red”, unwanted history of Poland, before the war and during People’s Republic, instead of relishing in the most reactionary elements of interwar period, with all its xenophobia, anti-Semitism and nationalism. Let’s, even if that seems crazy enough to a Pole, make it more rational, humane, reconnect with the unrealized socialist past, which was suppressed, and for which, our unsung heroes, like those in the Warsaw Ghetto fought, to the silence on the other side of the Wall.

Even before the dissolution of the Cold War order, post-communist studies within post-colonial discourse were mapping the problem of the way our dependency influences our psyche. This is even often called post-dependency studies. Yet another dependency was less direct, yet as influential - that is, upon Western, capitalist imperialism. Such groundbreaking books as Maria Todorova’s *Imagining the Balkans* or Ivan Colovic’s *Balkans – terror of culture* analyse the idea of balkanization and the influence of self-colonization as one of the responses to westernization since the nineteenth century. At a recent series of events in Warsaw, *Panslavisms*, scholars and artists from the former republics debated over how they might save the idea of the East without it becoming chauvinistic. They proposed among other things the rethinking of Polish nineteenth-century nationalism, with its slogan *For Our Freedom and Yours*, which meant that one nation’s liberatory fight

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would liberate the others, in this case other eastern countries from the Tsarist, Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires; the group Slavs and Tatars contributed a poster translating the slogan into Russian and Farsi. Today, that may mean liberation from a westernizing neoliberalism, which is experienced acutely in Eastern Europe. They also seem inspired by the idea of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a multi-racial, 'Sarmatian' eastern empire of Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Ukrainians, Armenians and Tatars, while criticizing the actual reality of it, in the colonial relations Poles had towards the *Kresy*. I was surprised though, that throughout the many discussions over how this new eastern international association could look like nobody even mentioned the most obvious one, that actually existed for decades: the Soviet Union. The answer to that is obvious – it's too discredited in the intellectuals eyes to seriously consider it. But the USSR at first wanted to be the most accomplished realization of eastern internationalism. Even in its name, it refused to use any national territory, proposing instead a perfectly abstract association of territories run by workers councils. In reality, it eventually became just another realization of Russian Empire. The next chapters will discuss more at length the communist culture of this Empire, and the reality of communist ideals.

## 4

### Socialist Realism On Trial

#### Post-post-modernism, avant-garde, realism and socialist realism in our time

*It is not a way back. It is not linked to the good old days but to the bad new ones. It does not involve undoing techniques but developing them. Man does not become man by stepping out of the masses but by stepping back to them. The masses shed their dehumanisation and thereby men become men again – but not the same men as before.*

Bertolt Brecht, *Against Georg Lukács*

*A considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss' which I described in connection with my critique of Schopenhauer as 'a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered.'*

György Lukács, *Introduction to Theory of the Novel*

*Culture is continuation of politics by other means.*

Socialist slogan

*Here we are now, entertain us!*

Nirvana, *Smells Like Teen Spirit*

#### The real in the new reality

If by chance you'd had gone back in time to 1990s Poland, you'd have been struck how 'reality' had been suddenly changed into an augmented cardboard maquette made up of commercial products.

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Buildings become mere canvases for gigantic bottles of Coca-Cola, Snickers or West cigarettes, old neon signs were taken down for the sake of big logos of McDonalds and Burger King, the familiar grey newspapers started to have tons of very bright colors applied to them, and the marble of Stalinist buildings was covered by big stickers, where somebody's teeth were bigger than people's heads. It was like that in the whole Bloc. "Advertisements have conquered civilisation," Russian writer Arina Kholina said in 2011 in a Russian literary journal, where she compared bannered promotions to "knickers drying on a balcony". Public space was swamped: *Turn left after Toyota, there you will see L'Oreal, and after Pepsi turn right – for the house where Sony is*, sounded the typical directions. Many of the new ads were illegal, contributing to the general image of the former East as an easily conquerable no-man's land. To this day not much has changed. Yet, today not only the East, but the whole neoliberal capitalist part of the world finds itself in a great crisis of representation, sitting somewhere between the big Virgin Media signposts and the "tasteful" retro of Keep Calm and Carry On. Despite it touching both political sides, the aesthetic crisis doesn't bother the ruling class nearly enough. More worryingly, this also concerns the progressive side, whose political paralysis paralyzed its aesthetics too. Between gifs, the hideous layout of social networks and tumblr, rots the corpse of reality. As this book is interested in looking back at the reality of socialism, this chapter wants to go back – as you do these days - against what Brecht and others wished for, and ask archaeological questions about Realism as the lost model for involvement in reality. What was the realistic solution in the state controlled art and later, in democracy?

'Socialist realism' was a style that transcended both Russia and the 1930s. The first Western reactions to sotsrealism were hostile. America before the Cold War was a country in transit where socialism was popular, and the two empires were watching each other closely. As English art historian Herbert Read justly pointed out in the 1950s, sotsrealism was not simply kitsch, but derived

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4.1 Human species, man and woman - crude Sotsrealist gendering.  
Peasant Man and Woman on the Green Bridge, Vilnius

from the general nature of the popular arts in various epochs - art which "had never been of any great cultural or aesthetic significance, and the reason for this we ascribed to its realistic nature – the very quality which is in Russia extolled as the supreme aim in arts". An example of this is Mexican muralism and its great influence on American art of the New Deal era, which was a contemporary to Soviet sotsrealism and was made overwhelmingly by Mexican communist artists. It's a rare example of art's influence going from a poorer country to the more powerful one, bottom-up, and not top-down. There was also an uncanny similarity between the mass culture in the States and Soviet Russia, where in both cases, grand scale realism was a low, popular art. Simultaneously with the invention of the New Person in USSR – a sporty, cultivated, harmoniously built man - you had the



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emergence of comic Superheroes, equally unreal in their fitness. Both were 'men of steel'.

Yet avant-garde and realism were constantly opposed to each other. It mostly derives from the reading of post-war (sometimes even pre-war, like Clement Greenberg) critics, who were to quick in interpreting the new realism of the 1930s as necessarily complicit in totalitarianism, ignoring the political nuances of certain forms of realism. In this chapter I'll seek a theoretical redemption of realism, that at the same time could serve for a better interpretation and historicization of 'real socialism' and the current difficulty in which militant art has found itself. It will be necessarily a tough task, but realism needs no redemption – it still happens in arts, only popular arts, like TV shows and still sometimes happens in its critical, Brechtian, form. It goes largely unnoticed by the critics, with the prominent exception of Fredric Jameson, who has promised to devote a still unpublished book to the question of realism, and wrote extensively on the contemporary historical novel and 'realist' TV serials like *The Wire*. Realism seems an unfashionable position to take, which necessarily re-emerges within the post 9/11 world, and especially, in the post-2008 financial crisis world. If 2011 started what can be interpreted as the gradual rejection of the 1980s order, both factors – financial and political - seek their expression via the most available channels – internet, youtube, social networks. Cell-phone films pose the question of reality vs. simulacrum, in which we have to believe in reality again, a reality for so long smashed to pieces by the mediation of TV news and computer simulation. The greatest success of postmodernism is that we still behave as if we don't believe what was going on. The mass of depictions of current wars, revolutions, riots, protests, show trials doesn't seem to make them *real* enough.

The years 2012 and 2013 will write themselves in the memory of posterity not only as an explosive year of double dip recession, but also as a year of necessary disappointment in the outcome of the revolutions of 2011, that spread across the so far silent or silenced

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areas of post-communist Eastern Europe, with the anti-Putin protests and jailing of anarcho-punks Pussy Riot (alongside with dozens of unsung others), and similar anti-austerity protests in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia. But is there anyone who still remembers the fact that leftist art was given the biggest official power and exposure in 2012, at the Berlin Biennale, turned by Polish artist and curator Artur Żmijewski into a showcase for radical art collectives and Occupy protesters. The Berlin Biennale was as intensely commented on in the months succeeding it as quickly it was later forgotten. It was the year of massive exposure for so-called engaged art: with the big exposition by Jeremy Deller in Hayward Gallery, *Joy in People*, coinciding with the publication of Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells*, a summa on socially engaged arts and relational aesthetics, working with and through communities/groups and the delegation of others. Yet, there are very specific reasons why 'socially engaged' arts started getting prominence and an increasing interest in the artworld, perhaps the most important being that after 1989 a lot was done so that the notions of history and politicization were dismissed and put in the museum. Everything solid should melt to air now: old battles should be forgotten and we cheerfully gave ourselves to the post-communist transition-induced consumption. Everywhere, not only in the Eastern Europe, this transition was felt, as the 1980s especially were a process which touched us all.

But from then on, as the world of politics was undergoing the increased post-modernization and spectacularization, culture was similarly focused on not even celebrating the surface as depth, as in the 80s, but celebrating the surface as surface. "Here we are now, entertain us" – this lyric by Nirvana best sums up the time, when the prolific production of the most insipid entertainment and pleasure-making went together with the biggest possible deflation of pleasure, experienced now as passive-aggressive, endless reproduction of nothingness. The "disappearance" of history from the everyday made its arrival into the most unexpected place, visual

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arts. The influx of money, made on financial speculation, made it necessary to invest especially in the areas of the immediate social prestige, yet strangely enough, despite its particularly spectacular monetization, art still remained a critical space.

With this success story came the remorse of conscience, not so much on the part of the galleries, but of the artists, still holding to the traditional romantic notion of an artist. There appeared new forms of specifically “user-friendly” art, which were now denying that “it’s not about the object, but more about the relation between the artist and the public” (or artists and other artists, more like). That was ‘relational art’ – a rather unhappy pop-theory term coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, which helped to cover a lot of crap touchy-feely, meaningless, ingratiating middle class art and smuggling it into the museums as avant-garde for the large part of late 90s/2000s. But while it claimed its “openness” and welcomeness, it was rather set up to obscure the really existing divisions and inequalities. It was a perfect post-post-modern theory, where the differences first obfuscated in the transition from modernism to postmodernism were now further obliterated, for the sake of the ideas of fun, false togetherness and a fetishized ‘relation’ which at best lasted five minutes in the gallery.

Relational aesthetics aside, in recent years something emerged that we can call the ‘third avant-garde’. These are artists or groups which subscribe to the ethos of the avant-garde, referring to their aesthetics (including open citation of their work), while not shying away from the contemporary political issues and Marxist theory, and often through their work discussing some of the problems of the contemporary, which by necessity also touch artistic production: from the financial crisis and precarity to the difficult, ambivalent relations art itself has in this equation. This went together with the risk of ‘recuperation’, haunting the arts since the end of the conceptual era. The endlessly rehearsed “aesthetics of” punk, Situationism, or old avant-gardes such as Soviet Constructivism, the well known phenomenon of radical chic, was

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4.2 A middle finger to the state. Voina paints a penis in front of Petersburg's FSB offices.

always supposed to suggest or evoke rather what has been, hardly communicating with contemporary issues.

There's suddenly a 'demand' for politicized aesthetics, which is hanging often in a political void, since political aesthetics is by necessity something which doesn't just appear somewhere all of a sudden, but is and always was emerging and developing together with the social movements and events which were provoking it. Today we have a glimpse of a social movement, yet without the aesthetics, and massive amounts of art production, yet without any real movement or thought that it would result from. How to create art in the post-socialist world, in moment of social dejection and depression?

Community art was inadvertently embracing both aspects of its own impossibility: the one of short temporality of its effects and their actions, and the fact it was still selling pretty well. The works are often about working with a given community, and doing a collective project with them, usually as a kind of palliative therapy against the effects of a dysfunctional society. This "art through delegation" – as Claire Bishop described it in her essay "The Social Turn: Collaboration And Its Discontents" – is most notably made by artists like Jeremy Deller, Christoph Schlingensiefel and Artur Żmijewski. Here artists invite so-called ordinary people to take part in their work, seemingly to include them in the process of social sculpture, but with greatly varying ethical and aesthetic

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results. The danger is artists fetishizing certain old, well known aesthetics of protest (like May '68) which when put into a gallery space become objectified and clichéd.

How to put history back into the frame, without necessarily falling into the traps of naivety, without repeating the same mistakes, without fetishizing politics and instead, practising it? One solution (as far as art works are concerned) to this problem may come from study and knowledge: as such, projects can become deep researches into long forgotten histories of dissent that can teach us something about the present, rather than just being objectified. Opportunities we missed, perhaps, that become valuable again, as after decades of silence, the old struggles reemerge.

### Critical Art, Engaged Art

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, what the accession to the capitalist West did for Poland and many others was accession to the much desired art market. In the 2000s there was something of a boom in Polish art, with even attempts to label it Young Polish Art, after the British equivalent. This trend has now begun to fade, especially since numerous events during the long Polska! Year promoting Polish culture in the UK failed to attract as much publicity as might have been hoped. Mirosław Bałka got a prestigious Turbine Hall commission in 2009/10, which is as close as you can get to canonization in the modern art world, but it worked more as promotion for Bałka rather than for Poland.

What has shifted is the political impact of Polish critical art at home. Polish art, rather than being simply an entertainment for the rich, started to engage with politics on the levels many of the Western artists gave up a long time ago. In the Polish 90s it was much more unleashed – suddenly there was a freedom to speak, but there was no infrastructure. Soon enough it turned out that what could be said was very limited anyway. There emerged the “critical artists”, who were questioning Polish moralistic hypocrisy, and especially

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the treatment that “minorities” were getting: women, LGBT or handicapped people. In this, the visual arts challenged a society in a harsher and deeper way than film or literature. Practically immediately after '89 artists rushed to get at those elements of reality which went repressed or unrepresented under the old regime. Even before that date, after the Martial Law in the 80s, there emerged artistic groups, like Gruppa, whose especially obsessive painters were painting and reproducing the symbols of communist reality, as if they wanted to reappropriate it, or via this pop art gesture, put them to the same level as Warhol put Mao and Marilyn all together.

The critical artists were reacting to the years of censorship and to the superficiality of democracy, revealing limits of the new democratic reality. It was our Viennese Actionism, but in place of the old fascists they fought pathologies of Catholic fanaticism and the far right. Artists such as Katarzyna Kozyra, Artur Żmijewski, Zbigniew Libera, Robert Rumas and Grzegorz Klaman were excavating Polish traumas, touching upon themes such as Polish religiosity, the too-soon forgotten memories of the Holocaust, intolerance and exclusions, various taboos, like non-normative sexuality, the body and its visceral aspects or ageing, and the way individuals are controlled in a purportedly free, but actually extremely oppressive, society. Unfortunately, the inequalities wrought by the transformation from communism to capitalism were present in the artworks much more rarely.

They took up the task of testing democracy: it was the system on trial, exposing the fact that the choice between one oppressive system and another is not really a choice, at a moment when the majority of society regarded liberalism as the only option. By self-exposure (such as Kozyra, who posed as Manet's Olympia while suffering from cancer) or assuming the role of a perpetrator (Żmijewski asking a former concentration camp prisoner to “renew” the number tattooed on his arm), critical artists were frequently becoming the object of harsh, politically motivated

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censorship and hostile social ostracism by the right-wing press. Gallery closures were common, as was the removal or even destruction of work. The most famous case of censorship was the 8 year long trial of Dorota Nieznalska, concerning her 2001 work *Passion*, where she put a photograph of male genitals onto a cross. She was finally cleared of the charges, but this trial remains a reminder of the abuse of free speech in Poland.

Yet history didn't stand still, and when a new leftist circle, *Krytyka Polityczna*, was founded, Żmijewski started to criticize this kind of art for being self-indulgent and for its lack of visible political success. Critical art had not disrupted the system, it was claimed. Worse, it had become a playful, attractive gallery object, all the more pathetic given its initial ambitions. In 2005, Żmijewski became an art editor at *Krytyka Polityczna's* journal, where he published his manifesto, 'Applied Social Arts', which prompted fervent debate about the political impact of Polish critical art. Interestingly enough, at the same time Żmijewski was accusing his peers of political indifference and lack of taking serious risks, he, Kozyra and Pawel Althamer were becoming renowned names, appearing frequently in international art magazines. And exactly when a new generation of artists born in the 70s and 80s entered the scene and were cutting off from the "critical" generation, they, to whom Bałka also belongs by age, had started to get the official nod: there were huge retrospectives for Libera and Kozyra as well as big group shows in the key Polish art institutions. Apparently, they no longer threatened the establishment, they wouldn't shake Poland. But was this really the case? In this one sense Żmijewski was wrong: critical art was capable of political agency, because it provoked national debates that redefined the status quo.

Yet the appearance of *Krytyka Polityczna* and Żmijewski's manifesto instigated polemics within the scene itself. Artists who obviously had strong political agendas weren't used to inscribing themselves strongly on the "left" or any other political side, as that language was a taboo in post-communist Poland. Not all of them

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were happy with Żmijewski's manifesto, as other, less obvious elements played a role: Krytyka and Żmijewski were in Warsaw, the capital, where all the cultural capital went, unlike some other critical artists, and in the new Poland the rest of the country was becoming increasingly marginalized and, in effect, was turning to reactionary politics.

Żmijewski, as if in an act of expiation for his previous, not engaged enough art, responded with a number of socially engaged works: he filmed dozens of demonstrations, rallies and protests for his ongoing series *Democracies*; in his *Work* series he filmed people doing particularly unattractive, numbing jobs: a cashier in a hyper-market or a street cleaner. Then the Smolensk catastrophe happened. Żmijewski then responded with a film about the mourning on the streets of Warsaw, *Catastrophe*, which studied the behavior of the crowd that stood in front of the Presidential Palace brandishing a giant cross, raising all kinds of social tensions. Żmijewski himself chose provocatively to side with the religious crowd, presenting them in a positive light, rather than the counter-demonstration there, whose marchers, yearning for a secular country, called for the release of city space from the church's domination.

Żmijewski's aim is always to provoke the viewer into recognizing his own political choices, yet someone less sympathetic could also see in this a search for 'sensation', simply some good and provocative material. I sympathize more with the actions in public space of the "post-critical" artist Joanna Rajkowska, who often comes into spaces between conflicted groups, and tries to mediate between them. Some of places she chooses formerly belonged to one ideology, and later were obliterated. One such space is the square in the former Warsaw ghetto where the contemporary Israeli trips come to the Synagogue, and a nearby church was selling anti-Semitic brochures. In this toxic area Rajkowska built an artificial pond, a so called 'Oxygenator', that was mainly used by the formerly neglected pensioners living nearby, who were



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4.3 Pussy Riot perform in front of a Moscow cathedral.

suddenly enjoying public space, and created a different view for the Israeli teenagers on their compulsory Holocaust trips to the “land of death”. Despite the pond’s popularity, city authorities objected to prolonging its few months existence. Later they built a typical, much less inviting or original pond there, which is hardly used as much as its predecessor.

The art historian Piotr Piotrowski calls this gesture “agoraphilia”, an obsession with the public space and the community(ies) it’s evoking, and which for long had no right to exist. Yet, in so doing, Polish critical artists neglected many other groups, like the new underclasses, which also emerged after ‘89 and went unnoticed or kept going, yet were crushed in the new economical reality.

#### An “Impact on Reality”

Joining the international circuit contextualized Polish art. Globalization runs deeply into our part of the world as far as economic aspects are concerned: we inherit post-Fordism and crises, but in even more blatant forms. Becoming part of the same processes, the art of the former East went through a hastened course of all the currents that omitted it in the past 50 years, gaining some of the new ambivalent consciousness or making critical art

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which then becomes part of the market. Yet there must persist still something of a myth of the East, since many of the interesting artists emerged from its politically unquiet clichés, and what's more, make art which exactly fits into those expectations.

By now the critique of instrumentalizing political issues, and of relational aesthetics especially, has become nearly banal. It is made from different perspectives though. The Berlin Biennale got criticisms for its complete ignoring of the "real art" (that is, paintings, installations, objects). The more progressive circles critiqued the way that Żmijewski simply assumed that socially engaged actions wouldn't become merely objectified themselves. In this it's certainly no better than just another exhibition with canvases on the wall. By the sheer inviting of leftist artists or the Occupy activists and closing them in a gallery, it's rather just objectification, making ideas harmless.

Yet this could lead us to rethinking some old and mis-used notions of art, like "reality", realness and, in the end, realism. Żmijewski is a perfect example of an artist who felt a 'social' calling and is consciously now using his high position in the art world, to, at least according to him, make it more politically expedient. Yet, expectedly, it didn't have any other effects than a smug shaming and alienating of anyone with a different approach. Yet, there's not enough examination of the sheer notions that this kind of community art operates under: care, interest, politics. In Żmijewski's works, we usually end our knowledge/relation with its subjects exactly where the film finishes. The artists bear no interest in the further lives of people they engage, despite them providing the material for an attractive, "subversive" work of art. Many characters of his films, like the Holocaust survivor who tattooed his concentration camp number again on his forearm, or the people who took part in his 'repetition' of Professor Zimbardo's Stanford Experiment, or deaf children singing Bach cantatas, disappear with their problems so that we can move on. The 'realism' of their lives and suffering is a fictional realism, since it fails to create a

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continuous reality between what is in the gallery and their lives.

It is clear Żmijewski and his like suffocate in the present climate, yet the bona fide solutions they find to it are bound to fail, for obvious dialectical reasons. The situation of an artist who hates 'art' as a bourgeois concept or simply an ideological veil for capitalism is obviously not new and dates from the early twentieth-century avant-garde. When the consumer society started to emerge, artists, especially in Weimar Germany, felt that they had to react against the increasing appropriation of art by the market, but not by necessarily rejecting it completely, even if that was possible. Art could still be a practice, which would come from some everyday job, which could still feed their art. Left-leaning avant-garde artists like Dadaists Georg Grosz, John Heartfield or theatre reformer Erwin Piscator were rallying to the progressive cause. For modern artists there were specific progressive approaches, Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde claimed: "if he doesn't want to be an idler, an antiquated dud, the contemporary artist can only choose between ideology and propaganda in the class struggle. In either case, he must relinquish 'pure art'. Either by enrolling as an architect, an engineer, or an advertising artist in the - unfortunately still highly feudalistically organized - army which develops the industrial forces and exploits the world, or by joining the ranks of the oppressed who are struggling for their share in the world's value, for a meaningful social organization of life, as a recorder and critic reflecting the face of our time, as a propagandist and defender of the revolutionary idea and its supporters.'

Propaganda, instruction, fact, zero psychologism and illusionism – these were the principles of the new art, that was from now on to mingle with the most everyday, most common and banal: newspapers, advertising, radio, cinema, also theatre. Those were there for the artist to use to spread the word. This referred also to the Soviet factography, yet, as the historian specializing in the magazine LEF ("Left Front for the Arts") and productivism Ben Brewster writes, it "must be seen in a triangular debate with

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psychological realism and revolutionary romanticism”, which were the necessary backdrop. Living in the era of screaming fascism, artists saw the mass media as the field in which they had to fight the Nazi propaganda. At least in the case of advertising this prospect ended in a tragic misunderstanding, in which it was capitalism that devoured agit prop, not vice versa. Yet the message is clear. The artist should do the possibly least artistic thing in his other life if he’s to remain an artist – a classic TS Eliot formula (see his *Tradition and Individual Talent*), where the artist was supposed to transfer his talent into business, like advertising, banking or the press. Even if in capitalism advertising wasn’t transformed by the propagandist experience into revolutionary art, it showed the ways a radical socialist art could be practised. The artist was at best a virus on capitalist society’s unhealthy body, infecting it with ideas.

A group from the “oppressed East” today worth mentioning in this context is Voina – a collective from St Petersburg who in the last few years have provoked the Putinian regime by many flippant actions, the most famous being drawing a gigantic phallus on a drawbridge next to the KGB headquarters, just before it was raised. They are also definitely regarded as part of the ‘third avant-garde’. In their case it’s less about the sophisticated artistic means, but the *real* risk the members are putting into their work. Żmijewski made them the co-curators of his Berlin Biennale as an attempt to save them from arrest. Many of the artists engaged in the Biennale came from places where it can’t entirely be said there’s no movement or no serious political cause. If we say that everything that gets caught up in the rigmarole of late capitalism is necessarily formatted by it, does that mean the mystical Russian east manages to exist somehow outside of it?

Yet, for that reason precisely Voina have become the best-loved darlings of the Western artworld, which craves nothing more than their authenticity, which, in effect, despite the real life risks the artists are taking, does not essentially change the meaning of their gestures, which now visible in billions at computer screens or news

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portals, become just another sexy news story, and this time with poor oppressed artists as a background. This reality principle is manifested in the jailing of Pussy Riot (several members of whom were also members of Voina), despite, or maybe with the help of the wide support they received around the world, leading to curious events such as the “staging” of their trial in the London Royal Court and Pussy Riot-themed symposia where pseudo-folk artists like Emmy the Great are asked to “discuss whether feminism in art is dead” or something similarly ludicrous.

Voina as an organization compare interestingly with Femen. But whereas the latter base themselves on their victimization – the protests can only succeed if they fail, if they will be caught by the police or are abused/arrested - Voina operate exactly to the contrary. Voina may then be an antidote, together with other groups which emerged on post-Soviet ground in the shadow of the brutality of authorities, like Chto Delat or Zagreb’s Badco. Voina’s members are an embodiment of Franciscan non-violent resistance: they treat art as it was their everyday life (or vice versa), they embody what they do, they don’t use money, they reject property. Their main feature is their invisibility, so that they can’t be punished for what they do. They never celebrate going to prison, and if they do, they get out of it soon afterwards and easily.

The importance of artistic groups in Russia and Ukraine doesn’t diminish because of their lack of real political power or claims to it. In the current protests Voina probably played a crucial role, after the giant dick waved at the KGB HQ had done the rounds on TV and internet and shown people that everything is possible, even this kind of massive disobedience to the state. Within the absence of democracy those movements play a double role, activizing society. Voina and Pussy Riot successfully instigated an important debate on the connections between artistic action, politics and the state. At the same time, much art that is supposed to stand for “avant-garde” today seems to be in an irreconcilable crisis. It would like to dwell on the experiences (and propagandistic successes) of the previous

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movements, and yet today it is marginalized and insignificant as never before. The problem with Źmijewski and others in the contemporary avant-garde, like the Otolith Group, is that they often use the methods and forms similar to the leftist and conceptual avant-garde existing around the year 1968 but taking them out of their original context and the initial ideas that fed them. Źmijewski was a student of Grzegorz Kowalski, member of the Polish conceptual scene whose original methods of work applied the Polish post-war architect Oskar Hansen's theory of 'Open Form'. Kowalski pursued transcending the notion of a simple artwork and directed artists to create situations, always open-ended, which he popularized in the free, open space of his studio at the Fine Art Academy in Warsaw. Yet the methods of Kowalski were deeply rooted in his own practice and experiments, grounded in the reality of 60s, 70s and 80s People's Poland, while Źmijewski simply takes them and reuses in completely different contexts, as if he was thinking simply that the interest in 'leftist' ideas makes a 'leftist' artist. Decontextualization is often the case with recuperation. Źmijewski often wants to see a 'result', an effect, no matter if this effect is in the end positive or negative. The maximal amount of 'leftism', or 'engagement' is supposed here to give the critical mass of leftism that will finally explode into some leftist paradise. But putting the Occupy movement within the gallery walls will remain as an objectification of the movement. With the recent discussions on the immaterial work and unpaid work of artists, it becomes simply a way the art world cleans its bad conscience at having a more pleasurable, concern-free life than most of the people who have to work for a living.

### The New National Art, or the New Socialist Realism

Contemporary art, even of this kind, that genuinely is sensitive to the political state of affairs and sees its role as similar to the previous engaged avant-gardes, finds itself alienated from the popular sphere. When researching this book in summer 2012, I

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encountered two symptomatic exhibitions. The first was conceived as a “parallel action”, to borrow an expression from Robert Musil, to the Berlin Biennale: *The New National Art*, in Warsaw’s Museum of Modern Art. The second was *Interrupted Song*, a huge exhibition of socialist realism in the Slovakian National Gallery in Bratislava. One was a retrospective of the 50-year old examples of this style of fine and applied arts in communist Czechoslovakia, the other was



4.4 False or true empowerment.  
Wojciech Weiss, ‘Manifesto’,  
1950. In Socialist Realist  
painting people were bigger  
than life.

collecting and positioning the new, inconvenient flourishing of amateur national/patriotic art in Poland, which, with a bit of a stretch, its curators said could be called ‘the new socialist realism’.

Both couldn’t have made a different impression, which rather undermined the intentions of the Warsaw MoMA’s curators. The Bratislava National Gallery – in itself a stupendous example of socialist modernism, with its cubist, experimental form, - presented ‘sotsrealism’ in its all visual forms, from paintings to street decorations and banners, to the design of a flat and souvenirs.

If anything, this *Interrupted Song* showed sotsrealism as a prisoner of its conventions and political conditions. Uncountable amounts of canvases, over and over, of heads of state, boring, repetitive identical depictions of street demonstrations, colossal, monumental figures of workers like gods. And, at the same time, a feeling of inappropriateness: should we really *look* at them? Sotsrealist paintings now made an impression similar to pornography: we feel we shouldn’t be looking and yet there’s something in it, the feeling of the *Verboten*, that makes it

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exciting. This is also the way Boris Groys writes about socialist realism: today, hidden in the museum magazines, it is not the avant-garde that seems to retain a subversive power. But can we honestly say that it can be found in paintings which were often endorsing dictators, turning famines and bloody events into kitschy neo-tsarist poetry? What impressed in the Bratislava show, apart from the sheer quantity, was the seeming 'amateurism' of Sotsrealist art, seeing how many of the previous styles and poetics persisted within the new, obligatory style, unnoticed or rather transferred too amateurishly so be taken seriously.

*Interrupted Song* showed how within sotsrealism we can seldom find the things we usually associate with artistic excellence: the notions of originality, individuality or technical accomplishment, cease to exist. Instead, we encounter rooms full of almost identical paintings, in which we wouldn't be able to distinguish the artists if not for the labels next to them. Sotsrealism encouraged nationalism, but was selective about which elements of a particular country's patriotic traditions could be used – after all, they could start giving people ideas. In this way the impeccably folksy, reactionary nationalist Slovak painter Martin Benka was banned as a "formalist". Czechoslovakia had strong pre-war avant-garde traditions, especially surrealism. So we still find some quite stupefying examples of Sotsrealism informed by pre-war ideas, like Ladislav Guderna's constructivist, aggressively colored *New Machine Station*, or Edita Spannerova's *In the Kindergarden*, where an uncanny, brightly lit group of little children and their maids sits closer to Balthus' underage Lolitas than to the distinguished men of Stalin's portraitist Gerasimov. We can also spot hints of Gustave Dore, Gustave Courbet or Expressionism. But mostly, the rooms of the gallery were filled by insipid large-format portraits, pathetic, metaphorical visions of worker's labor and the forthcoming Golden Age. Individual talent ceased to have any importance. What was important, at least in intention, was how art will *transform* their lives, how it'll play a role within their most



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everyday life: let's remember sotsrealism wasn't only, although it was in huge part, monumental paintings cherishing agriculture and heroic labor. Sotsrealism was supposed to encompass the *totality* of human life – which today, with the complete dismissal of any project of totality as totalitarian, is completely rejected, supposedly for the sake of 'pluralism'. It'll be better to understand the specificity of sotsrealism by remembering what came directly afterwards: Poland and other more liberal satellites adapted a more modern style in art and design, a Brussels Expo '58 colorful optimism, while Russia remained skeptical towards abstraction until the end.

Another level of sotsrealism is architecture, which was, as some say today, pioneering of postmodernism, in its neoclassical or eclectic revival. Maybe that's why there wasn't a great deal of controversy when the infamous publishing empire of Dr Andreas Papadakis, with its flagship magazine *Architectural Design*, was in the 1980s regularly publishing outpourings of Charles Jencks in praise of the tastes of HRH Prince Charles, Leon Krier's praise of Albert Speer and Anthony Gormley's monumental, figurative sculptures next to Russian correspondence on the Sotsrealist mosaics of the Moscow Metro and the fair at VDNKh (the All-Russian Exhibition site in Moscow, representing an especially flamboyant type of Sotsrealist architecture), often by the great specialist in Russian avant-garde, Catherine Cooke – because in the end they all expressed the same aesthetic sensitivity. "Pluralism", as understood since the 90s, meant usually the horrific monumental neoclassicism of sculptors like Igor Mitoraj or Zurab Tsereteli, not dissimilar to the 'Gormleyism' spreading across the British Isles.

By contrast Warsaw MoMA, normally devoted to sophisticated conceptual art or rediscovering socialist modernism (like the pioneer feminist sculptor Alina Szapocznikow), for the whole summer of 2012 was a strange house for the creativity of the political "other side", showcasing the aesthetic expressions of the recent right wing movements and its sympathizers in Poland.

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Among them were “flower carpets” made by women from the church circles during the processions of the Corpus Christi holiday, fragments of the gigantic figure of Jesus (bigger than in Rio de Janeiro) from the small town of Swiebodzin, visual frames from football matches (e.g. mass ornaments on the terraces, with a gigantic face of Jesus inscribed into the team logo), covers of the “intellectual” journals of the Polish right like *Fronda*, clips/visuals from Polish nationalistic hip hop, and most preeminently, artworks and projects associated with the infamous Smolensk plane catastrophe.

The Smolensk catastrophe spawned political divisions and many right wing conspiracy theories, but hasn't, surprisingly, affected the polls – more people are still voting for the neoliberals of Civic Platform, leaving the right wing, Catholic and nationalist Law & Justice behind. Yet, ideologically, society is divided. Smolensk augmented the break within society that existed already. The works collected at the exhibition largely dwelt on emotions “repressed” from the modern progressive discourse, like patriotism, nationalism and piousness in the Catholic religion. Granting them a place in a prestigious gallery, seemingly brings these repressed discourses into art, which polarized Polish society after Smolensk. This is neither ‘relational’ nor it is simply ‘authentic’ art. It was rather folk art – fulfilling all the premises of this kind of expression. As Alex Niven in his *Folk Opposition* points out on the British context any spontaneous, anti-bourgeois, working/peasant class expression has been today either neutralized and taken over by the middle classes, or given a political label of far right. For the progressive, liberal art circles it means (mostly) “don't touch”. Yet it could be felt that the show electrified the debate, as it gathered what perfectly fitted the fetishized category of ‘authenticity’, realness and all sorts of street-cred. The presented artefacts are similar to the art most willingly promoted by the progressive institutions: they are second or third circuit, and were done according to the DIY ethos. They are the ‘unofficial narrations’, those “other

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traditions" we mentioned in the third chapter. Yet the same spirit is expressed by the popular and often reactionary historical superproductions at the cinema, ubiquitous in the former Soviet Bloc, with films like *Battle of Warsaw 1920* taking revenge on communist times. Made for millions of taxpayers money and promoting nationalistic behavior, they couldn't be further from folk art.

The artefacts presented often came to existence in the process of collaboration, group activity and within the direct engagement in reality, and within unofficial, spontaneous channels, which sounds exactly like the community art ideal. Yet what "effect" these works may have – and do – on the reality, is strengthening the feeling of national identity, of feelings that are often xenophobic and lead to an exclusion of others, which of course couldn't be further from the ideas of the leftist avant-garde. Coming back to TS Eliot's essay title, where is the relation between the tradition (which the avant-garde rejected in strongest terms) and the individual artist? As for the aesthetics of the presented works, they were mostly complete amateurism combined with a reactionary mindset that sometimes produced accidental aesthetics, as if from a fanatic Sunday artists club: they dwell on the passeist aesthetics, freely mixing the imagery from different levels, pop with world art movements and sacred art. There are exclusions: *Fronda's* covers from the beginning presented a very high level of graphic design. What of it though, if they're serving a despicable cause?

If anything from the past, this art reminded me of the spontaneous artefacts created by the members of the Solidarity movement – by workers interned, under arrest or during the difficult period of strikes in 1980-81. Political, agit-prop leaflets, posters, banners, picket placards, stamps, postcards, badges, prints on fabric, magazines, even jewellery made of barbed wire – all DIY, all printed, Xeroxed and distributed with often the most primitive methods. Overnight workers had to become propagandists, paint their own posters, which often presented an extremely high and interesting level of graphic design. They combined collage, comic

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4.5 Flower arranging at the New National Art exhibition at the Warsaw MoMA.

strips, quotations from older art, prison associations, elements of mass imagination, verbal jokes. They also use the visual symbols of the forbidden historical events – the Warsaw Uprising from 1944 or previous, bloody strikes. The symbol of the union itself, the famous red lettered SOLIDARITY in itself is a magnificently done logo. Although often expressing the anticommunism and devotion to Pope John Paul the Second, there was something carnivalesque to the way workers – artists, amateurs - treated any available element. The carnival of Solidarity, as those two years were called, brought

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a short lived unity which, subsequently, was lost. The pre-existing divisions within the movement won out after the unjust division of power after '89. The right wing within the movement formed a stubborn, closed front, where it was becoming increasingly reactionary.

In PRL, in order to be considered an artist, one had to have permission from the state, with proper studies finished, and to be registered. Yet the contemporary sophisticated leftist movement don't seem interested in working out a strong, appealing, powerful aesthetics, and reject it as kitsch or superficial. We used to have a powerful aesthetic of protest in the form of a strong grassroots movement, which today remains in the hands on the other side of the barricade, as the other side has a 'cause' it strongly believes in. Aesthetics develop alongside movements, and the greatest failure of the post-communist countries is the inability to create a strong labor movement. If the aesthetic of the right seems strong now, even if amateurish and not according with our sophisticated expectations, it's a manifestation of a movement we ourselves don't have.

The show revealed two Polands: one, which spoke through absence and which its liberal elites aspire to, and another one, abandoned by the state, used by the populists, but also poorer and less well educated people. Yet it retains a powerful position as "this is what the majority wants in Poland", serving as an excuse for the politicians to continuously refuse rights for the minorities. We live in a reality in which those two groups are constantly and rightly, antagonized. The novelty is that the former are no longer happy with the status of the uneducated masses. There's the new intellectual right, which takes the lesson from the sophisticated left by founding magazines and discussion clubs not dissimilar to the left. This is not a Polish specificity, as the most prominent example is perhaps the Italian Casa Pound. The anachronistic, national or even folk/legendary aesthetic is what the abandoned parts of Polish society hide behind, scared of modernity. Yet, unlike the Romantics, who wanted to re-examine and exorcise Polish traumas, they are

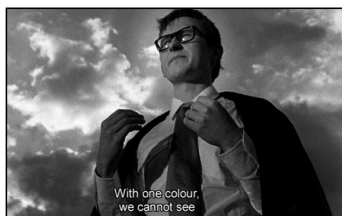
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interested only in preserving the life-giving power of trauma, of mythological wars, without which they'd lose their *raison d'être*. Yet it also discloses the great failure of the intelligentsia, who lost the battle for the forms of modernity. Instead of the modernity of socialism, we got a modernity entirely stolen by the neoliberal version of capitalism.

Hardly "the new socialist realism", this, as sotsrealism was a state art, if equally an expression of nationalist kitsch - and, of course, there couldn't be a term that would cause greater offence to the communism-loathing far right. Yet, if sotsrealism was apart from nationalism, an expression of several other ideas, what do the artefacts grouped in Warsaw MoMA represent by comparison? Of course, this isn't sotsrealism in any practical sense, only metaphorical. The people who make this art do not possess actual political power. But they do epitomize a political force that can't be ignored, like the Catholic Church. The question about New National Art remains: is the notion of "art" in here actually neutralizing something that is possibly much more dangerous? It wouldn't be the first time in history that the right wing and avant-garde would meet. Art historians still have problems how to categorize the views of the Futurists, or Vorticists like Wyndham Lewis, and how to appreciate art which was inseparable from their often despicable, fascist political views. So is it merely just "the other side", we should think, or a reverse of what was happening at Żmijewski's Biennale? This new 'folk art' should be cherished by the artists connected to the relational/participatory/engaged aesthetic: it is popular, it is made by 'ordinary people', it is 'spontaneous'. Yet, how to deal with its ideological content? Doesn't it rather reflect the social construction of the masses created by the sophisticated, educated, liberal elite?

An equally curious example of reinterpreting Socialist Realist aesthetics is a work by Israeli artist Yael Bartana, shown recently in the UK, *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, a staged video trilogy about a fictitious "comeback" of Jews, killed in the Holocaust, to Poland.

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4.6 Polish intelligentsia in the lost cause. Bartana's fantasy of the Jewish return back to Poland.

The first part of the video is called "Phantoms-Nightmares", which could be a semi-conscious reference to the uncanny tradition of Polish Romanticism in the writings of Maria Janion, to whom we referred to in Chapter Three of this book – something which Bartana could have learned via her collaborators from Krytyka Polityczna. It's also a reference to

the evil which was done to the Jews in the Holocaust, who are now called to come back – yet in what form? Does she mean the descendants of those Jews who were killed? Or does she demand a return of the dead Jews? And on which premises, who gives her the right, one might ask? And if they're dead, are they to make a rebirth, and in what form? As the phantoms in the Forefathers Eve? Or maybe as zombies from a nightmare? Despite being Israeli, Bartana became the artist of the Polish Pavilion in the Venice Biennale 2011. The first part shows the informal 'leader' of Krytyka Polityczna, Sławek Sierakowski, stylized as a 1950s Polish 'intelligent' – dressed in thick glasses, jumper and in grey colors, as he delivers a passionate speech in the empty – significantly – 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw. This Stadium had a rich history – built in a socialist modernist style, it was one of the first buildings in 50s Poland where architects successfully negotiated the rules of socialist realism, and was recently demolished for the sake of the new, bombastic Polish-flag-wrapped kitsch of the National Stadium, ready for the Poland/Ukraine Euro 2012. The speech, co-written by Sierakowski, is a pathetic address to the – dead? alive? – three million Polish Jews to come back to the land, which previously brought a Holocaust upon them or forced them into emigration in 1968. It's an apology for their suffering and promise of a new alliance, in which Poles and Jews will no longer be hostile

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to each other. The second part of the triptych shows the Jews that responded to the appeal, coming back and building a kibbutz in the place of the former Warsaw Ghetto. In the third part, the Leader, Sierakowski, is assassinated during another speech and buried.

Art was in this case to have real life continuation – there was, during the aforementioned Berlin Biennale, a Symposium of the Jewish Renaissance Movement. In Poland, among the Jewish community itself, it caused mixed feelings. We know that the idea of a “comeback” of Jews couldn’t be farther from reality, not only because of the mutual attitudes of Israelis and the continent. The Polish-Jewish historian Jan Tomasz Gross, author of breakthrough books on Polish anti-Semitism during and after WWII like *Neighbours*, on a pogrom in Jedwabne and *Golden Harvest*, on Poles betraying Jews for money, said about this project that only treated symbolically does it make any sense. In the history of Poland we heard various directives telling Jews where they should go, from Madagascar to Palestine, during the anti-Semitic 1930s, so telling them to come back to Poland is not innocuous. Poles need to realize the hole, the void that was left after the Jewish population’s extermination. Bartana’s cycle, even if objectionable, historically simplifying and too easily sidestepping the profound problems it raises, was interesting because of its form: its Sotsrealist aesthetics was partly intended to evoke the lost early socialist past (and political aesthetics) of Israel, land of kibbutzes, where the pioneers were to found a new world. The films, especially the middle part of the trilogy, evoke the socialist propagandist newsreels, full of healthy bodies affirming their physical fitness and beauty so conspicuous in early socialist heroic art. The question whether the film’s message is ‘for real’ or a political spoof and political scandal is hanging there, to the delight of the artist, no doubt. Yet, Bartana seems to take this at face value, unable to give a counter, critical look. The text of the speech is ludicrous, and neglects the contemporary position of Israel as oppressor of Palestinians. It is a mock



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politics, conveyed in a knowingly cheesy form.

#### From avant-garde to realism (and back again)

Artists today can once again take Marxism seriously, yet its effect is necessarily weakened by the lack of a strong movement such an art could represent. But is another weakness leftist art's devotion to old notions of the avant-garde? Andre Bazin in his essay on realism pointed out its hunger to "bring back to life", a hunger (not accidentally having here sexual connotations), that can be compared to Badiou's passion of the Real. What lies behind the fear of realism? It's an aesthetic that has been ridiculed and become politically bankrupt, as in the cases of sotsrealism in the Soviet Union or China. Socialist Realism was a question of life and death to many under socialism, and hence is part of post-Soviet trauma. We often see it and think about it with shame. Not only in art, but also in literature and architecture, sotsrealism is an easy straw man, as it's easy to see an oppressor and oppressee in there, and we're never the oppressor. Surveying Sotsrealism requires from us a complete redefinition and rethinking over what was the function of the artwork, what was the idea of an artist, what was his role.

It was in the 80s that artists and critics began to confront Sotsrealism again, after Martial Law in Poland, when the disgust at the system reached its limits and the system itself began to decay. There were new possibilities for boycotting the system, there appeared new options for democratic opposition, and critics wanted to somehow regain sotsrealism, as the style-purveyor of realism, figuration and painting. At this time people were disillusioned with the avant-garde. And exactly then the slim but controversial book by Boris Groys was published, in 1987: *The Total Art of Stalinism* (*Gesamtkunstwerk Stalins* in the German original).

Historically the first avant-garde was trying to bring art back to the everyday, and its practices were eventually to transform political and social reality. In every respect, 'avant-garde' is a retrospective, synoptic term, used by critics such as Clement Greenberg

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(late 1930s), Harold Rosenberg, Peter Burger (since the 1950s), to describe more than just art itself, often conflated with modernism, but also its political context. 'Avant-garde' artists were in fact calling themselves the Neues Bauen, Neue Sachlichkeit, Futurists, Constructivists, Expressionists or Dadaists. Later, with the consolidation of Stalinism in the late 1920s USSR, a new style, 'socialist realism', was the expression of the spirit of 'socialism in one country'. Art was supposed to be 'national in form, socialist in content'.

In recent years, some historians and critics have started to re-examine Sotsrealist artists like Alexander Deineka or Yuri Pimenov, both of whom had participated in the experimental period of Soviet art during the NEP era, before turning back to the style of the nineteenth-century Society of Easel Painters. In their work it was possible both to fulfil the rules of sotsrealism and still retain an ambivalent, uncanny avant-gardism. In Pimenov's painting *New Moscow* we see for instance a New York-like landscape of skyscrapers, and a girl in the car riding through this uncanny atmosphere, with the allure of emancipation from the usual feminine fate of kitchen and family. In the example of Sotsrealist artists who managed to retain and entangle the new demands with their previous personality, like Deineka, we can see a continuation of avant-garde stylistics taken into new territory. In many 1930s paintings we can still see the remnants of other, pre Sotsrealist styles, before they were banned, especially Expressionism and Neue Sachlichkeit, with their montage-like, overtly industrial, half abstract compositions experimenting with perspective. But while their earlier works genuinely tried to work out the contradictions within the socialist reality of the 1920s, after that they presented too easy a pictoriality, and a problem-free vision of collective life.

Presently the viewpoint that the Sotsrealist doctrine was simply "imposed" on artists is being actively challenged by art historians. As Christina Kiaer writes in her essay *Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The case of Aleksandr Deineka*, artists were not only victims

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but also necessarily helped in constituting the predominant ideology. The opening of their art to the widest possible public by the state might have just as well freed the artists from the market necessities. Yet their pictures of the “collective laboring body” create all sorts of negative as much as positive images of the meaning of communism in Russia. As Sotsrealist paintings are both realistic and heavy on metaphor, they are in their idea not dissimilar to the avant-garde, Constructivist idea of a work of art which would use both modernity (photomontage, abstraction) and a literal socialist message (slogans, lettering). Technology meets abstraction, and a photorealism of depiction meets a crass yet optimistic message.

The replacement of the precious collective genius by the sole leader must’ve meant a readjustment - hence the endless production of ‘heroes’. All Soviet art, regardless, was characterized by a positive take on materiality, and extreme juxtapositions. At the same time, Deineka produces the complete vision of the New Person, accentuating physical strength as beauty, which was at the same time, a realisation of Meyerhold’s avant-garde ambitions: ‘the biomechanical actor partook of the discipline of the dance’, through linking the dancer to a good laborer. A distrust in Freudianism was shared both by the avant-garde and sotsrealism, with their biomechanics and focus on materiality. As art historian Hannah Proctor writes, “the oft-repeated Soviet injunction to make sacrifices in the present in order to reap the eventual benefits of the bright Communist future corresponds to Freud’s reality principle, which he defines as the ‘temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure’.” If we take up this distinction between the critical and automated consciousness, we’ll have the avant-garde and Sotsrealism described quite adequately.

The Russian formalists and constructivists saw the new art movement in terms of how it displayed its modes and devices of operation, art being its own undoing, a defamiliarizing, critical negativity. In sotsrealism the consciousness of an audience was

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4.7 The New Man. A mosaic in the Moscow Metro by Aleksandr Deineka - the unobviousness of Socialist Realism.

automated, in the Pavlovian sense. Yet sotsrealism was far from simple. It wasn't only a state, total art, creating a whole with the state apparatus, it was also intended to act dialectically. The dialectical act was constituted when a person was seeing not what *is* but what *should be*. Sotsrealism, though claiming realism, was never realistic in the veristic sense. It was projecting the reality that didn't exist, but was to be created as the final goal of Soviet history. We were anticipating the future of socialism that never came. Also, Sotsrealism is devoted to depicting a time and space richly filled – quite contrary to the stagnant, eventless, empty and wasted time of the reality of socialism. Sotsrealism represses eventlessness, in

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theory precisely to liquidate the gap between life and art apparently created by formalism. The relation Sotsrealism had with reality was schizophrenic, with its tension between what 'should be' and what really is.

Sotsrealism's main theoretician Maxim Gorky criticized constructivism for being distant from the workers movement, for fetishizing technology, for being too Western and 'decadent'. This work was now dubbed 'formalism', in Germany it was called Degenerate art, and in Anglo-Saxon world, USA and the UK – modernism. In the recent discussions of the legacy of the counter-cultural movement and conceptualism, especially in the post-communist countries, like Poland, it's is largely referred to as the "avant-garde" and continued to be after the war, as documented in Piotr Piotrowski's useful compendium on Polish conceptualism of the 1970s, *The Avant-Garde in the Shadow of Yalta*. The so-called second avant-garde after the war was an aesthetic effect of the development of capitalism: on one hand, in America, pop art was a partly critical/fascinated result of the progression of the capitalist market. On the other, it was a result of the invention of the youth in the 50s, the growing independence of the younger generation, developing a critique of society, aesthetic emancipation, anti-market alienation and creating a counterculture against the "establishment".

The role of art changed: before the war it was mostly a 'national' question and, in the case of Poland and many other underdeveloped countries from outside Western Europe, also a ticket to (understood more or less in a Western way) modernity. After the war, art radically changed its meaning, being still nationalistic in form, but in a unified, Soviet way and presiding over its own Soviet version of modernity – at least officially.

The fundamental difference was that whereas the avant-garde found the only confirmation of its existence in a constant, methodical erasure of its own methods, a constant self-erasure, Socialist Realism was searching for what is eternal. Boris Groys'

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book was written exactly when the communist construction was falling into ruins. The avant-garde was supposed to create a New Man, to create not only the visual environment, but to change the world itself, and this, as Groys suggests, “destroyed them”. After 1917, with liberalism discredited after wars and pogroms, progressive workers and intelligentsia took the side of socialism and communism as internationalist, emancipatory movements, which made them the front guard of humanity, heirs to the progressive leftists from Chernyshevsky’s novel *What is to be Done?* American historian Marci Shore calls their engagement in the communist regime a ‘loss of innocence’. Yet what was the alternative, and what innocence can we speak of in the case of those who had just gone through the experience of war, mass killing, revolution and great crisis? Isaiah Berlin writes in *Russian Thinkers* on their ‘fanatical devotion to ideas’. Perhaps this was the case with Herzen, Chernyshevsky or Trotsky, but not of the white intelligentsia, who didn’t risk nearly enough. Groys’ thesis is that we cannot make the distinction between the early avant-garde and the later sotsrealism, as the generation engaged in Bolshevism was the same who later helped create the total state apparatus and so had a distant role in the crimes of Stalinism.

Let’s remember about the breaks within the avant-garde itself – dada detested utopianism, yet it supported the communist movement in Berlin, and the constructivists in Russia were looked at skeptically by the revolutionary establishment in the 1920s. They were naïve, says Groys, as it is obviously the Party who were really controlling the changes that were taking place, not artists. Groys argues that the same generation of educated elites conceived sotsrealism, and that this realism was brought about by the same kind of future-oriented thinking. Yet, as the ruling class of Stalinism recruited mostly from the generation born in the nineteenth century, they endorsed art with which they were familiar, i.e. the grand scale naturalism and realism of the Tsarist nineteenth and early twentieth century. The problem was that

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realism became the official, state art not only in Russia, but also in Nazi Germany; that it helped not only to cover a reality of political barbarity, mass murders and famines, but it helped to stabilize and consolidate this power.

Socialist realism was very much connected with the personality of Stalin – and it quickly disintegrated after his demise. After that Russian art (and art within the Bloc in general) went two ways: it copies Western, partly abstract, modern art, which is with time incorporated within the state; or by pursuing conceptual ways, it continues with a realist mode, which in Russia created ‘Sots Art’, a sarcastic version of Western Pop Art, which instead of symbols of consumerism, inverts it and takes up the symbols of real socialism: images of the first secretaries, Soviet rituals and state control expressed at every step of life.

Sots Art mocked the facadism of an unbearable, ritualised Soviet life. On some of the most recognized Sots Art works Western symbols appear, like Coca-cola, next to the rough symbols of Soviet



4.8 Attempting normal life among the ruins of the old world. Wolfgang Staudte,

The Murderers are  
Among Us.

life, predicting already at this point, not only how easy it will be for Western capital to infiltrate and take over the weakened, demoralized structure of late Soviet reality; it also puts them where they belong. All, Lenin, Mao and Coke, belong to the same order of images, the same degraded realm. Nowadays, this naïve juxtaposition of ideologies doesn't flatter these works, when we're far more aware of the political value of the real complexities between the capitalist transition and

the role that the East played within the post-communist reality in the West.

The reason Sots Art was among the most instantly popular exports from the East to the West was the easiness and instant

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understandability of their communiqués. Similarly, the work of many of the Moscow conceptualists, including the sophisticated installations of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov or the scornful duo Komar & Melamid, were initially read simplistically, as gestures of resistance to the oppressive Russian reality. We see now that they didn't simply refer critically to the Soviet reality, but saw already the traps of what is beyond it, of all the capitalist world, and that there's nothing really oppositional between the myths of Uncle Joe and Uncle Sam.

## Inside the Socialist Reality

*I should be compelled to abolish reality!*

Ulrich in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*

Yet the critique of avant-garde methods wasn't always drably primitive obscurantism. The reason we can still consider it today is largely due to György Lukács' insightful criticisms of so-called bourgeois modernism, in works like *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957). Lukács deeply admired much early modernism, especially Thomas Mann's bourgeois grand novels. Early on Lukács saw the predicament of modernism as precisely its malaise: it wanted to present the disintegration of a certain world, but at the same time, it indulges itself with the same decadence it's trying to describe.

What he called the "modernist ideology" underlying modern literature was the contradictory attempt at a rejection of narrative objectivity and the surrender to subjectivity, whose results may vary from Joyce's stream of consciousness to the studied objective passivity of Musil, or Gide's 'action gratuite'. The problem is Lukács doesn't accept the positive sense of the 'dissociation of sensibility' found in its negativity. For him, realism 'aiming at truthful reflection of reality must demonstrate both the concrete and abstract potential of human beings in extreme situations'.



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Actions then must reveal themselves dialectically, in their becoming. The 'critical realism' he proposes was not far off Brecht or the Frankfurt school's idea of the partial, potential unveiling of an artwork's reality, by which they expected to inspire and activate the reader to become the part of the story.

For Lukács, modernism didn't have enough of an educational, parable-like quality. He didn't reject experimentalism per se, as we can see in his lucid words on Musil. The latter is quoted saying that although one could tell without doubt that his *Man Without Qualities* takes place between 1912-1914, he 'has not, [he] insists, written a historical novel. I am not concerned with actual events. Events, anyhow, are interchangeable. I am interested in what is typical, in what one might call the ghostly aspect of reality.' The problems with Lukács' doctrine start with his criticism of Western 'degenerate' modernist art. In his critique 'Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann', pointing out the former's decadence, isn't he merely repeating the arguments of the brown-uniformed gentlemen from two decades earlier? Lukács is of course too sophisticated for that. Yet his idea of the 'inside' and 'outside', where a socialist realist work is the one speaking of socialism from the inside, is deeply dubious.

Lukács was no Zhdanov and saw the great tragedy of the modern artist as someone who lost the ground under their feet, but, as with Musil, treated this as an advance rather than a difficulty. What Lukács was rejecting in modernism was dictated by his sensing how easily modernist devices can be transformed basically into an aestheticization of politics. This must be in the end a failure, because the recognition of art's value must lose set against the necessity of art and literature to have a proper effect on reality - and such effects cannot be planned. In theory, these works would be playful, when in practice, Socialist realist literature was anything but: rigid 'production' novels replaced any expression of art which didn't have the desired direct meaning. Yet Lukács did understand the doubly contradictory nature of the avant-garde (self creation

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and self-destruction), and wanted the new socialist art to avoid its negative effects. According to Lukács, the work of art must represent totality as well as legibility. He objected to the avant-garde idea of the aesthetic of fragments (practiced by the Russian avant-garde of Constructivist provenance and Objectivist circles in Germany), which will be only made legible within the dialectical process of understanding by the audience, actively participating in the constitution of meaning, a so-called “critical realism”.

His theories were recognized in the DDR especially, where they became a part of official national aesthetics. The “anti-modernist” programme of Lukács was taken up and discussed by the academics and literary critics, since this ‘pre-modernism as realism’ became an obligatory art in socialist republics until the mid-1950s at least. In cinema, this expressed itself in thousands of films, whose sole purpose was to be screened for the workers in the factory cinemas. In socialist realist films, like novels, you had the epics about Production and Construction (*Aufbauroman*) and depicting the development/arrival into socialism on a mass scale. Yet these were the *Nachgeboren*, to quote the famous poem by Brecht, ‘To Those Born Later’. Was it really too late?

With cinematic sotsrealism, the problem is that the actual examples of this cinema are often unwatchable today apart from as curiosities of the era. Let’s take as an example 1940’s *First Horse - Breakthrough on the Polish Front 1920*, which was recently shown as part of the Panslavisms festival in Warsaw, where it was to be an antidote to the anti-Bolshevik contemporary superproductions. Its astounding schematism, boredom and systematic lying about history (with the sudden insertion of Tovarisch Stalin into events in which he didn’t participate) made it very difficult to watch. On the other hand, it could produce films that are quite fascinating. Take for instance several works by the Polish-Jewish director Aleksander Ford, who in the 50s became the omnipowerful boss of Polish cinematography, like *Border Street*, about Jews in wartime Warsaw, saving *themselves* throughout the war, or *Five from Barska*

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*Street*, about a gang of petty criminals that turn into Stakhanovites. The first of these especially presents an interesting counter-narrative to the typical Holocaust film, where Jews are always powerless victims. Socialist realist film didn't always mean the same thing, and largely depended on the talents of its creators. You had also many liminal cases: such is *Generation*, the first full length Andrzej Wajda film (1954), which opens in many ways The Polish Film School, in which the young director is trying to "cheat" his bosses (with Ford as the leader) that he's making a sotsrealist film, while smuggling a new, more neorealistic, psychological style and also a less propagandized version of history. The film tells the story of the last few years of the war in Warsaw, with the group of young friends, who fight and try to survive. While characters still have "proper" proletarian backgrounds and there's no mention of the Home Army, the sheer style, authenticity and lack of pomposity of the film made it a breakthrough of Polish cinema.

What is most interesting is when the directors, especially towards the Thaw, were trying to "cheat" the strict rules by nuancing the compulsory black and white characters, and not necessarily serving as unilateral praise of the Party. Cinema in the Eastern Bloc didn't fall under the necessity of sotsrealism immediately. The first few years still left this door open. In East Germany you had films like *The Murderers Are Among Us* by Wolfgang Staudte (1947) on the difficulties of denazification in the still Nazi-ridden DDR society or, a year later, *Rotation*, about a socialist father forgiving his son, who had become a Nazi during the war and denounced his parents. In these, the first post-war German films, Staudte retained the ideas of the Brechtian epic theatre (even quoting his songs), experimental editing, and in general, the style of the pre-Hitler avant-garde. The Weimar provenance of those years was strong, and *The Murderers Are Among Us* gained considerable success in the USA, where its female star Hildegard Kneff briefly became a household name. Those who came back after the war, amongst other places from Moscow, wanted to organize a new film

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industry and thus DEFA (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*) was founded as a German joint-stock company, with blessing from more liberal Soviet representatives.

Only later the ruling SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei*) seized a controlling influence on DEFA, when it was put under the Propaganda Division of the Central Committee of the Party. At this point the Wall still hadn't gone up, and for several years they produced anti-fascist films, which tried to balance a socialist message with artistic accomplishment, tried to address the idea of how to live in Germany after all that had happened.

Socialist film and literature is today often described as "kitsch", this eternal, it seems, problem of dissident intellectuals. This is how Milan Kundera defines it in his *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, where Sabina, a free artist, leaves Czechoslovakia because she can't take the kitsch of living under Soviet rule anymore. Films of the actual sotsrealist era both in Poland and in Germany are difficult to watch without a certain ambivalence. Artistically they're often awful, and we watch them only as documents of an era. One of the essentials was to "reject the Western way of life", "To learn from the Soviet Union means to learn how to win" was the leading slogan. There was a great need after the war for a new, necessarily positive Kulturwelt, especially in the East, whose future suddenly drastically narrowed. Iconic East German writer Christa Wolf describes this in her memoirs, how building the new, idealized future/reality of socialism was an urgent alternative to the catastrophic past.

The production of agit-prop films started running from the late 1940s on, and the aesthetic that was prescribed was a seemingly naïve realism. Films describe the construction sites all over the Wild east in a heroic tone not different from the 30s in the USSR. The films that endured until today and have been released on DVDs are usually the artistic crème de la crème of those productions: Staudte, Konrad Wolf, Kurt Maetzig or Frank Beyer. The best and most renowned films of East Germany were made during the Khrushchev Thaw, though they still retain some Stalinist rigidity.

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Often brave ideologically, the best of them were subsequently banned, when artistic freedoms were curbed again in the mid-1960s. Yet they provide an interesting counterpoint to the ritual accusation that these were ideologized and thus poor artworks.

The first wave were antifascist films, that had to react towards the reality of a post-war sense of shame. With what the West was making looking colorful and sexy, the East was making up by ideologization. The characterization of personages, the situations in which they were involved, always seemed a tad artificially constructed, focusing on the social problems, including the shortages in industry. Yet, in this way they deconstructed other, traditional clichés of cinema. What in capitalist conditions would've become a couple-only focused melodrama, with all the kitsch that entailed, in DEFA couldn't be just that. Characters couldn't just be slackers devoted to sweet love, as any kind of defeatism and slackness was severely punished. In Thaw films like *Born in '45* or *Divided Heaven*, or the later *Solo Sunny*, we see the dissolution of the couple, where it's usually the woman who retains 'dignity' and searches deeper into things.

Directors like Konrad Wolf wanted to come to terms with the hardest period of Stalinism. Hence films like *Sunseekers*, an astonishing mixture of Soviet avant-garde and harsh, workerist content, with such a realistic presentation of the post-war conditions in East Germany (it takes place in a uranium-mining town) it had to be banned. Filmmakers tried to negotiate the conditions of the DDR, but because of the closeness of the West, the censorship was some of the hardest in the Bloc. Even a small critique of the shortcomings of industry, like in the film *Trace of Stones*, which would have passed uncommented in Poland, could be banned. The building of the Wall in 1961 was the final blow. The abrupt turnaround of the DDR economy in the mid-60s led Erich Honecker, then number two in the Party, to blame the artists for the economic disaster of the new economic policy. After the infamous 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum several films/cause célèbres were banned until 1990, including such

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outstanding examples of DEFA cinema as *Trace of Stones*, *The Rabbit Is Me* or *Divided Heaven*.

From today's perspective these films often seem slightly naïve, very righteous and with laughably idealized characters, with pure hearts devoted to the party, even in the artistically most accomplished of them. What is left for the contemporary viewer is the way the films looked. They were Marxist in every sense, yet trying to combine artistry with the depictions of workers struggles. Konrad Wolf's films (*Sunseekers*, *Divided Heaven*, *I was Nineteen*) didn't pretend there were no problems affecting the socialist life in the DDR, and his films escape idealization. In *Sunseekers* everybody is dirty, hungry and frustrated by living in this middle of nowhere mining town, sick of their jobs - but with the implication this is the best they can have for a while. Especially in comparison to the official TV, these DEFA films were very brave indeed.



4.9 The New Woman vs Men of Marble. The fearless feminist director Agnieszka in quest for truth about the communist past, also prophetic of the later obliteration of women's role in Solidarity.

The main difference between the Eastern and Western film culture may actually be their approaches to sex. Just assuming that the Eastern Bloc cinema was more prudish would be a simplification. In the sotsrealist years, of course there couldn't be any mention or show of a single body part or action related to the sexual act. Work and healthy life meant at the same time a complete desexualization of its objects, decent socialist citizens, concerned with work and the serenity of socialist life rather than dark desires. The sanitized iconosphere/iconography, especially up to the mid-50s is full of awkward moments. In the words of many

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Polish authors, even those who remained subjugated to the rules of the new style, workers, especially women, assume strange desexualized forms, for which they're later mocked or patronized. The physicality of those who worked was often described as asexual, disgusting and dehumanized – suggesting that it's only a bourgeois woman who can be truly feminine. Yet sex comes back through the back door in DEFA's Thaw films, to suggest either the general repression and despondency of the young (*Born in '45*) or of the repression of women in particular, as in *The Rabbit Is Me*, where the openness and honesty of a story about a young woman having an affair with a married man well connected in the Party was considered a threat to socialism and banned. Critical films were getting made, yet then deemed not socialist enough. Censorship was much more liberal in Poland in this respect, where from the late 50s, in our version of New Wave and in our comedies sex scenes, though still tastefully arranged, often didn't leave things only to the imagination and didn't get banned. They were no more or less sexually explicit than what you could see in your average Antonioni or Angry Young Men film.

The socialist body within the Bloc was purified and asexual. Also, it is the women who were supposed to carry the burden of chastity. In most DEFA films it is the women who are trying to be good socialists, and the men who are weaker, and who drop out or defect to the West. Socialism is identified with woman's personal strength and virtues. Christa Wolf presented this in *Moskauer Novelle*, where a member of a delegation to the Soviet Union has to deal with a Nazi trauma which is identified with eroticism. She was in love with a Nazi, and only via a repression of sexuality she can become a viable, real socialist. Only after dealing with it, is she now carrying something Slavoj Žižek describes as a "sublime communist body", where the body of communism is marked by redoubling.

Any idea of the original, sexually open communism is suspicious: in the banned films, heroines have a mostly uninhibited,

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healthy relation to their bodies. Stalinism was repressive, moralistic and authoritarian towards sexuality, especially female. How different the relation to the body and the past is in Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1961). There, you also had a woman who was punished for her past passion for a Nazi, but it is only via uninhibited eroticism that she can overcome the trauma and stand on the side of the living. Yet a sexual revolution happened on both sides of the Curtain. In fact, initially we had similar levels of sexual freedom, but we parted our ways only later: over the years a pornographic film industry developed in the capitalist West, which for obvious reasons didn't happen in the East. Young people from my mother's generation stormed cinemas when they were screening Milos Forman's *Loves Of a Blonde* in 1965: for those two minutes of male ass and female half-breast, just as they no doubt did in the West about the scarce nudity in *Blow-up* in 1966.

It is similar in *Divided Heaven*, another of Christa Wolf's novels, adapted for the screen by Konrad Wolf, where similarly the female character's sexuality (in this case an infatuation with a man who turns out to be a weak defector to the West) must be given up in the name of remaining 'faithful to the socialist motherland'. When we meet her, she's just trying to be a good communist: she's a member of the youth branch of the party at school and remains in the DDR even after the wall starts to be erected and there's still time to escape. Perhaps this fatalism was what contributed to banning of the film. Many of Wolf's films shared a similar mood and destiny. The most artistically accomplished DDR director, he is remarkable for showing all the contradictions of socialist commitment, with, yet, the commitment winning out over other, less patriotic feelings, which retain a bitter taste.

Perhaps the most shocking film of all the East German productions I saw was *Hot Summer*, a terrifying, relentlessly silly, pushy and propagandistic "youth film" set against Cliff Richard's *Summer Holiday* in the cultural war with the West, with sing-alongs and a



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plotless structure with unfunny gags – and all this in 1968! What a move backwards in comparison to the post-Thaw cinema. Yet, the Eastern Bloc didn't simply return to pre-modern forms of art. And if the workers were screwed over by the authorities, there were artists aware of it and capable of honestly depicting it on the screen.

### We were men of marble

The conception of women as the carrier-filter of past socialist ideas continually returns, as if it was the notion of female purity and a lack of fixed identity that allowed them to be a good medium for directors to talk about history. This is what happens in Andrzej Wajda's film diptych *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, astonishing films made in the rare but brief little thaw in the 1970s, which share a main female heroine, despite talking about the man-made history. *Man of Marble* was made in 1976, its counterpart, *Man of Iron*, in 1980. The first was affected by the Polish 70s, an era of relative relaxation, after Edward Gierek became the First Party Secretary. The 1970s were a time of seeming 'prosperity' in Poland, when the government wanted to stifle dissent (after the student protests of March '68 and the brutally repressed workers strikes of 1970), via massive international loans that later pushed Poland into great public debt and financial and political crisis. This was the time Wajda, an internationally successful director, could come back to certain traumatic themes from the Polish past, now available again. This sudden relaxation lasted very briefly though, and ended in political crisis which then led to the rise of Solidarity and the crisis which ended in Martial Law in 1981.

Wajda's films frame that period. A young, go-ahead, charmingly self-assured film student, Agnieszka (known only by her first name) is determined to make her graduate film on a forgotten Stakhanovite from the 1950s, Mateusz Birkut, whose rise was as quick as his demise. She's subsequently discouraged by practically everyone she talks to: state television producers, collaborators, people from Birkut's life who she's trying to make speak about him.

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For everybody it seems an unwanted topic – a trauma, which is not only identical with the trauma of Stalinism, but also with the failure of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” which, though promised by the authorities, never really occurred. The films Agnieszka watches in secrecy from her superiors are the verboten images of socialism: the first, made during the early post-war years of acute poverty and devastation, shows state violence against workers, among them Birkut, who is beaten by a functionary while queuing for a plate of soup. Those forbidden fragments are mixed with the “official” ones, where Birkut is recognised in his role as a socialist hero and worshipped by the party officials and the masses. Two images, which couldn’t be more different, now equally stranded in forgetfulness.

Agnieszka goes through the museum magazines full of the now-hidden, scorned and despised monumental art. Gigantic heads, torsos and flags, with bombastic declarations, now empty and meaningless. Yet, it also means the workers principles become meaningless too: Birkut, a complete ingénue, a Polish Yuri Gagarin with an innocent, charming smile, a true believer in socialism, which gave him literacy and transferred him to the city – is first given the highest applause by the authorities. Delighted that he can now do something for his country apart from bricklaying, he starts heralding demands for the better existence of workers, which would be nothing but the logical consequence of a true proletarian dictatorship, if such existed. He doesn’t realize the facadism of the system, he becomes a liability to it, which, in the person of the terrified party officials, then does everything it can to silence him. Finally, an accident at the construction site is arranged, leaving Birkut handicapped and unable to continue physical work – and quickly his monumental portraits are taken down from the 1<sup>st</sup> May march decorations and other propagandistic spaces as he slips into oblivion.

Yet the way the film posits questions about the aesthetic and political quality of the forbidden Sotsrealist materials is surprising

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in its subtlety and intelligence. Wajda didn't use a single second of 'real' archive materials, and every black-and-white newsreel or old propagandistic fragment we watch is utterly fabricated by the director. Through the eyes of Agnieszka, as she slowly discovers the mystery of Birkut, embodying the time of the title's Great Heroes made by the state, we are also ravished and gradually seduced by the aesthetics that accompanied them. Wajda, obviously on Birkut's side, finds himself unable to simply mock sotsrealism. And in the end, he unconsciously adopts some of its principles - heroism, monumentalism, pathos, characters so positive that they're rendered incredible - to make the second part of his film, *Man of Iron*, situated in the Solidarity strikes in the Gdansk shipyards in summer 1980.

Agnieszka doubly represents her generation here - the same who abroad sang 'we could be heroes' or "no more heroes", where heroes disappeared, because either their time has passed or they got discredited. Way ahead of the later Hollywood use of fabricated old newsreels (as in the dreadful *Forrest Gump* and Woody Allen's superior *Zelig*), Wajda posits the question of the authenticity of history as historical material and also as a style, which, now forgotten and denounced, is at every step being recontextualized in his film by the sheer stylization of what "has been". The episodes from Birkut's life are constantly flirting with socialist realism, the then-compulsory style, using its strictly monumental features to the utmost filmic effect. Is Wajda endorsing sotsrealism or ridiculing it? Is he in favor, fascinated or just coldly looking at it? Is he just quoting Eisenstein, or playing with old cinema, a style that in the West, was already then known as "postmodernism"? He's doing all of those things at once. Through the use of the wonderful, mimetic/illusionist powers of the cinema, we at the same time watch the illusion AND the forbidden archive material which was supposed to rot away from the public eye in the cellars forever.

The film is the first proper reassessment of socialist realism not only in Polish cinema, but also in visual arts. Agnieszka, this new,

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dynamic woman symbolizing her own time in the best sense, is suddenly confronted with a past she has no grasp of. Her film on Birkut is pulled, she's hopeless, she blames herself for opening too many wounds from Birkut's life – but that brings her to his estranged son, a former student, who, in a typical idealistic romantic gesture drops education and starts working in a factory, as a belated homage to the killed father, to his memory and to affirm his working-class background.



4.10 Men as Giants. Wajda repeats the Sotsrealist Gesture in *Man of Marble*

Krystyna Janda, playing Agnieszka, embodied a new woman – a bit imaginary, with a bit of wishful thinking, being bold, forthright and jeans-clad, fearless and self-assured. She was a feminist without even realizing it. She looks exactly as if she came from a Second Wave demo or a women's lib Agnes Varda feminist film. She was a feminist, in a patriarchal socialist Poland full of open sexism, and what's more, men recognized her as their equal and respected her. To this day I think Agnieszka was a phantom. She never really existed, she was the projection of a director who wanted a real opposite gender partner whom he respected, although she may be partly based on Agnieszka Holland, prominent director of the Cinema of Moral Concern, who also later became famous in Hollywood. In this sense Agnieszka's fate was prophetic of many Polish women involved in conspiratory politics, the Solidarity movement – and there was no shortage of women in the democratic opposition – who never really reached any significant positions first within the union, and then within the party system or government in "free" Poland. Their often-crucial role was never properly acknowledged. This is predicted in the film, by the sudden change Agnieszka undergoes, when she becomes the companion and wife of Birkut Jr, and later a mother of his child in *Man of Iron*. Her decisiveness disappears, she is interned in prison,

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from which she's beatified in her role as a suffering mother, subjugated both to 'the cause' and her husband, a Gdansk shipyard worker.

Even the characteristic transubstantiation of matter from one film to another – from *Marble*, symbolizing the Stalinist past, to *Iron*, symbolizing the iron will and boldness of the Gdańsk shipyard resistance, no doubt - rings ironic, given who used "Man of Steel" as his pseudonym. *Man of Iron* represented the optimism of Solidarity's first years, completed during the euphoria of Gdansk in summer 1980, only partly predicting that what will happen will be another facadism of behind-closed-doors decisions, and yet another betrayal of the workers. It also glossed over the ideological discrepancies and disagreements within Solidarity itself. It's an incredibly idealistic image of the time, the way Wajda would have liked things to happen: people getting together, a peaceful revolution and a more just world for all. Today we know, too bitterly, how wrong he was, yet it's intriguing that when given an opportunity to finally show Polish society in its most ideal form, he chose an idealized realism – the very style he was supposed to reject.

And what about Agnieszka, our absent Woman of Marble? There's another aspect to the film, which became clear with the next leading role of Krystyna Janda, only year later in 1981, in Ryszard Bugajski's *Interrogation*, where Stalinist repressions were shown from another angle, in the most shocking depiction of that period ever committed to the screen. After playing her contemporary, obsessed with the Stalinist past and doing their victims justice, Janda took the part of one of *them*. In *Interrogation* (finished just a few days before Martial Law was declared that December) she's playing Tonia, a revue-cabaret singer and dancer, touring with a troupe and performing for soldiers and peasants across the miserable landscape of the ruined post-war country. Living the life of a gypsy, careless, constantly under the influence of alcohol, she doesn't even notice when one day she's captured by two hangers-

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on and taken to the secret police commissariat. There she is brutally groped as part of a “forensic examination” while she’s still unconscious from alcohol.

This symbolic “rape” of her body is done repeatedly by other means, when she’s thrown like a sack of potatoes to the overcrowded cell and then wakes up to gradually realise what has happened to her. She’s accused of collaboration with “the enemies of the people”, and her reaction suggests she didn’t even realise these Stalinist processes and purges were going on behind the closed doors. Despite her initial fragility and erratic, unreliable character, the more atrocities, humiliation, violence, terror and abuse she experiences from her secret police perpetrators (the terrifying Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, Security Police), mostly psychotic sadists, to “break” her, the more defiant and stronger she grows. Fascinatingly, Bugajski shows Stalinism as indeed the nightmare of patriarchy as such: from the female victim’s perspective and with men as their ruthless abusers, predominantly as a specific abuse done to women’s bodies. Feminine Tonia is, in the course of the tortures (she’s near-drowned, beaten, isolated, refused food, kept awake, used sexually, denied contacts with her family and finally betrayed by her husband) turned into a pale ghost of herself, with her charms erased, as a special kind of humiliation – to leave a permanent sign. But she grows something else instead: courage, strong will and fearlessness in the face of the state repression apparatus. She’s repressed as a woman: her interrogations are to prove her fault on the basis of her promiscuity and humiliate her chiefly as a “whore” without dignity who sleeps around, so that she’s in a way punished for her sluttiness, not for real treason against the state.

The “treason” is typically Kafkaesque, and the punishment is for something she hasn’t done but she’s supposed to realise as her guilt. In the course of the film also her “fault” becomes meaningless: her oppressors don’t really care what she’s done, the only thing that matters is her *self-criticism*, admitting the crimes she

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hasn't committed (because the socialist state "never makes mistakes"), written and signed, and this is exactly the thing Tonia repeatedly denies them. It's also a story of solidarity growing in most uninviting conditions: the brutalized women in the cells, apart from the expected brutality to one another, express also solidarity and mutual support. Janda opposed the initial script with her character as a victim and rebelled against her role as somebody broken, creating a rare if not unique feminine perspective on the atrocities of the worst period of Stalinism with a woman as an individual, free subject. In this way she widened the historical construction to incorporate also the woman - the *other* of history, absent from the pages of books and largely absent from cinematography, where only the heroic male perspective was favored. She was reclaiming the Women of Marble, the Unknown Heroines, how different and yet similar in their naïve heroism to Mateusz Birkut, both even after the damage is done still believing that justice will prevail. Yet *Interrogation* is the underbelly of *Man of Marble*, where all the sotsrealist decorum is stripped away for the sake of the naked horror of torture away from the officiality and the public, where it's the women, who pay the political price. Also, in *Interrogation*, the divides in social class and background between the women inmates were becoming invisible, they became equals – and in this way Tonia, as a female heroine, stands for all the forgotten women of socialism, of all social classes whose work and contribution has been neglected.

### Soap operas about late capitalism

What is the contemporary socialist realism? One could definitely think here of today's Russia, with all its comeback of the bombastic Tsarist aesthetic and the great-master tastes of its business aristocracy – oligarchy as a sad façade of its undemocratic political processes. Recently Vladimir Putin brought back the Stalinist award 'Hero of Labor', among whose previous recipients are Stalin, Khrushchev and Sakharov. Some people could instantly think of

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this as an act of completion of the restalinization of Russia. But let this not mislead us. If anything, the massive Soviet nostalgia of contemporary Russia is another façade: a façade designed to hide the degree of neoliberalism in the Putin era. As many Russians, whose lives got worse after 1991, yearn for the ‘comeback’ of the old times, Putin cynically tunes in to those moods by creating a façade of a strong, resilient country, with election candies such as the reinstatement of the Prize. Yet this action should pass as nothing more than cynical play at the masses, aimed also at winding up all the liberal intellectuals, who much in the style of the nineteenth-century “pro-Westerners” sigh at it with disgust. Their main medium is a magazine called *Snob*, after all. One facadism is replaced with another. It inscribes itself within the whole presidency of Putin, whose main feature seems to be in combining the lure of the old times with a ruthless, galloping oligarchical theocracy.

What then, in a time of self-marginalization of arts as a “mirror to reality”, still plays the role attributed to socialist realism, depicting totality while retaining a mass appeal and on a mass scale? What are most discussed as a new form of depicting the current late capitalist reality are TV serials. *The Wire*, but also *The Sopranos* (the earliest, which started the whole trend) and recently, the Danish *The Killing* are all multifaceted, mosaic, complicated portrayals of the world-system; and its history is depicted in *Mad Men*, whose creator, Matthew Weiner says he’d ideally lead his characters until the present. What *Mad Men* does with the 60s, *The Wire* does with the contemporary neoliberal world. It is, by far, the most complete, dense and complex rendition of how the contemporary world, or the contemporary neoliberal city, in this case, is functioning. It also has a very nineteenth-century development, unfolding characters and plots like in a classic novel. Many interpreters of *The Wire* have recalled Fredric Jameson’s concept of “cognitive mapping”, dating from his *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Initially, Jameson’s concept was purely



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metaphorical, taken from spatial methods of analyzing culture. What Jameson meant was art that cognitively “maps” the reality that has seemingly become unrepresentable. What he writes about is an art that instils class-consciousness towards capitalist reality, which, as an American academic, he couldn’t just explicitly use as a concept.

Jameson, influenced by the Lacanian distinction between reality/realism and the “real”, takes up once again the problem of representation, in which he observes among other things, in a search for some kind of new totality, how “a certain unifying and totalizing force is presupposed here, although it is not the Hegelian Absolute Spirit, nor the party, nor Stalin, but simply capital itself”. He took up the concept of totality again, after Lukács, posing a question of totality vs. partiality against the growing unpopularity of ‘totality’ as a concept, which came largely after the 1968 generation “discovered” Stalinist crimes and started identifying every attempt at totality as a straight path to the gulag. Totality as a concept was passé. Another question is that of representation. Postmodernist art’s role was, via means like dispersion of form, to make the world unintelligible, convincing the viewer/reader that he cannot grasp the total view of reality. It is not enough just to “come back” to the old ideas of the avant-garde, even if such an operation was possible. Jameson brings back instead the idea of critical realism. The more ‘realistic’ ideas of the iconoclastic, critical avant-garde could also be part of this, to mention only the *sachlichkeit* of Brecht or John Heartfield, which came up with an augmented, sharpened realism, creating the *Verfremdungseffekt*, alienation effect, while still using a ‘realistic’ method of representation.

Lukács wrote that ‘socialist realism is in a position both to portray the totality of a society in its immediacy and reveal its pattern of development’, a form of art that had ‘the ambition to portray a social whole’. Is it then that the success of *The Wire* or *Mad Men* lies in precisely their focus on the totality, that links every form of our being, every possibility – capital? One of the main features of

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*The Wire* is its classical narrative – the show operates within the present, develops linearly in time, and also quite slowly, never really using any devices like flashbacks – it stubbornly stays in a dead end, just like the lives of its characters. The serial takes its form from a novel, furthermore, a novel, as it was in its golden era, the nineteenth century: a “low” form, printed in a newspaper, in episodes. Many of the greatest novels of all time were published in episodes: Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Dickens. The novel was “low” in comparison to the metaphorical language of the heroic epic literature, instead talking about everyday life. One of the milestones in the modern novel was *Don Quixote*, a satire on heroic romances detached from the world. The novel was always a tool for social critique and satire, it was fictionalized but realistic. Even extreme examples, like Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, have an experimental form, which use the idea of the world that is impossible to tell to a positive, constructive effect, enabling one to see the production of clichés and stupidities within the process of storytelling. We can argue that representation of reality is always different from fiction, a failure of someone who tries to tell their life story as fiction. That’s why *Tristram Shandy* was loved by Russian formalists, as a work that is about constructing, about technique, about devices.

Modern works of art always strive to cognitively map the world, says Jameson, to explain it. *The Wire*’s apparent ability to depict totality more successfully than experimental cinema or engaged art can help us in explaining the relation of socialist realism to the avant-garde, and effectively explain the current weakness of art as a tool in cognitive mapping. The televisual form (all-available, democratic) makes it popular. Each of the serials I mentioned is produced in specific conditions: by a private channel, with a big budget. Can you really compare it to art that is made in different conditions? But you can compare it to the work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, a former underground director who produced several works for television in 1970s West Germany. Most of his

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films concern the left movement, Germany's Nazi past and its repercussions on the present. Fassbinder never questioned 'representation' as such, as did the more radical part of the New German Cinema, and never produced a 'film-essay', but instead always created realistic narratives.

Situations and performances from Fassbinder's movies often seem nearly comically overwrought, over the top, where the grotesquely exaggerated dialogue and acting serves as a running locomotive of stereotypes, even if the behaviors of his characters are often non-conformist and non-normative. Fassbinder often took his situations from pornographic movies: but here sexuality is rather a way of driving certain attitudes present in the society to their radical end. In his films relationships between men and women, but also between men (not always, but mostly, homosexual) and men, full of sadism, masochism and hatred, are depictions of the real power relations within society. Despite actors who are often compelled to act out in the most hysterical way the schizophrenic relation within society, Fassbinder remains genuinely sympathetic to his characters. This director emerges today as one of the most acute critics of the post war capitalist Germany, as a residuum of un-dead fascism, racism, greediness, which expresses itself in radical violence and cruelty.

In the novel, Peter Weiss attempted a similar radicalized realism. Weiss was one of the most sensitive and complex artists to comment on the Cold War reality of a split Germany. His monumental 1980s trilogy *The Aesthetics of Resistance* is a retrospective look at the German past, to create possible scenarios for the German future. In the novel he follows a fictitious anti-Nazi resistance group, who spend their time in intellectual disputes, and meet up in galleries and museums, to link their ideas of radicalism with the past ideas of art and ethics. The author does resist the bourgeois individualism often evoked by such discussions (as we know from the modernist novel, from Mann to Proust) by replacing a singular individual character with a collective political mind of the resis-

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tance group. In doing so, Weiss was looking at the aesthetic premises of sotsrealism: heroism, grand scale, nineteenth-century realism. Yet his novel is not simply a repetition of the previous realism, with its academism and conservatism, but instead manipulated consciousness by using devices and provoking specific emotions. It is a rare example of a historical novel, which for Lukacs was the pinnacle of realism.

So, at least in my language, the call for new kinds of representation is not meant to imply merely a return to Balzac or Brecht. Realism and the avant-garde are historical concepts, rooted in their time and place, and it'd be impossible to bring them back as they were without falling into quite obvious forms of kitsch, as it is clear from so many post-Soviet artists, who were, especially in the 90s, making "liberation art", endlessly recalling the years of the regime. A new realism will include the new ways we live our lives today, unknown to the previous generations; the ways neoliberalism is perverting the spaces of our work and privacy; a new precarious aesthetic. The reason we exclaim often while watching *The Wire* or *The Sopranos* at the aptness and intelligence is that in fact they are syncretic. *The Wire* shows the full spectrum of the changing social classes, the personal is always attached to some wider impersonal structures: politics, union, police, financial. The world of *Sopranos* often uses oneiric, retrospective elements and unrealistic devices, but always in the end to enrich and nuances of the portrayal of the reality of its inhabitants. But what politics is produced by these serials? Might it only produce the protests like those against ACTA, when the thing that finally spurred young people was the ban on endless free downloads of their favorite serial? The availability of TV online, especially in this really refined latest form, only deepened the already existing retreat into the private zone. In the end, in the current climate, even the most intelligent television may transform your politics, but it won't make you act.

German artist Hito Steyerl, in her essay *Is the Museum a Factory?* asks a question about the growing harmlessness of political art

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today, which is closed in the safe space of the museum. She even quotes Godard himself, who said recently that “video artists shouldn’t be afraid of reality” which suggests that they obviously are. This made me think about Wajda again, as *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* interestingly compare to Harun Farocki’s *Workers Leaving the Factory* as oppositional “archaeologies of (non) representation of labour”, as Steyerl describes Farocki’s film. Wajda wilfully fabricates the images of workers at work: in the factory, laying bricks or even starving and being beaten - and confronts that with the facadism of work shot “as newsreels”. Farocki doesn’t strictly shoot anything, putting together footage from eleven different decades depicting workers all over the world after they finish their day. Yet nobody in their right mind would call Farocki’s film ‘realistic’, just as Wajda’s film is realistic in an obvious way, shot in a “traditional”, historical movie manner.

Both depict the life of a worker living in the time of a manipulated world-image. Farocki’s work uses documentary and absolutely realistic parts, it uses unrealistic devices, and it’s neither a documentary nor a fiction film, but an installation, created in a way similar to the avant-garde – via editing, defamiliarization, the old avant-garde techniques. Maybe there are two kinds of realisms at play: while the traditional realism of Wajda or *The Wire* continues the old Story, the Great Narrative, the artist, whoever it is, will try to engage the viewer on a more intimate way. “Every spectator is either a coward or a traitor”, Steyerl quotes Frantz Fanon, postulating greater political closeness instead of spectatorship. The cinema which will embrace such intimacy, must be secondary, not primary, to the political space that emerges.

5

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### On the “catching-up” revolution in the Soviet Bloc

*Not only the New World street is new  
For us every Day is New!  
Everybody is looking as if  
They saw their city for the first time  
(‘The Red Bus’)*

*We’ll build the new Poland,  
We’ll build a new world.  
Where everything will be better  
Where there’ll be new order!  
The most beautiful cities, the most beautiful villages,  
We’ll build Poland beautiful like in a dream!  
(‘We’ll build a New Poland’)*

*In the morning your hands were mixing cement  
But now you shine like a star!  
(‘The Girls from Fab-loc’)*

*Because MDM, MDM grows upright night and day  
Below: sand and rubble,  
In the evening I look:  
It lightens up like in the theatre!  
It’s the workers day and night  
Warsaw houses.  
And like a beautiful dream  
Work will burn in our hands  
Like in our million hearts*

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(‘MDM’) (A song on the flagship Socialist Realist estate in Warsaw)

Fragments of various popular songs from early 1950s

*Suddenly we were surrounded only with photographs of food and shoes. Maybe food and shoes are the new sex?*

Arina Kholina, *Snob* magazine

*‘Could I have a coffee without cream?*

*Sorry sir, there’s no cream, there’s only milk.*

*Ok, so could I have a coffee without milk?’*

Joke from the Polish People’s Republic

Learning modernity from the east

In recent decades, notions of center and periphery have become completely central to so-called ‘subaltern studies’, and are seen as the most revealing way to analyze our seemingly naturalized ways of seeing the world. And despite the tremendous effort of thinkers and philosophers to make the periphery more interesting than the center, as a citizen of a post-communist country I experienced how these categories can have a direct influence on your life. It goes without saying that Western Europe is Center, and Russia, for example, which probably produced the greatest amount of outstanding artists in the twentieth century in the world, is not even considered ‘Europe’ by many.

*Europe...is not Russia!* exclaims Croatian journalist Slavenka Drakulic in her dramatic essay from *Café Europa*, one of many post-Soviet memoirs, written soon after 1991, when “explaining” the former East to the West - in a double sense of guilt and revelation - was suddenly considered necessary. As an “expiation” for the pitiful life we lead during *komuna*, we now greedily appropriated everything that was Western. That it was better than anything we could possibly produce went without saying. The transition to

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capitalism happened in Eastern Europe at the worst possible moment – the system imploded after years of financial crisis, misinvestments and as a result of a massive debts taken decades earlier. The patient was nearly dead, so it's no wonder that in this state, after everything was pumped out of him, he died immediately.

Europe's Cold War borders were decided through the cruel geopolitics of the Yalta treaty. Some countries were thus attached to the Eastern Bloc against their will, like Poland; others were included against the popular will into the capitalist camp, like Greece. The West supported fascists in Greece against the communist partisans, to eliminate the possibility of communist governments arising outside the agreed-upon Soviet Bloc. This divide was reinforced by the Marshall Plan, where American money was lavished on a ruined Europe. Communist countries were also offered Marshall Aid, yet they were forced by the USSR to reject it, mainly because it meant opening up the books of the economy to American examination. It's not like this aid to Communist states was proposed realistically - it was proposed in such a way that the East had to reject it.

Western Europe had massive investments from America, creating a huge boom.

Although the communist economies grew throughout that period, especially Yugoslavia and USSR, they were basically still command economies, with all the inefficiency that entailed. The post-war order was established so rigidly and with such a great support from the USA that it ensured communism would be once and for all confined to the East. It is common to believe within the ex-Bloc, that it was the lack of Marshall Plan financial help that decided our belatedness. A popular conviction today is that because of this it was actually the Western countries who could really afford to put into life elements of the socialist programme, realized as the welfare state.

It is not the ambition of this chapter to decide whether the



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compromised version of monopoly capitalism that occurred in Western Europe was a real solution, but to look at what the alternative to it was, or could have been. We're so used to thinking of the economy in the whole Eastern Bloc as obviously inefficient, that we're now shocked when names of Polish and Soviet economists, like Nikolai Kondratiev or Michał Kalecki, are called upon as to explain the capitalist crisis. Yet in the post-war years, the Soviet Bloc not only produced an outstanding economic theory, it had its own ideas for socialist-led economy. Most famously, market socialism in Tito's Yugoslavia and the whole Non-Aligned Movement fought for an economy of the 'third way'. But also during the post-Stalinist years of the Thaw, scientists had Nikita Khrushchev's permission and enormous amounts of money to work on new, alternative methods of directing the economy without resorting to capitalist methods, in the specially designed Academic Towns, like Akademgorodok, just outside Novosibirsk, the subject of Francis Spufford's scientific-historical novel *Red Plenty*; "closed cities" you needed permission to visit, devoted to the development of science.

### We will bury you!

According to Spufford, during his visit to America Khrushchev was first of all astonished by their level of life and dreamt about a similar standard for his people. The famous temperament of the charismatic leader is of course best remembered from his speeches in the UN. "We have to try to be friends, a peaceful coexistence" – he says, despite waving sputniks and rockets behind him or the famous declaration "We'll bury you!" or banging his shoe on the conference table to get some attention. In Spufford's account Khrushchev loved hamburgers and the idea of a cheap, rich meal that was available to everybody.

There used to be a different model of modernity than that we know now – things were tried and then discarded. In this chapter I want to take the reader to this very specific moment of history, in

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5 A late communist parade in East Berlin 1987. Computers taken for a walk.

which an alternative modernity to that of the West was not only possible, but started to be introduced in life. There existed a world of parallel, socialist-only economic systems, where technique and utopianism went together. The Soviet reality until the mid-50s experienced a tragic waste of life, mass murder rivalled only by Hitler, famines, horrific politically motivated purges and the spreading of the disease that was the Gulag Archipelago. With such amounts of blood on their hands, Soviet authorities were especially interested in redeeming the Soviet project. After decades of undernourishment, and terrible problems with supply of food and other products necessary just to live, Khrushchev's idea was to finally bring to the Russian people the plenty they had sacrificed so much for.

This was to be achieved through a revolution within the Soviet economy, which was until then centrally planned. Central planning was a command, 'shouting' economy: the orders were given from the top and had to be fulfilled no matter what. What mattered was the quantity, not quality. More of everything, regardless of demand, was the best, albeit primitive, form of accumulation. In this way you would have vast levels of production of steel, while there were not enough shoes. Without central planning it would

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have been impossible to build a gigantic industrial base in the underdeveloped, post-Tsarist country, yet over the years, it started to be a burden to the communist economy and a chief problem in the 'catching up' or even 'overtaking of the West', which was the slogan of the post-Thaw era.

According to central planning, USSR could outproduce the US in raw industrial tonnage, yet often at the cost of poor quality. This is why it was the most basic goods and infrastructure that were always important for communist planning: railways, metro systems and other public transport, mass housing, these were all often of very good quality and sometimes better than in the West. It was the consumer goods that were the Achilles heel. That was the reality of constant shortages, queues and low quality goods. The new economy, which was to be introduced in the 1950s, bore resemblance to both the socialist and capitalist system. Instead of the centralization that resulted all-too-often in barter, bribery or inefficiency, it was supposed to be more like a network. It was striving for more quality stuff, more high technology and more available consumer goods, of ever-better quality. In order to do this, Soviet economists had to introduce some market mechanisms. In central planning, if the center committed mistakes, they were reproduced by the rest. Without the permission of the Party, you couldn't rebuild or adapt any project, including the heavy pre-fab, system built mass housing, which was everywhere the same, from Vilnius to Vladivostok. The successes of the Soviet economy had been based on military discipline - under Stalin you had to meet those targets or you were shot - and this too was to be abandoned. The Soviet economy had accumulated; now it was time to redistribute.

The ideas of the Soviet economy had to be reformulated: instead of simplistic measurements of the rise in production, demand was to dictate prices, which should, as the most radical economists of the time insisted, be set by computer networks. Cybernetics, a very important branch of science in the Soviet Union, was developing, trying to marry economics and computerization. In this Soviet

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science was potentially really overtaking the West by producing original computer systems, just like they were at this point well ahead in the space race.

And for a bit, in the 1950s and early 60s, the economy didn't differ so much, or at all, from what the propaganda was saying. Not overtaking the West, it was nonetheless an advancing economy, the sweetest moment of socialism, closest to the idea of 'red plenty'. Yet quickly the limitations of the Soviet state appeared. Expectedly, the price rises on sundries insisted on by the economists started to cause social dissent: riots and demonstrations, which ended tragically with the shooting of demonstrators in Novocherkassk. These limits revealed how the Soviet state couldn't go on without the total support of its citizens and a total acknowledgment of its ideology. Any dissent would be a threat to the state integrity. Or so they thought: ideological purity turned out to be more important than the lives of the citizens. After that, Khrushchev was removed from power, and replaced with the much more conservative Brezhnev, who brought back the previous rules. From then on there was a policy of "no more revolutions". No more experiments, no more attempts at democracy, no lifting of censorship. Some of the promised consumerism was realized during the Brezhnev 1970s, but on false premises. This was already the era of stagnation, the lack of any innovation, in the name of not taking risks, slowly descending into the eventual massive crisis in the 80s, which, accelerated by the turbo-capitalist transition, led the country to complete economic disaster in the 90s.

What was the American reaction to the competition? It was often outspoken ridicule. In one of the funniest, if incredibly heavy-handed Western comedies of that era, by a Polish Jew and resident of Vienna and Berlin in the 1930s, Billy Wilder's *One Two Three*, we have the symbolic war between the two camps banalized as a romance. The misalliance of a rich, American girl – the daughter of the factory boss who James Cagney's manager is working for, stationed in West Berlin – and an East German boy, a

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completely ideological, anti-capitalist worker, who'd rather die than betray the ideals of the DDR's Communist Party. The whole film is full of gags and jokes recalling the famous appearances and speeches of Khrushchev, from the "bury" speech to the 'overtaking'. The crudeness and lack of lustre of Eastern life, its glamourless roughness, is key to the way the Cold War is presented here, and what we're led to believe it *really* is: Easterners are of course a bunch of crassly dressed, dirty, styleless drunks, and the DDR police is of course the cruellest. So it's a mere difference of style!

The American sector, where the company and the factory of our



5.1 One Two Three - the German Democratic Republic as American grotesque.

friend are, is of course warm-hearted, even if not always that efficient. The joke is not completely lost on Cagney, as, awaiting the visit of his American missus and a little son, he's eagerly ogling, or maybe more, the charms of an attractive blond German secretary. The scandal of his powerful boss' daughter's alliance unfolds exactly as he and his wife are to pay a visit to Berlin, where Cagney was supposed to "take care" of this crazy, irresponsible child. Yet, the up-to-now posh and vacuous girl all of a sudden, under the influence of her new love, decides to reject the earthly pleasures of capitalism and the American oil fortune, to defect to the East and join

the CP with her fiancée, looking exactly as if he just left the Berliner Ensemble playing a courageous worker in one of Brecht's plays. In order to save face and job, Cagney must now, within less than 24 hours, convince the now pregnant & married daughter to dismiss her husband or... do everything she can to get the boy to defect to

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the West! The results of his mission are uncertain, and involve a lot of jokes played on the Eastern proletariat. Yet in the end, not only does the daughter realize just how stupid her idea of living in the rough East was, but also, by way of blackmail and a crude arrest by the DDR police, the boy himself is not so Marxist anymore, and successfully pretends to be a rich aristocrat in the eyes of the potential parents-in-law. Though the transformation happens due to an army of stylists and good-manners teachers, which uproot all the communist roughness out of our sweet boy, it's all only a pretext to yet more gags at the communist regime's expense.

This dream, that we can 'overtake the West', existed for less than two decades, somewhere between late Stalinism and Brezhnev, somewhere between the secret speech of Khrushchev and the rise of Władysław Gomułka to power in Poland in 1956 and the anti-Semitic purge of March 1968; somewhere between the walk Jeanne Moreau took into the Parisian night in search of her lover in *Ascenseur Pour Echaffaud* and the sleepless night in Prague that a married couple of system beneficiaries endures in Karel Kachyna's 1969 *The Ear*, wiretapped and scared of a visit from the men in black suits. It starts somewhere during the Space Age era of Bikini costumes, Googie-style diners and Atomic TV sets. It shares the enthusiasm of the colorful designs presented at Brussels Expo '58 and follows the splendid monument to Le Corbusier's brutalism in Marseilles. It shyly explores new, previously non-existent worlds in laboratories and sound studios across Europe: Pierre Schaeffer's first experiments with musique concrete since 1948, and the Polish contemporary music festival Warsaw Autumn beginning in 1957. Karlheinz Stockhausen executes the first electroacoustic music experiments in Cologne, inspiring students Holger Czukay, Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider, later of Can and Kraftwerk fame. Modern Polish designs cause a furore at international festivals: they win the first Textile Biennale in Lausanne in 1962 for an innovatory, unconventional approach to textiles as a new kind of work of art. New Wave cinema flourishes everywhere,

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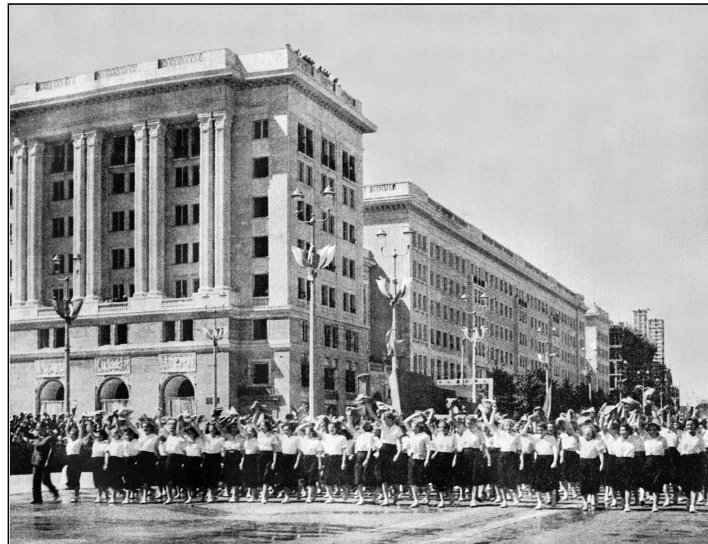
Polish and Czech dramas films win prizes on international festivals, and so does the music, at Cannes, Donaueschingen, Darmstadt. It is this territory that this chapter will explore.

#### The Meaning of the Thaw

Khrushchev's Thaw in '56 marked a significant liberalization of this same high-up bureaucratic class, as he fought the new hierarchies within the party structures. He significantly cut the payments of the upper echelon (for which reason he became unpopular among them), as well as liberalizing the harsh Stalinist laws on divorce, abortion and women's rights (but he kept the criminalization of homosexuality). Yet although he was a believer in equality, Khrushchev, the former butcher of Ukraine during the great famine and the great purge in the 1930s, still remained a conservative.

On a certain scale, the Polish Thaw looked similar, but Poland went further to become the most liberal country in the Bloc. It also had immense influence on its culture for over two decades. In Czechoslovakia, though it was brewing for several years, the Prague Spring lasted only about six months in 1968, and was crushed by Warsaw Pact invasion, and in films, the New Wave lasted at most about 4-5 years. Hungary after the crushing of the '56 revolution had milder censorship and a much more advanced 'market socialism', but it drew very different conclusions from the triumph of the Polish October '56. While Polish workers strikes in Poznań in '56 led to the seizure of power by the more liberal part of the communist party, led by Gomułka, who successfully reassured Moscow that he could maintain socialist order; in Hungary, student-inspired protests were took place in the capital, with secret policemen strung up on lampposts, and with Imre Nagy's cabinet containing non-communists and promising withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. This ended in the bloody Moscow intervention in Budapest. The unsung revolution of '56 in Poland is unpopular precisely because it was in a way successful – you cant romanticize it in the same way as the Budapest revolutionaries, who keep being

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5.2 Youth marching amongst the new Palaces for the People, MDM, Warsaw 1952.

immortalized in films and popular anti-communist sentiment in contemporary Hungary. Back then, in a sense, we both ended up with less harsh communist regimes, but in the Hungarian case, after a bloodily stifled revolution.

This began a decade and a half of liberalization. East Germany, though relatively affluent, as the most western of the Eastern Bloc countries it had some of the harshest censorship and secret police in the whole Bloc. Especially against this background, Poland's liberalized culture had splendid artistic results: its famed cinematography, which excelled from as early as 1955 (with the first Andrzej Wajda films, starting the phenomenon of the Polish Film School), and it continued to produce great films and directors well into the 1980s. This extended to literature, music and the press, which in particular will be the subject of my inquiry later on. Often, this movement criticized the system in the most open and direct way. Poland seemed to have won its revolt in 1956, which



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made many sympathize with it - but instead of revolution it gave people the so-called "little stabilization": more flats, more cars, but still of poor quality, and without the promised withdrawal of censorship. The growingly disappointed followers of the system started criticizing it, which led to March 1968 and the infamous purges of the Jewish citizens and "revisionists", which once again, tragically sealed Polish destiny. But first, we'll look at the two fighting ideals of culture, proletarian and bourgeois, which opposed and competed with each other in socialist Poland.

#### Was there a proletarian culture?

While we condemn the socialist period for the belatedness of our economy and being the "lesser Europe", the future of our modern history was already decided in the small industrial enterprises and factories in the imperial United Kingdom. I will focus here on the un/development of the working class culture in Poland, to demonstrate some of the many reasons why the anti-capitalist revolution didn't succeed in Eastern Europe.

Poland, though a major European power in the early modern era, experienced much slowing of its development, as its elites of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries weren't interested in the accumulation of capital via cities and coasts, both decisive for the progress of capitalism, but mainly in the lands worked by serfs that they owned in the East. Subsequent wars and annexations weakened Poland to the degree it was partitioned in late eighteenth century and was swallowed by Prussia, the Russian Empire and Austria for over 120 years. Poland entered the twentieth century underindustrialized, still with the terrible effects of peasant serfdom and the cult of the aristocracy-landowners and the Catholic Church as the carriers of Polish patriotism. This wasn't a great soil for a strong labor movement. Despite this, a certain proletarian culture started to develop in big cities, especially in the Prussian partition in Poznań and Silesia as a result of industrialization begun in the last decades of the nineteenth century; and in the Russian partition,

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there were strong socialist currents in Warsaw and especially Łódź, where a movement against both Tsarist and industrial exploitation, concentrated in textile factories, had a major role in the 1905 Revolution. But in general, the labor movement and labor culture were not strong in Poland.

After independence in 1918, the newly formed Communist Party was banned. The moderate socialist party, the PPS, was influential in the factories and in the parliament, but its power was circumscribed after the May 1926 coup by its former leader, Marshal Josef Piłsudski. So despite the efforts and the memory of 1905, Polish proletarian culture was weak. In the 1930s, the whole of Europe was characterized by growing nationalisms and dictatorships, and it was no different in Poland under the dictatorship first of Marshal Piłsudski and then his associates. Our traditions were weaker than in the Soviet Union, where the massive revolution of 1917 pervaded the whole nation. We also had a weaker trade union movement than Germany and France. All this made the development of 'proletarian culture' unlikely. But it wasn't even bourgeois culture that was considered the national culture. It was the deeply rural peasant culture and the aristocratic culture of their landlords. This caste was also identical with the bearers of Polish patriotism and, though it's never named this way, our "imperial" aspirations and ambitions - sympathies which were kept alive throughout the whole existence of the PRL by the intelligentsia. In this way the liberatory forces in the Polish tradition were at the same time often deeply reactionary, and the only vision of Poland that was truly Polish had to be necessarily a vision that was nationalistic, Catholic, and what's more, a vision of the grandiose Poland, claiming the ownership of the *Kresy*. As it's beyond doubt that Poland has borne a huge burden of suffering – the Holocaust, severe repression and destruction by the Nazi occupiers, and then Stalinism - it proposes a history in which only revenge over the enemy is at play, refusing to see or recognize its own colonial claims and nationalism.

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Although these were among the reasons why the Polish social experiment that started after 1945 and lasted for 44 years wasn't that successful, much else was the fault of the communist regime itself. It was imposed from the outside, set up initially as a Soviet colony, and it committed many crimes, which didn't exactly help to legitimize it. It systematically lied about its recent history – about everything from the dissolution and mass murder of the first Polish Communist Party by the Soviets in the late 1930s, to the denial of Soviet responsibility for the massacre of thousands of Polish officers at Katyn.

But many of today's class relations and people's relationship to the recent history, as well as the refusal to criticize the capitalist transition, still comes from this pre-Soviet history. As it should be clear now, even if the war didn't happen, Poland would still hardly have been on the economic level of the Western countries, even if we are to devote our time to such speculation. Yet we base our pretensions and dreams of being a 'regular European country' precisely on those claims. But the new regime, even if it raised Polish cities from the rubble, didn't make it easier to identify or accept its rules. Even if it was introducing egalitarian rules, it was doing so via coercion. As it was rebuilding the country and elevating the peasantry or proletariat to previously unknown levels of literacy (books went from having a circulation of 1000 before the war to have 50,000 or 100,000 – the number often proudly displayed on the title page), building schools, libraries and propagating culture, at the same time it fought the intelligentsia, who were plagued with repressions. Under Stalinism, if the Party wanted to promote the proletariat, it did so by keeping children of the intelligentsia out of university, or sending them to the country for 'reeducation'.

At the same time, they necessarily created their own ruling class and their own intelligentsia. This meant the upper echelon of the bureaucracy, but also a wholly new class of specialists, engineers, scientists and teachers, newly educated in the new circumstances.

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5.3 Monumentalisation of labour. Stalin removed from compulsory worker's reading after 1956.

In some way, there was a continuity with the past, as a part of the previous intelligentsia survived the war. Yet, despite building this new ruling class, they couldn't openly admit that they, the Communists, had become it, as to do so would be to abandon any claims to socialism.

The lyrics listed at the beginning of the chapter come from songs, which, mostly in the Stalinist period (1949-54) and around the Thaw (1956), were intended to encourage, empower and ennoble the working class and the task of labor. They were mostly written in the poetics of socialist realism - incredibly simplistic, grandiose, spectacular and heavy. The style spread from the architecture of Stalinist skyscrapers to the choral songs, played on the radio, exalting the labor and glory of the working classes, resur-

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5.4 Przekrój. The beauty of labour.

recting the dead, destroyed Polish cities from the rubble. The moment to build a new culture after the war couldn't have been more perfect: there was literally nothing left, as the Nazis left Poland in pieces. With its bourgeois and nationalist traditions, Polish society, only after enduring the loss respectively of its Jewish proletarian-petit-bourgeois base and a great deal of its intelligentsia and elites, had the ground "ready" to completely reformulate its structures.

In principle and on the surface, within socialism it was finally the proletarian culture which was to become the dominant culture. Also, for the first time it was given a splendour, scale and magnificence it never had before. Never before were such palaces of marble

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and gold, devoted to culture and development of the laboring class ever built. Proletarian culture became the official culture: culture designed for the working classes, in theory at least. Because it must be asked if people really did enjoy it or feel that it was theirs? The solemnity, heaviness, seriousness and scariness of the new sotsrealist art must've been also a deterrent. Especially in its Stalinist period, it was designed by the same token, to discipline and intimidate people: the grandiose socialist realist design had the effect of domination and stifling as much as 'encouragement'. In reality, both reactions to the new culture were conceived to discipline people: as we know, communism was by no means accepted by the whole Polish society. So the initial efforts of the new authorities were designed to both please and rule an unruly society.

Post-Thaw, when there briefly was relative freedom and a lowering of censorship, culture, while becoming less heavy and rough (as must've been the stereotype of the proletariat), became lighter, more elegant... could we say more bourgeois? Today the locally patriotic songs sound nearly charming, especially about the biggest success of the post-war reconstruction, that is the capital, Warsaw. There are hundreds of propagandistic pro-Warsawian songs, often dressed as popular radio songs. From lighter tunes, cherishing the beauty of the Polish cities' streets, with "I could be a Parisian boulevard flaneur, but would it be as good as promenading in Warsaw?" (of course, the question is rhetorical), to the much scarier and heavier, choral songs such as "We're building the new Poland", giving the quasi-religious or even operatic properties to these – what are they? – folk songs? Agitation songs? Of course, the political song has a long tradition. But it was only by "stealing" from the already existing and established high cultural forms that the pathos and splendor could be given to this equivalent of proletcult.

But was this culture really empowering by the sheer value of singing of the working class? First of all, the new culture, even though it was glorifying "labor" and workers, claimed that labor

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was in fact a pleasure and an honor, because it served the building of the beloved socialist country, never mentioning the unpleasant, wearying, life-shortening aspects of hard work. Work becomes the “most beautiful dream”, membership in the party or organizations becomes “a new life”, and the factory becomes “our beloved port”. Crude and unimaginative as they are, they projected a reality on which work had incredible dignity, importance and its role was finally valued properly according to the value it had in the society. Yes, the working class is a necessary muscle of every society, without which any other activity wouldn’t be possible, yet it’s ritually dismissed and never written about in bourgeois art or literature. That was now to change. But was that just a revenge? And was PRL just a revenge on the previous exploiting class?

Cinemas were now full of films where heroic, beautiful proletarians (though with a rather characteristic muscular beauty) were reclaiming not only the themes and medium up to then reserved for the upper classes, but were also introducing a completely new aesthetics to that medium. But could we, at any step, call it a proletarian culture? Or was it rather another propagandistic way to keep the people out of the streets, to prevent any social dissent? From the beginning it was artificial: never being the real, spontaneous culture of workers, socialist realism was imposed on them from the start. But then we’d have to answer the question, what is the ‘real’ proletarian culture? A similar example is the way the ‘folk culture’ existed in PRL – in the form of orientalized, exoticized mass produced ‘folk art’, like that stocked in the national chain *Cepelia*, who sold examples of Polish folk art, relying on a patronizing, compromised vision of the Polish countryside.

Last but not least, proletarian culture couldn’t really be dominant, but constituted a certain façade: PRL wasn’t exactly a dictatorship of the proletariat, but a clandestine rule of the bureaucracy, which only gave the surface impression of letting the working class govern: the workers were a rising class within PRL, yet with no actual power, except perhaps briefly for the workers

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councils of 1956. The only real revolution that happened in Poland was the one forced without the participation of Poles at all, at least according to the 'lost revolution' thesis of the Freudian thinker Andrzej Leder, expounded recently in *Krytyka Polityczna*. The social revolution was the erasure of two social classes: Jewish labor and Jewish entrepreneurs destroyed by the Nazis, and the Polish landlord class destroyed by the Soviets. That's why it could never be acknowledged. As they themselves had not carried out this revolution, the mentality of most post-war citizens was determined by the countryside, and they took that consciousness to the city with them when Poland urbanized and industrialized. Yet, for political reasons, this goes completely unacknowledged by Polish society, making it impossible to gain any sort of social class-consciousness. That's why we prefer to choose myths about ourselves: noblemen, landowners, the myth of the intelligentsia of interwar Poland.

This analysis would be attractive, if it was at least trying to present the point of view of all classes: yet eventually it's just another analysis from the point of view of the bourgeoisie. There are many erased histories within the post-war period, and the Holocaust was not discussed enough in PRL, and nor were the pogroms started by Poles themselves. Yet this analysis doesn't want to be compassionate with another 'other' in Polish consciousness - the proletarian. It chooses instead to present the masses as inherently primitive, peasant-like, backwards, conservative and reactionary, never public spirited enough to be really 'collective'. A huge counter-argument against this theory is the existence of Solidarity, the union and the movement, which counted 10 million people at its peak in 1980-81. On one level, Solidarity may have been traditionalist, wedded to patriotism and Catholicism; but it was also based on the premises of equality and self-organization, and really proletarian in its political outlook, at least at first. Solidarity, rather than being the expression of some primitive peasant consciousness, was a collective, civic-minded



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and disciplined movement. But before Solidarity, there were many attempts to take culture to Poland's new working class.

#### Aspirational magazines of Socialism

'I read Polish magazines', says a character in Edward Limonov's *Memoirs of a Russian Punk*, set in Thaw-era Soviet Ukraine. 'And why? Because I am interested in life and in culture'. During the Thaw, Poland had the most open press in the Bloc, in its publication of literature and also in the way its press were unashamedly presenting consumer goods, youth culture and popular culture. People all over the Bloc, like the poet Josif Brodsky, learned Polish just to be able to read uncensored stuff and world literature. The first post-war illustrated magazine designed for the new society in the wholly new circumstances was *Przekroj* (Slant) - the very same which tried briefly in 2012 to transform itself again into a leftist periodical - one of many adventures of the most important popular magazine in Polish history. 1945 was the Year Zero and as the reader should realize, the first few years after the war were a relative relaxation in comparison to what was to come. As early as May '45 *Przekroj* was founded - the first illustrated magazine of People's Poland, and which consciously embodied the revolution happening in Polish society. If I could describe it in one sentence, *Przekroj* was striving to make a magazine which could be read by all the new social classes of the New Poland, from the new elites to engineers to the kitchen lady, while at the same time smuggling in some of the pre-war charm and aspirations of the intelligentsia and bourgeoisie. It comprised of world news, columns, varying from cuisine to fashion and *savoir vivre* lessons to those serving the preservation of a material culture destroyed by the war. It had a mission, as one critic sarcastically put it, to "civilize" the nation, with the whole formation of its readers (circulation 500,000, and each copy was read by several people) considered "the civilization of *Przekroj*".

Visually, *Przekroj* embodied the social formation it tried to

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5.5 Barbara Hoff's *Przekrój* fashion column

represent. And together with it went a style connected to the cultural ideal and ambitions they promoted - a combination of the pre-war intelligentsia's artistic aspirations and the new post-war democratization and homogenization of avant-garde and high art. *Przekrój* employed several graphic designers whose roots were in the pre-war avant-gardism, of course condemned as "formalism" in the Stalinist period. *Przekrój* took up what we could consider 'liberal' positions, yet the meaning of liberalism highly depends on the political context, and meant something else to what it did after 1989. *Przekrój* editors tried to discreetly 'educate' and raise the

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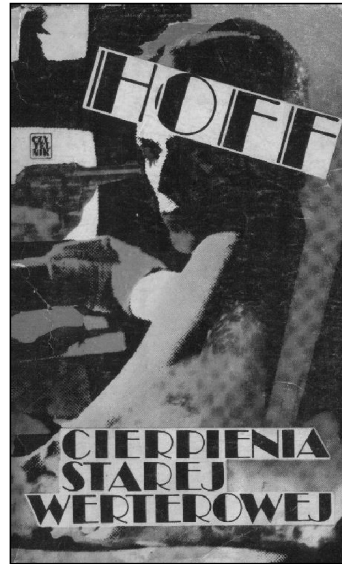
nation, publishing suggestions and various kinds of advice, which was mostly incredibly mundane and, read after the years, reflects the dramatic shortages and grinding poverty in the early PRL. The first two decades after '45 were an era of special austerity: there was not enough good quality food, or food as such, housing was in a dramatic state, including people living in the "caves" left after bombings, crumbling infrastructure, no clothes or of very poor quality, not even mentioning care for their aesthetics or fashionability, and, of course, the already mentioned "social revolution", which meant that the traditional codes of behavior, of *savoir-vivre*, traced from the bourgeois society, were not only suspended, they were the part of the bourgeois past. *Przekrój* took the task of "re-civilizing" the nation in the reality of the implosion of everything that was before, discreetly reinstalling the bourgeois culture.

Advice on cuisine, where various cheap vegetables were "pretend" meat, or how to dress/make up, having neither clothes nor cosmetics, was combined with witty stories, usually written under pseudonyms by the editor Marian Eile and his deputy Janina Ipohorska, both editors and artists established before the war. Wit, charm and delicate persuasion were the weapons of *Przekrój* in their mission. This was conveyed not didactically, which was the norm in the humourless and heavily stylized socialist press, but via tasteful jokes assisted by the original graphic design and lay-out. *Przekrój* dealt with the growing alcoholism, encouraging sobriety and good manners in public places; promoted good health, advocating sport (that inherent element of every socialist politics and ideology, as a "typical entertainment of the proletariat"); and it promoted healthy eating and a less formal, democratic elegance.

The fashion column was one of the most important in *Przekrój*, and was basically a guide to how to do something and create a "look" out of basically nothing. It was initiated by Janina Ipohorska, but a few years later taken over by the young art historian Barbara Hoff, who ended up holding it for the next 50 years and becoming the first "fashion dictator" of Poland. The

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nation had to be taught once again how to dress well, and the national clothing and fabric production was so poor that in order to survive in style, one had to live by one's wits more than ever. At the beginning, as Hoff has described in numerous interviews, this was an impossible task: when she realized there was nothing to write about, she asked the ministry for permission to produce a clothing line of her own. She travelled across Poland to factories, bought fabrics and ordered them to produce her fashionable, modern designs. They were still hardly available, yet Hoffland, as it was called, was, next to *Moda Polska* (simply "Polish Fashion") one of the rare



5.6 The unexpected return of the Thin White Duke in a book cover by socialist fashion dictator Barbara Hoff.

examples of the quasi-private, though officially nationalized fashion companies in Poland. Both have survived communism, and Hoff kept designing well into the 90s. You could be sure, that if Hoff wrote about a new style for wearing a shawl in her column, the same afternoon there would already be dozens of girls on the streets trying to copy this style. Her flagship idea was blackening the "coffin shoes" (i.e. light, paper shoes, used as footwear for the deceased) which when colored black could pass as elegant "ballerinas". As Czech journalist Milena Jesenská wrote in 1929, from a perspective of a fashion columnist,

*The fashion column is really for people for whom there is no fashion... The average person with an average job and an average salary cannot dress fashionably. She can, however, have superb clothes... It is up to her to*

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*make clothes for herself according to fashion, adapting to it without aping it. In short, the less money she has, the more art it takes to look good... While many people think for a rich person, she must think for herself. The fashion column in the newspaper is for people who love beautiful things and cannot afford them. Only these kinds of people make culture. Only these kinds of people have style: they are innovative, daring and modestly restrained. The desire for things cultivates taste... It is a rare art to look like a good human specimen, without much money or expenditure, through one's own efforts and the proper organisation of one's life.*

The fashion column in *Przekrój* was doing exactly this: teaching people how to be artists, often how to make clothes on one's own; how to create elegance out of nothing by paying attentions to details and creating visual sensitivity towards one's everyday life. The images were accompanied by witty remarks and comments, and in this, those delicate drawings by Hoff still emanate an elegant, dandy austerity which we could look for in vain in today's chain store driven fashion.

Only after making the everyday palatable, could the higher needs be fulfilled, like the need for beauty, aesthetics and art. In here is some of the greatest merit of *Przekroj*, which relentlessly propagated modern art (in visual arts and music) and abstraction, which extended to publishing "posters" with Picasso or Leger to pull out and hang on the wall in the modest socialist salons, giving away postcards of Polish abstract paintings to its readers or even selling abstract paintings painted by the artists-editors. It also was a vehicle to the post-Thaw eruption of the new, colorful design, associated today with the Festival of Youth in 1955 in Warsaw and Expo '58 in Brussels.

Yet, if this was a 'civilization', then it had to be according to Norbert Elias's definition, i.e., civilization as something created in the West. *Przekroj* supported the silent, careful rebirth of the 'cool' in Poland too. It was creating 'positive snobbery' for the abroad, but its sights were ceaselessly always turned to the Seine, not the Moskva. It discreetly cheer-led the birth of the new, casual Western

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5.7 Socialist folk queueing for better clothing. But why in French?  
Cover of *Przekroj* authors fashion bible from 1958.

elegance, e.g. in the person of Brigitte Bardot and the new kind of free, careless, self-conscious girl. From the 60s films of the Polish school, like Janusz Morgenstern's *Goodbye, See You Tomorrow*, or *Innocent Sorcerers* by Andrzej Wajda, there emerges a certain kind of noblesse, even if produced with little money. This is the era when the youth prefer, rather than the rough sleazy American

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culture they pretended to have in the '50s, a noble and stylish European version: they wear black and dark sunglasses, listen to jazz, are sexually liberated, looking like their counterparts in the later *Nouvelle Vague*. Or at least that was the image promoted in the suddenly liberated and West-friendly atmosphere of the 60s. This is the reason for the golden era in culture, art, film and design that ensues. Whereas elsewhere the 60s meant the most hectic time of social revolutions and upheavals, for the Bloc it meant that for the first time, consumerism was noble, as noble as art.

*Przekroj* was never a simple proletarian agit-prop of the authorities. It was neither bourgeois enough nor proletarian enough, said to be too westernized for the communist *poputchiks*, and too ideologized for the pro-Western intellectuals. It continued to be inconvenient even after 1989, when it wasn't socialist in content at all. So why did the civilizational mission of 'culturation' in the new society have to be always understood as 'liberal' or 'bourgeois'? To answer this question we have to come back to the previous divagations on the force of proletarian culture in Poland. And this wasn't strong enough – aside from the beleaguered efforts of the PPS or the Bund, liquidated by the war, or the efforts of Polish futurists and constructivists, there wasn't much of a legacy to build upon. Or, one could say, the proletarian culture, of big cities and their industrial bases, was often Jewish, and disappeared together with their extermination. So anything culturally sophisticated was automatically suspicious (or celebrated) as being 'bourgeois'. Yet it's hard not to sympathize with the style of *Przekroj*, today inspiring only nostalgia for the sophistication of its language and good taste, which despite being egalitarian in its message, also tried to decompress the crude ideological information it had to provide.

Another level of the strange discrepancy between the official state policy in "bringing up the nation" and the practice was the strange existence of 'luxury' goods. While *Przekroj's* strategy was to seduce, become the part of a life and then 'raise' its readers, *Ty I Ja* monthly was pretty elitist: a strange combination of an artist and

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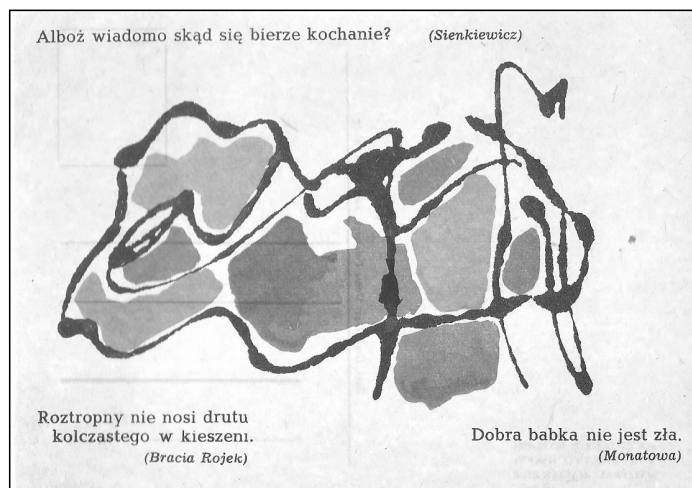
luxury magazine, with an avant-garde lay-out designed by Roman Cieřlewicz. Cieřlewicz was a pioneer of animated film, pop-art and Nouveau Realisme in Poland, who later migrated to France to design for *ELLE* and became one of the most prominent Polish artists living in the West. Driving from surrealism and his own version of Pop, Cieřlewicz's covers invited the reader to dream, they were a window to the secret life of unexisting bourgeoisie, in the atmosphere of Bunuel's *Belle du Jour* or the erotic tales of Walerian Borowczyk, another Parisian exile. It was expensive and presented haute-couture creations from Parisian fashion houses arranged in an artistic way, houses of artists and famous writers, in a way which didn't at all correspond with anyone's lives but those of the high officials.

#### A Festival of Youth

For the communist authorities one of the most important aspects of the everyday ideology was to keep home production on the level which, at least officially and in the local media and broadcasters was presented as being "as good as" the Western one. Maybe at the beginning, in the post-war years, when the countries were still in reconstruction, this aspect didn't matter, as the whole world, including the West, was dealing with shortages and austerity for several years after the war, with rationing lasting even in the UK until the mid-1950s. It was difficult in the freshly socialist, war-destroyed Poland to explain to people the shortages in production and the low tempo of the growth of the infrastructure. Yet, from today's point of view, the growth and reconstruction of Polish cities, given that it happened from scratch, was immense and on an unheard of scale. This progress occurred at the same time as the harsh introduction of the communist order, in which any remnants of the pre-war structures were leveled. One may say they were leveled by the Nazis first, but it still meant the new system had a once in a lifetime chance to change the social stratification of Poland.



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5.8 Popularising abstract art. 'Przekroj's postcards adorned with funny quasi-proverbs.

To young people after the war, it didn't necessarily matter what the big conflicts and the big history were about. For them, the matter of life, here and now, was what counted. This is shown well in several novels from the era, such as Skvorecky's *The Cowards* or Leopold Tyrmand's *Zły* ('Badass'), which describe the lives of young people right after or a few years after the war. The material side of life, the body, sexuality, enjoyment appear here as the filter through which young people perceive and receive the world. For Skvorecky's young Czechs, it didn't matter if the girls they encountered were the 'enemy'. In this way we can also understand the creeping youth revolt that was taking place, though it never really triumphed in the Soviet Bloc, but had its phases and levels. The youth revolt in the Soviet Bloc was weird, because it at the same time rebelled against and embraced, or at least tried to, the very Western "consumerism" and "conformism" the Western youth were contesting. But who was the real rebel here and who was the conformist? One of the most interesting views was offered by the writer, anti-communist and admirer of all things Western Leopold

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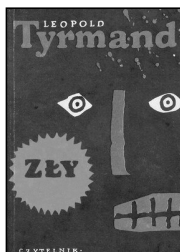
Tyrmand, in his banned 1954 *Diary*, long a cult book in Poland but never translated into English:

*A great deal of anxiety about "clobber". The last Monitor announces a great failure, i.e. a new law about duty put on packages sent to Poland from abroad. This is the end, really. How to even start to show the scale of the unhappiness? Not many realize that since the end of the war three quarters of the clothing consumption of the society is being satisfied by abroad. Actually, America, a dozen charity organizations. That was the militant period of Polish fashion: the elegance was battle dress...*

*"Clobber" and color were in a great way dangerous for the system, because they were direct, everyday. Against what they say that they want to give joy, gaiety, colorfulness and carelessness, communists want only greyness, not-being, a colorlessness which wouldn't take the population away from their sacred ideals. Some kind of uniform ugliness leveled to the rank of moral norm – this is a new ideal of the common usage. They want to see us all in Stalinist jackets and overalls. Lack of charm is a virtue, the appeal of the looks is subversion. Hatred of originality, joy, brightness, individuality, eccentricity, is within communism organic, because every egalitarian ethics is about seeing good in the average and plainness. You can't show a pretty girly face on a magazine cover. But Poles, even the most stupid ones, understood, that the style one dresses is in every era a function of beaux arts, and this way of dressing is in a way an act of resistance. No iron curtains consist a barrier to it.*

Tyrmand identified the Soviet ideology with the lacklustre nature of its clothes and design. Yet today we all know how "emancipation via consumption" ends – somewhere in *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw's epiphanies over Manolo Blahnik shoes. Fashion shows how the circumstances change the semantics of any object. In reality, the greyness of communism was another myth. But as the beauty of the system was meant to be one of the most visible and consistent elements of life under Eastern European socialism, surrounded from every side by images of idealized, fit but hunky workers, robotniks and robotnitze, looking at you from

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5.9 Leopold Tyrmand's novel 'Badass' (1955) was his protest against the new reality, by celebrating Warsaw demi-monde and reviving the pre-war city mythology (cover by Jan Młodożeniec)

the monumental art, murals, buildings decoration, banners and streets, the viewer was not always gaining in the famous Stalinist "gaiety".

This chapter takes its title from one of Tyrmand's phrases. The 1954 *Diary* is a unique document of late Stalinism in Poland. Tyrmand was shaped by a different system – from a Jewish intelligentsia family, he was sent to Paris for architectural studies and survived the war in a Nazi camp in Norway. In post-war Poland he tried to pursue a literary career, publishing in *Tygodnik Powszechny* (*General Weekly*), a Roman Catholic yet progressive magazine, still for a time allowed to publish with a light censorship. After *Tygodnik's* liberal editors were fired all Tyrmand's novels were pulled by the censors. Tyrmand was an example of a liberal, pro-Western intellectual, turned conservative in the clash with People's Poland. His anti-communist crusades are today a record of what a non-communist intellectual, with the previous era in his memory, thought about the new reality. They have their limitations - Tyrmand was still very much indebted to the pre-war view of life and politics, and Western democracy remains an ideal for him, regardless of the political impossibility of its realization in Poland. A militant liberal, neither the anti-Semitic, nor nationalistic views prevalent in pre-war Poland made him embrace the new system. He became its most fervent critic, from a cultural and political point of view remaining a devotee of the West, deploring the new system's shabbiness. While a petit-bourgeois in many of his cultural tastes, valuing the easy listening of Glen Miller as the highest form of civilization, this promoter of jazz and everything Western was one of the most colorful intellectuals of the Soviet period in Poland.

As I've stressed here, Poland in 1939 was an underdeveloped

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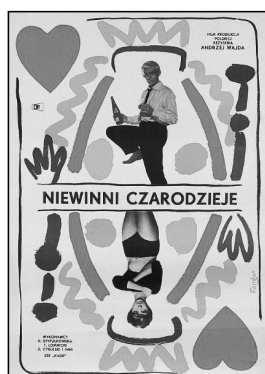
country, pervaded with all the problems of the time: financial crisis, nationalism, right wing dictatorship, anti-Semitism, xenophobia. Tyrmand chose to ignore the fact that even if the Second World War didn't happen, in those conditions Poland would at best become a minor country massively dependent on the West. Yet for him, the fact as a part of the Warsaw Pact Poland didn't have to rely on the West was insignificant. He believed that the biggest tragedy of living under the burden of real socialism was the drastic lowering of any aesthetic, spiritual and intellectual aspirations and expectations of men and women: a reality where the silent subjection of the individuals to the authorities was not enough – it also had to have power over their minds. Tyrmand's critique referred especially to the earliest, harshest Stalinist phase of PRL. As a member of the intelligentsia, Tyrmand had little understanding and belief in the efficiency of the programme of equality. The so-called social advance of the people from countryside to the cities he regarded as disastrous. The omnipresent socialist rhetoric and the newspeak of Stalinism was to him the death of reason.

Many of Tyrmand's fears cannot be completely dismissed as the typical classist fears of the intelligentsia, à la Ortega Y Gasset, hateful of the masses. Tyrmand saw correctly the abyss between the existing shortages and the promises of the authorities. His "Primer on Communist Civilization", translated and published in 1972 in the USA as *The Rosa Luxembourg Contraceptives Cooperative*, is an alphabetically juxtaposed 'komuna vocabulary', with short chapters like 'How to be/do x' or 'What is X', within communism. Topics include 'How to survive education', 'How to use a telephone', 'How to oppose', 'How to be a playboy' or 'How to be Jewish'. There's also one on 'How to be a woman', where Tyrmand seemingly demolishes the new liberties and equal rights women gained in socialism. First of all, the ideas of equality in communism were always rotten, and then in the process of joining the physical hardship of workforce, women gave up their womanhood and turned into masculinized unhumans. All this rather banal

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misogyny wouldn't interest us, were it not for the fact of how little has changed. In the new capitalism Polish women have in fact less freedom and are subjected to greater misogyny than under socialism, where at least basic freedoms, like abortion, contraceptives, and equality within the workplace were officially guaranteed.

But for all his reactionary devotion to the West and his final



5.10 To consume or not to consume. The new PRL generation (Innocent Sorcerers) by Wojciech Fangor, 1960.

defection (where he pursued a career as a conservative/republican publicist and, interestingly, never wrote anything remotely as important as while living under communism), Tyrmand both observed and embodied something that was specific to Eastern European communism. In his writing he remains completely dependent, even mad about it. He constantly uses phrases and metaphors showing his lack of objectivism. He constantly uses the phrase 'they'; 'My attitude towards communism is my outcome of my life under communism', he writes. Tyrmand often behaves as if he owned communism, completely unaware

and uninterested what it might have meant for people outside of his milieu. Tyrmand, who was privileged under the socialist system, which gave free flats to the members of the writers union and supported them financially, couldn't see the connection between the censorship and the privilege he was getting. The latter was transparent to him, and often he even speaks of it as just another form of repression.

Tyrmand was not the only intellectual in the communist state, who, while using all the privileges and being implicated in it, got a sudden myopia when criticizing its shortcomings. He took his derision of working women for a serious act of system critique, rather than simple misogyny. He often seems as if he'd like no

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women to work, or only middle class fashionably dressed women to do so. While seeing the poverty of the working class in post war Warsaw, he was blind to their newfound literacy; nor does he consider that giving jobs to these 'masculinized' women working in the city was a rather positive alternative to being imprisoned at home. Intellectual critics of the system couldn't take the lower classes into account, because that would ruin their line of reasoning, in which the system is portrayed only as the evil slaughterhouse of aspirations.

Yet Tyrmand remains interesting because he embodied certain aspirations just as naïve as those of his opponents. Dressed famously in colorful socks, listening to jazz, reading and writing Western-style literature, he became an idol of the nascent class of youth, born before the war, who only knew socialism, and who came of age around the Thaw. These people were the closest we had to the Americanized Western youth culture. There was the emergence of the student theatres like STS and Bim Bom, linking the traditions of surrealist avant-garde and poetry, a repressed memory of the war time illegal art and literature with the new spirit of jazz and new wave film - the spleen and the glamor of the beautiful actors in Wajda's *Innocent Sorcerers* (1961). Their literature was Marek Hlasko and Tyrmand himself, their cinema was Wajda, Skolimowski and Polanski, their music was the highly original, Polonized jazz of Krzysztof Komeda, Tomasz Stanko and Zbigniew Namysłowski, published in the famous vinyl series *Polish Jazz*.

However, like many other pro-Western bourgeois intellectuals before and after him, Tyrmand's love of the West came from the fact that the West he knew was the cultivated and sophisticated world of Parisian museums. An author on the other side of political spectrum to Tyrmand, was the reporter Ryszard Kapuściński, who, elevated and educated by the communist system, becoming its flagship journalist, actually travelled to those less known territories subject to Western influence or domination. In his recent biography of Kapuściński, Artur Domosławski notes the incomprehension of

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the journalist's contemporaries, who can't really believe in these stories about ruthless French or American murderers.

*For the twenty-somethings at journalism school and Kultura, socialism is rather absurd, nothing but empty rituals and boredom. They dream of a comfortable life and the outside world: the West is where it's at! Someone is going on a scholarship to the States, someone else is off on holiday to Western Europe. In the West these young people get a large dose of new impressions, experiences and ideas. Yet Kapuściński comes back from that outside world and speaks of the West as having enslaved the poor countries of the Third World, and of the curse of 'American Imperialism'. For the young people, the stories of their colleague and master sound like sheer cant, while for Kapuściński 'American imperialism' is not a platitude but an accurate description, something he has touched, sniffed and seen.*

Domoslawski quotes one asking him 'You don't like America, but why do you carp at the French, too?' 'You know the French from Paris – cultured, educated people', responds Kapuściński, 'but I know the ones from the colonies. They are barbarians! If you get in their way or frustrate their business interests, they'll kill you'. As in the frequently quoted saying from the transition – 'they were lying to us when they told us about communism, but they were telling the truth about capitalism'.

Were all the youth of Eastern Europe all eager westernizers? Polish-Jewish Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher saw the Russian youth movement otherwise, writing in the 1963 essay 'The Soviet Union enters the second decade after Stalin':

*Western observers of the Soviet scene are often struck by what they describe as the gradual Americanization of the Soviet way of life. They notice a general preoccupation with material comfort, a weariness with ideology and a craving for entertainment, widespread profiteering and blackmarketing, cynicism and pessimism among the young, especially among the Soviet beatniks, who look sometimes like real cousins of their*

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*Western counterparts. These observers conclude that Soviet society, or at least its upper strata, are undergoing a process of embourgeoisment... This view seems to me erroneous. The general preoccupation with material comfort is real enough; and so (after half a century of wars, revolutions, and Stalinist terror) is the longing for a relaxed, easy-going life. Yet, the so-called Americanization is rather superficial and transient (although it is connected to some extent with the Soviet ambition to catch up with the USA industrially).*

'The little profiteer' – continues Deutscher – 'the beatnik, the



5.11 War fashion. A photoshoot in the ruins of Warsaw in Ty i Ja, 1960s.



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*stilyaga*, and the enthusiastic admirer of the latest Western pop song and dance, who so quickly catch the eye of the Western visitor – all of these are marginal characters.’ To Deutscher, the appearance of the westernized youth, *stilyagi* or *bikiniarze*, didn’t change the natural course of the society’s structure. The 1950s were the era when the workers could re-embrace the equality from the times preceding Stalinism, regardless of the other social classes inertia. Thaw generation poets like Yevtushenko, reaching for the ‘values of the 20s’, were hugely popular and it was them, for Deutscher, who were really the avant-garde and the rebels of that era, not the *stilyagi*. The ‘resurgent egalitarianism’ was the word of the day. It was very different to Tyrmand’s simple equivalence between consumerism and subversion. Both Polish Jews, divided by a generation, Tyrmand and Deutscher could not have had more different ideas about young people under socialism and their desires.

### You and Me and Things: Socialist Objects of Desire

As capitalism grew and reached its heights via textile production in nineteenth-century England, textiles and capitalism, textiles and production seem to be a perfect way of discussing the meanders of both production and social reality under communism. Its most obvious consequence, fashion, is erratic, passing, unstable and speculative – precisely what socialist production didn’t want to be. In this way fashion behaves like a modernist, avant-garde movement, which has to erase everything solid, in a permanent revolution of dress. Yet Soviet man was supposed to be focused on something not only stable, but something eternal, something monumental.

As Dick Hebdige puts it his *Cartography of Taste*, in the UK ‘although during the Cold War the prospect of Soviet territorial ambitions could provoke similar indignation and dread, American cultural imperialism demanded a more immediate interpretative response... America was seen by many as an immediate embod-

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iment of the future taken from Huxley's *Brave New World*, Fyvel's Subtopia, Spengler's megalopolis, or Hoggart's Kosy Holiday Kamp. Since 1930 the US served as an image of industrial barbarism...A country without a past and therefore no real culture, ruled by competition'. Yet it had its extremely appealing popular culture and fashion. Fashion was an obsession and real factor during the Cold War, enforcing the easy qualifications that everything exciting comes from the West. So if fashion, as a thing that relies on a changeability that is erratic, uncontrollable, unstable, is like a metaphor for capitalism itself, what then of fashion under a planned economy, that couldn't and wouldn't be subjugated to the terror of supply and demand?

Fashion was in the post-45 Poland a matter of negotiating between what was available, what was smuggled and what could be self-produced. Women had to become at once fashion designers, illegal fair-hunters and queuing masters, trying to guide themselves to what was fashionable. Creativity, DIY and also a desire for Western goods was mediated by *Przekroj* and *Ty i Ja*, with their "moral mission" of showing post-war society a way through the perils of censorship. Fashion definitely existed in real socialism, but it wasn't really 'fashion' in the capitalist sense, fast-moving and fast changing. DIY, practiced by everybody in Soviet Bloc, was closer to anti-fashion, made against the industrial dialectics of supply and demand. Because of the unavailability of goods or the poor quality of the local production, DIY magazines and TV programmes flourished across the Bloc, counselling its citizens in areas as different as fashion and science, furniture and electric inventions, at the same time trying to trivialize the shortages and cover for the poor quality of goods by promoting the popular wisdom and the terrific skills lying dormant in every Mr and Mrs Smith.

According to Marshal Tito, socialism was an 'essentially consumerist society', and Yugoslavia, as a part of the non-aligned movement, definitely belonged to the most liberalized in this

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matter in the whole of Eastern Europe. Yet it differed in this to the official version in the Bloc, where magazines promoted goods that were completely unachievable for any settled citizen, and unless smuggled, could only exist as the dark objects of consumerist desires.

Yet there were counter-strategies against the grayness, which from today's perspective can be seen as an attempt at extending the high-minded pre-war status of upper classes rather than the mere imitation of America. But the goods craved by the youth were not only cultural, they wanted good alcohol, cigarettes, pants and silk stockings (the crucial commodity through which Maria Braun makes her spectacular post-war career, in Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*). In socialism, one is not supposed to desire something as low as mere things and in any film from the early 50s material goods barely existed. One was supposed to withdraw the craving of things and work hard for the sake of the future and an always-postponed prosperity. This strangely enough corresponded with the pre-war ideology of the nobleman cultural intelligentsia of Poland. There, you were not supposed to be materialistic or admit you want things, which you were giving up in the name of higher, immaterial ideals. Ironically enough then, in this sense the new, post-war socialist ideal was adopted from the former upper classes.

How else could it have ended up apart from an even greater craving for the goods one was deprived of? In the Bloc, the mystery surrounding Western goods added to their metaphysical mystique, much in the Benjaminian sense of the "aura", yet augmented by the fact that even with money you still wouldn't be able to have them! Unless you had some amazing contacts within the Politburo, knew someone or were yourself involved with the smuggling of foreign goods to the black market (the essence of Warsaw described by Tyrmand), all you had was the fantasy. In later years, our freedom to buy was extended via the special foreign currency chain Pewex, where many sighed-about Western goods were available, including blue American jeans, but only with Western hard currency. It seems

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5.12a Everyday surrealism. Ty i Ja (You and I) luxury magazine, designed by Roman Cieslewicz.

that we're still seen via this prism of fantasy-power by our Western counterparts. Some films from the time took this easy dichotomy and pushed it to the point of absurdity and destruction.

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***Does it matter? It doesn't matter! An invitation to destruction***

In Věra Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966) two young women do *nothing* for the entire film, apart from: eating; lying on their bed in flamboyant costumes; rolling in a meadow; chatting up men and making them pay for them in exclusive restaurants; catching flies; sitting/lying down, *neglige*, in stupefaction, like mechanical dolls; awkwardly trying to attract men to then run away from; and throwing and wasting enormous amounts of hard won and fought for socialist food, in an obvious act of disdain for Czechoslovakian men and women workers' toil and socialist values. If anything, *Daisies* is driven by a sense of play, so rare in cinema, with an open-ended structure, which at best works as a series of episodes. If the stabilized socialist society (as we can call the 1960s) could be characterized by the rigidity of norms, conformity, lack of spontaneity, oppression, stiff rules directing every moment of life, then everything the two Marias do is aimed exactly as disclosing the organism's diseased bones, as if even the slightest blow of unruliness could easily overthrow this carefully constructed mediocrity. In fact, the state's power wasn't exactly that frail at all, as the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion and the end of the Prague Spring made most clear. But to maintain the ideology – similarly in Poland or USSR – the conformity of others was essential.

Made two years before the Prague Spring, *Daisies* was the product of a deep socialism, with all its sleepiness, sheepishness, closure of perspectives and with a return to private, family life. *Daisies* goes precisely against all this. Shot in radical, strong, 'hippie' tie-dyed colors, it also went against the greyness of socialism, creating an anarchic alternative. *Daisies* remains one of the rarest and strongest satires and subversive fantasies of a life under socialism, which never really took place. Maria and Maria from Chytilová's film remind me of the 'theory of form' developed by the Polish modernist writer Witold Gombrowicz. In his view, form is something negative: a pervading power of conformity,

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turning us into pitiful members of mass society, an opposition to which would be a romantic aristocrat of the old type. Yet Gombrowicz was rather up for the un-made man, a man without qualities, without feelings, without dependencies. No wonder he never came back to communist Poland, but before he became canonized as a writer in France, he preferred the life of an sexual outcast in Buenos Aires, much in the Jean Genet lowlife/whore-affirmative way.

The two Maries are on a mission to unmake the socialist stereotypes of womanhood: mother, wife, worker, nice girl from youth organisation, homemaker. They want to live on the margins of this society, still manipulatively using their girlishness to obtain their goals: a free dinner, adoration and lots of fun at men's expense. At the same time Maria and Maria's excesses visibly bring them little jouissance. Whenever they're up to something fiendish, they have their little dialogue: *Does it matter? It doesn't matter!* Precisely: whatever they do, it doesn't matter. The fun derived from breaking the rules, from constant line-crossing lasts perhaps two minutes, only to make room for the usual dullness and boredom (even hopelessness) once again. The more they try, the more they go to an excess, the more pointless it is. They're on a quest for form. They are women – which means within the society they don't have an inherent form just by themselves. What for Gombrowicz was a blessing and a liberation – escaping the overpowering form, becoming a dandy of the spirit, a ready product to be admired - for them becomes the reason they fall. "We will be hard working and everything will be clean" they promise. "And then we'll be happy".

People who have fallen out of form is a frequent topic in socialist era Czech film, because not working was the highest form of subversion in countries where it would straight away qualify you as a 'loafer'. In *Of the Party and the Guests*, Jan Němec's 1967 film, a group of upper echelon system beneficiaries lose their form. In turn, they are left adrift – without the system that made them feel important, they're nothing. Planning a nice picnic with their

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wives, they suddenly are taken over by a mysterious group of people – apparatchiks? Government officials? Best not to ask too many questions. Again, there's an obsession with food which can never be consumed, just like in Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*.

Are the *Daisies*' Marias bored, or empty or simply stupid? Their waste of time, labor, food, and the pointlessness of their own ways suggest they are outcasts of society – and they suffer because of that. Is this film really a praise of anarchy? The girls are rather dejected and depressed by all of the increasingly scandalous pranks they perform, so joyless. They exist between automated dolls from horror movies and eccentrics from a Beckett play. Self-reflection makes them unhappy. The two Marias are also women reclaiming their time, which normally is supposed to be spent on work, nursing men and children. They try (and fail) to realize their dreams: of a pure virgin, parading on a meadow with a wreath on her head. They plant flowers and vegetables on their bed, their room is a laboratory of fantasy. They seem constantly hungry. The motif of food and femininity in *Daisies* is strictly surrealist and had great traditions in Czech art, which produced some of the most interesting art in that spirit. Food as fetish, as sexual object was often a factor in Czech surrealist art and film, from the 1930s paintings of Toyen to the animations of Jan Švankmajer.

In Švankmajer's work food becomes basically "existential" and stands for the general hopelessness of human existence; the hopeless mundanity, the routine and repeatability of everyday activities, such as eating three meals a day. This is also deeply felt in the short film 'Meat Love', and is a motif that he repeats in his late film *Lunacy*, which was partly inspired by Marquis de Sade, a huge influence present also, in a sardonic way, in his *Conspirators of Pleasure*. The world of Švankmajer is always impossibly twisted and distorted to the degree that we barely recognize the familiar elements, stripped down to the libidinal rudiments of id, all-consuming, violent and unpredictable.

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5.13 Not for human consumption. Food anarchy in *Daisies*.

The screenplay for *Daisies* was developed together with Pavel Juráček and Ester Krumbachová, two artists in their own right - especially Krumbachová, a strikingly original costume designer, writer and director, and a somehow tragic, unfulfilled figure, who collaborated with Chytilová also on the oneiric *Fruits of Paradise*, and co-wrote several exuberant surrealist Czech classics, like *On the Party And The Guests* by Jan Němec, Karel Kachyňa's *The Ear*, and *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* by Jaromir Jires, but then, as a self-reliant director she didn't have similar success. Watching her only film, *The Murder of Mister Devil* (1970) we see that despite being possessed by an extraordinary visual imagination, on her own Krumbachová couldn't go beyond a combination of visual gags, without a principle organizing it. In *Mister Devil*, the visual means overshadow the actual content. We see a perfect bourgeois woman in a perfect flat preparing a real feast for her rather unimpressive functionary partner/husband. The feast is completely disproportionate to the small scale of the evening, yet the dishes just keep coming and coming, more and more breathtaking, and the whole film reminds me rather of Marco Ferreri's *La*



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*Grande Bouffe* or a similar transgressive anti-capitalist 70s fantasy. Yet given the title, and the superb poster, in which the screaming man is drowned and eaten in a ice-cream sundae by a smiling Medusa-woman - designed by Eva Galová-Vodrážková, in the best traditions of the Czech and Polish school of poster, with excessive



5.14 SCUM manifesto in Czechoslovakia. The poster for Krumbachova's *Murder of Mister Devil*.

irony and surreal/dada spirit, from where Linder Sterling must've learned some of her technique too - it was a strongly feminist statement playing with anti-feminist sentiments, about a woman who's using one of her only 'weapons' - food, as a way to make everything in the world implode.

Food and wasting food is a great taboo, not only in socialism but also in capitalism. The two Marias walk on food, crush it with their high heels - an analogue scene is repeated by Ulrike Ottinger in her *Trinkerin*, with the character walking on broken glass. Yet their consumption seems faraway from a joyful carnivorous feast. Was excessive eating truly subversive within the socialist state? It definitely was, especially in the light of woman's role within society, of her body being ogled and consumed, combined with her role of a family food provider. This is related to the sexualization of women eating, which today instantly brings to mind images from the hardcore pornography, with the scene of a zoom on woman's face, as she licks sperm from her face, the so-called money-shot. The sexual attraction of a 'money shot' is a pure male fantasy - but the thing is, as Mark Fisher points out, that the pleasure lies not in the fact the girl really 'enjoys it', but precisely that she willingly pretends to do so. As a good worker, it's not enough she just sucks somebody's dick, she must do it with a smile. In *The FACE*

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magazine in 1988 there was a photo session called 'ALEX EATS', with the relatively unknown skinny model, shot repeatedly as she eats in various settings, with the stress on the food that's being wasted rather than consumed. Overeating excessively, yet retaining her skinny flesh, Alex was openly mocking really existing eating disorders. It was the beginning of the 90s waif-like model, when magazines openly promoted an anorexic and unhealthy look. In the cardinal scene of *Daisies* involving food, the two come upon an abandoned banquet, with a table groaning under the weight of most gluttonously arranged piles of food, a real Balthazzar's feast, completely uncannily displayed in the midst of socialist scarcity. What ensues is the girls breaking into a final, elemental jouissance, where the food is consumed and destroyed, transforming into an ultimate orgy. Like children left home alone, they destroy as much as they can. They seem still addicted to the classic denominators of beauty – they must parody the fashion catwalk, dressed in mayonnaise, salad and curtains, to finally get rid of the nagging beauty ideal. They try to be flirtatious, yet they are ultimately afraid of sex: rather shy, they much prefer their own company to the boring/stupid/intimidating men.

It seems that the woman's body just never can be right, no relationship she has with food can be liberatory. Too fat/thin, or not thrifty enough. In *Daisies* the meaning of food is contradictory: the two Marias neither really chew and swallow their food nor take pleasure from their anarchic waste of it. But this association of women and food runs incredibly deep. Women are supposed to take pleasure from eating and preparing food, which makes their bodies equally prone to consumption. Natalia LL, the pioneering Polish feminist conceptual artist, made a still shocking series of so called *Consumption Art* in 1970s. The films and film stills show LL, then an attractive bimbo-blond, 'consuming' various phallic foods: she's licking and slowly unfolding a banana (then also a symbol of luxury) and then sucking it intensely, she drinks cream and lets it dribble all over her mouth and face. She smiles seduc-

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tively as she does it, licking her lips with visible lust and voraciousness. She nailed perfectly (and prophetically) the conflation of capitalism and pornography and the role the exploited woman's flesh plays in it. Not only was consumption as such a highly ironic notion in PRL – LL, like many women artists from the socialist republics, felt the burden of being thrown into a role of a



5.15 Sucking it up. Natalia LL in her dairy delirium.

'harmless chick', whose only role is to look good and conform well within the image of healthy socialism.

The Croatian artist Sanja Iveković, coming from the much more liberal Yugoslavia, similarly thematized woman's role as a 'sex kitten', in the women's magazines promoting consumerism and 'self-care', of endless making up, beautifying, sexing-up through buying clothes and cosmetic products. She exploited this in the hilarious series *Double Life* (1975), where she put together magazine advertisements with photos of sexy half-naked models in erotic poses, with her own self-portraits miming their seductive gestures. Unlike Cindy Sherman, 'deconstructing' the rules of the capitalist spectacle by pretending to be various people, Iveković stresses the sheer idiocy of porn or consumption in a country that remains much poorer than the West, with its ridiculous pretensions to Western 'glamour'. But there are much darker undertones to it yet. In the compulsory consumption of the Yugoslavian state she saw the obliteration of women's reality: in *Black File* (1976) she juxtaposed the photos of sexy pin-ups from men's magazines with paper cut-outs about missing women arranged like a police file, "Where is Liljina?" or "Brankica gone missing". Women under pressure come back in *Structure*, where Ivekovic again plays with the ironic caption-image pairing, putting old photographs of women, some looking like from they were taken from nineteenth-century

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physiognomy books or catalogues of mental diseases, and pairing them with ironic commentaries, like “Expecting her master’s return”, “Sought consolation in horse racing and nightlife”, “Had enough of being a good girl” or was “Executed in Bubanj in 1944”. As if death was the only apt punishment for the nice girls gone bad.

### Give me all that I want!

The late 1970s, the end of the Edward Gierek era, when the bill for Poland’s attempt to borrow its way into consumerist abundance was called in, was a moment when all the dreams of efficiency must have had reached their end. There was no possibility of pretending anymore, the decade’s prosperity was a sham. The affluent 70s started to reveal itself as a delusion of wealth: achieved due to massive loans which threw Poland into a dangerous debt. A decade which started with the tragic repression of strikers on the Baltic coast, ended in the massive economic crisis that started to reach every level of society. Aptly, the Gdansk shipyard strikes were prompted by the fact that meat prices were too high. Then Martial Law came in December ‘81, the coup led by General Jaruzelski and his army junta against its citizens. Curfews meant people often had to stay together at each other’s houses.

One of the best Polish post-punk bands of this era, Kontrola W were originally named “Kontrola Władzy” (Control of Power), but probably because the group didn’t want to get in trouble, they decided to shorten it – at some gigs when they were announced, someone from the crowd said: *but you can’t control power! But it’s about us being controlled by power* – the band allegedly replied (later they claimed that the W stood for *Wrażenia* (Impressions)). Still, the lyrics remained militant and pugnacious, with the music merging retro rockabilly elegance and postpunk erudition, bringing to mind Burroughsesque topics of control from the state, communist newspeak, atomic war, nuclear crisis, hiding in bunkers, imagining the end of the world, fear of pollution and radioactivity, state-controlled media brainwashing society, erasure of the self by the

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mass culture, personality crisis. Sound familiar? These were typical disillusioned subjects for punk and post punk, but they had an extra resonance here. For instance, they ridiculed and questioned the efficiency of Poland's collapsing post-81 economy. Like Xex or Devo earlier, they reacted with its absurdization: *Your factory leads in the world/they make everything the best in the world/radioactive!!/Radioactive little balloons/Radioactive ties/Radioactive lipsticks/Radioactive dummies!* Then the song comes back to the bleak reality of work: *Your leading factory/you work there four shifts a day/and have no time/for romances/no time/to be intellectual!* The factory existence influences the whole worker's body and physiology: *Radioactive are your eyes/your hands/your heart/your brain!*

On the top of that Kontrola dressed like something between Russian futurists and post-war Polish pioneers. But we must remember what was actually happening in Poland around the time the band came to existence. Shortly after they got together, Martial Law was proclaimed, which in its first phase was like a real war for many people: tanks, food crises and rationing, curfews, people arrested, 'accidental' deaths on the streets, terror. In this atmosphere Kontrola W took part in youth festivals from 1982, and in 1983, only when the repression began to be relaxed.

Leader Darek Kulda says in an interview from 1984: *I wanted to make an ugly music. It was a period when on Polish radio there was nothing apart from hard rock, which I was sick of. I decided to create a band whose music would be unclassifiable, neither rock, nor jazz, nor nothing. We failed, cos they put us under a label: new wave.* Listening to the 6 salvaged Kontrola W tracks that have survived, despite their poor recording quality, they possess an instantly recognizable originality: a precise and smooth as hell rhythm section (drummer Wojtek Jagielski, who in 'free' Poland became a talk-show celebrity) drives the motorik of *Bossa Nova*, which starts with a few seconds of scratching, compulsive guitar strings. An out-of-tune, sick, broken rockandroll, the song progresses in angular groans and whines of guitar, accompanied with the self-possessed, very capricious

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5.16 Kontrola W. Jarocin 1983, photographed by Ryszard Gajewski

screech of Kasia Kulda, in which she's trying to get rid of an importunate lover: *When there's nothing to talk about/ you persecute me at every step/ Crawling upon my feet (...)/ and if this doesn't bring effect/ you can only sing this old tune: Bossa Nova!* Kulda sings with a sharpness and panache that Siouxi Sioux would be jealous of, if she had only known about it.

In the complicated ways of the development of popular music in the Soviet Bloc it's easy to classify bands immediately as some sorts of poor, oppressed oppositionists. On both sides of the Curtain the youth felt that the current political order was wrong, that there were no opportunities for people like them. The music arising everywhere in the punk era, regardless of whether it was Eastern or Western, was directed by a similar impulse of disillusionment, of taking things in one's hands, an ability to express anger and dissatisfaction. On both sides it was a manifestation of the dispossessed: the fact that the Western youth were rejecting the

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comfortable lifestyle of baby boomers, and the fact Poles had nothing to lose doesn't change this. This strange time between the fake promise of bling and the grey, concrete reality resulted in a sudden change in more mainstream Polish pop, which embraced and flirted with the fallen dreams of beautiful commodities that hadn't exactly turned into reality. The historical, economic and cultural moment was perfect for this: the old cynicism of the Party was replaced by the enthusiasm of Solidarity, and the old truths didn't matter anymore. Be it the scarcity of the official culture or the hunger for emancipation, Polish popular music in the break between the 1970s and 1980s spawned more interesting female vocalists and music personalities than ever before or after.

Izabela Trojanowska was a one-woman Polish New Wave movement, whose populist songs picked up where punk left off. Drawing on the empowered feminine-but-tough girls of post punk and pop-punk - rapaciousness of Siouxi Sioux, the girlie charm of Debbie Harry or the boyishness of Chrissie Hynde - she added a completely new air of a mature sexy femininity. In Poland, she represented a completely new kind of a pop female performer with a quite shocking demeanor of self-confidence, sex and modernity. She wore short, predatory hair, strong make up with compulsory blood-red lipstick, and an aptly *garçonne* wardrobe. Androgynous suits with a feminine, perverse twist, sequin blouses in dazzling whites and zero degree of sentimentality. Walking on her red stilettos with exaggerated puff shoulders, Trojanowska was rather a communist David Bowie/Klaus Nomi, a Thin White Duke and a Bauhausian doll, and harsher than any male performer ever in the Soviet Bloc - maybe, because she understood and played well with androgyny. In several photos she assumes a pose similar to Bowie, and in one TV programme even performed dressed as a Bowie-esque New Romantic Pierrot, with glitter-brocade make up on her face. Iza wore both male and female clothes, always with a dominating air: jackets with spiky, "neo-gothic" collars and shoulders in striking, saturated colors, red and amaranth leather

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5.17 In Poland, David Bowie was a woman. Izabela Trojanowska.

dressess and jackets; metallic, futuristic coats, like an elegant cyborg, akin to Sean Young in *Blade Runner*, and huge, futurist sunglasses. The whole of her person seemed to exude the metallic sheen of a sexy robot.

In this she was also predestined by the self-irony with which she smilingly rejected any possible feminine clichés of life in the Bloc. She was a Helmut Newtonesque scary businesswoman, who didn't have anywhere to go to work, so in her videos she posed by the only 'modern' looking shiny skyscrapers she could find in Warsaw. She used men like toys whenever she fancied, but mostly she was self sufficient, with strong *lesbienne* undertones a la Dietrich, or flirting with a glam vampirella look. A sharp gal who couldn't stand the failure of a boyfriend to give her *all she wanted, now*. No wonder one of the first drag queen shows in early 90s Poland was an Iza T. impersonation. Imagine the shock which this caused any typical Polish man, used to a housewife who'd hand



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him a hot meal and slippers in their much-awaited two-bedroom flat. In her lyrics, she was shockingly sarcastic towards socialist efficiency, mocking both Socialist Realist Stakhanovites, and the prosaic reality of endless material lacks which was everything but glamorous. The heroic times of socialism were clearly gone, as Iza T. commented with a bored, sarcastic voice:

*No more Heroes... and even if, where to take them from?:  
 So much wealth has gone to waste  
 Laurel wreaths and golden ribbons  
 Nearly ready plinths  
 On which already someone climbed before.  
 One misty morning the Endless Olympics flown away  
 There's no more demand for heroes  
 And even if, where to take them from?  
 The jolly dancing speaker's voice  
 Doesn't solve problems anymore  
 Paper in hand, bored, they queue  
 With Bolek & Lolek – what a waste  
 And it is harder every day  
 For girls to fall in love in vain.  
 No more heroes anymore...*

By then nobody believed in the system anymore, but here punk nihilism was taken up by commercial pop. As Iza rejected the idea of shacking up with a boy and waiting 10 years for a council flat, she mocked the scarcity of means, most famously in 'The Song of the Brick' – in which the chorus line "pass me a brick" is a reference to a 1950s Stalinist slogan of building communist Poland. There she was in 1980, recalling the times everybody wanted to forget: just like Wajda, bringing back the trauma of sotsrealism. During a memorable televised performance at the Opole festival in 1980, dressed in the exaggerated red cravat of a communist youth organisation member, surrounded by naked

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musclemen painted gold (!) she parodied the positivist, brightly colored sotsrealist boom of growth and prosperity:

*Pass the brick, pass the brick  
Let's build a new house!  
Up to our aspirations – a house!  
Rain will stop, sun will rise  
A new harvest will grow  
Through our hearts and our hands!  
Our cause is simple, our goal is clear!  
You can hear our jolly song everywhere  
In a short moment we'll even touch the stars!  
Don't stay behind, if you don't want to be left alone!  
Spring will come, and immediately  
Hundreds of Steelworks will grow  
There will be plenty of everything!  
There's no paths or ways we couldn't reach!  
We know who's our friend or foe!  
Soon we'll embrace the whole world in our arms  
And who's not with us, is against us!*

All this she sung with a flirty flippancy. Her character was too disillusioned, too cynical to believe either the authorities or the men's promises. She looks with pity at the boy, who talks about the bright future,

*You tell me 'just a bit effort and the world belongs to us'.  
Well, lets say – in eight years?  
A tower block flat and a small Fiat  
Don't even think you're gonna afford it  
Cos you can give me all I need now anyway!*

Iza paved the way for several sharp female performers who appeared soon after. A French migrant, Richard Boulez, known for

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wearing colorful clothes in Poland, became the chief stylist of Kora, the charismatic singer of Maanam. Boulez and Kora were like the Halston and Jerry Hall or Grace Jones and Jean Paul Goude of Polish new wave: the stylist-artiste and the it-girl who has it all. Kora wore Bowieesque kimonos and excessive heavy jewellery, on synthetic bright-colored vampish sets specially designed by Boulez. Shocking the public at the Opole '80 festival in dayglo-colored clothes singing *Divine Buenos Aires*, Kora was all desire: to travel, to meet people, to shag men, to explore, to have everything she wanted.

Another 'hot chick' was Urszula, a big glossy synth-pop diva, whose productions were close to Trevor Horn's ZTT or Art of Noise. Her composers dwelled on the earlier synthesized disco of Giorgio Moroder, but gave it the sassiness of Blondie and the sublimity of 'Blue Monday'. In Urszula's songs the most mundane neighbored the most fanciful. She also fantasized about luxurious commodities, as in the ultra-synthy *The Seasonal Fashion Frenzy*, where her character can't stop thinking about buying new glittery clothes. One could ask, where in the grey 80s could she find any? In her songs there appeared surrealist flights of fancy or tales of journeys to outer space, which also appeared in Polish post-punk and new wave music, as in Kapitan Nemo's heavily synthed 'Electronic Civilisation'. Kapitan Nemo aka Bogdan Gajkowski, self-styled minimal-wave futurist in a quirky bohemian black beret, was the great uncle of all today's 80s revivalists. In his *Wideonarkomania* he pioneered a still-fresh in PRL topic of addiction to television and the suddenly available world of VHS, with a pulsatingly colorful video, where sexual lust gets confused with Cronenbergian *Videodrome* fantasies. He sounds as if he already knew that 30 years later the generation of lo-fi "hypnanogics" and Hauntologists will put the washed out distorted VHS image retro aesthetic onto the pedestal of a hipster absolute. '*This is a new hash for the masses/White screen is shaking/One move and you already live in it! And after Bruce Lee/ a bit of sex before you fall asleep.*' Delicate female backing vocals,

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heavy synths and an interest in the harshest modernity put him close to a Polish Phil Oakey with touches of Gary Numan. There are also common references to sotsrealism: in *Factory Love*, love is of course “tough as steel” and “according to the safety rules”.

Unfortunately, in reality, we couldn't be driving further away from space and the computer world, as Soviet technology had its most modern, forward-thinking years already behind it. Paradoxically, when we caught up with the dominating futurist fashion within pop-culture, time-traveling and computer technology, as in the children's trilogy of *Pan Kleks*, we had lost any potential to even overtake the West with our ideas. Post-81 the socialist utopia started to growingly morph into dystopia.

The catastrophic SF of Piotr Szulkin, one of the most distinctive 80s Polish visionaries, disclosed a quite different realization of the futuristic dreams, filled with fear first at the communist, and then capitalist versions of totalitarianism. It's an Orwellian vision immersed in philosophical existential deliberations over the media, cynicism and the mental destruction of the individual. According to Szulkin's films, the Soviet Bloc will be destroyed by communism, after which capitalism will take over, and turn out to be equally destructive. In a very loose adaptation of Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1981), one country, which due to English names could seem Western, is invaded by Martians, who are a 'higher' civilisation - one which ruthlessly oppresses the lower one on earth, as the Martians are bloodthirsty, horrific creatures, who vampirically live off humans. The world becomes overpowered by cynical media exploitation, and a brutal state apparatus assumes absolute control.

Even if the intention was for Martians to stand in for the Soviet Union (who were supposedly on the verge of invading Poland in 1981, which was then “prevented” by the introduction of Martial Law by General Jaruzelski's junta), in fact they rather resemble the other Cold War Empire – The United States of America. Their omnivorous media, popular culture and capitalist greed seem to be something that bothers Szulkin even more than the Soviet reality,

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as in *Ga Ga – Glory to the Heroes* (1985), where in post-communist, twenty-first century Americanized reality, humanity has conquered other planets. But on the colonized new worlds, mankind installs prostitution, vice and omnipresent media rule. In the finale, the hero is to be executed at a gigantic stadium media event broadcast across the entire solar system. We live in the world after the apocalypse, that's obvious: in 1984's *O-Bi, O-Ba, End of Civilisation*, after the nuclear war the whole humanity is reduced to living underground, like worms (several years before, and in a much more convincing way, than it was done by Emir Kusturica in *Underground*) and in these humiliating conditions they wait for the mythical Ark to take them away, the Second Coming, not knowing it's only the criminal state apparatus's propaganda. Instead of the Ark coming, the copula over the pitiful hole humankind lives in is collapsing. Still, the light revealed by the cracks is taken by the humans as the arrival of the Ark. Space in Szulkin's films is nearly always one or another form of prison: people vegetate in claustrophobic, dirty hovels, waiting for miracles that never come.

At the time Szulkin was developing his visions, People's Poland was in some of its darkest periods. We had rather more mundane problems, with austerity after the Martial Law and a collapsing economy. The topic of scarcity strangely enough must have become domesticated in the pop landscape of late *komuna*, because it kept coming back obsessively in pop music. Too down to earth to seriously debate about flying to space, Izabela stuck to disillusionment.

### Lost in Contradictory Images

One of the things that has been growing obvious in the most interesting contemporary art in Poland is an interest in the visual culture imagery of the communist past. With delight artists take up and paint or re-enact aesthetic elements of the everyday life of PRL. This trend remains charmingly and quite openly close to the more general, hipster gesture of cherishing retro for its own sake. Slawek

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5.18 Richard Boulez and Kora, 1983, photo by Tadeusz Rolke

Elsner repainted dozens of images from the popular weekly *Panorama*, in which he also mimed the poor print quality of 70s Poland. Paulina Ołowska, meanwhile, does not stop at re-enacting only the aesthetics, she re-enacts whole situations and elements of everyday life. She repaints the popular visual elements of socialist life: postcards with DIY fashion, often bizarre and on the verge of kitsch yet too strange to become it, or magazine covers and punk leaflets. She makes collages, merges the original print and her

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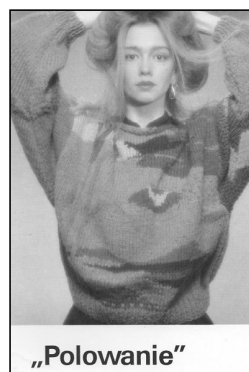
creation, which become indistinguishable. Part of the appeal of Ołowska's adaptations is the sheer love of clothes. In this way she builds a significant relationship with the period, and can't be reduced just to empty retro posing of a fashionista. Maybe it's the love of material culture that puts a bridge between an empty retro-mania and the ideology these aesthetics represent. But does Ołowska identify with the women who had to sew their own clothes, as there was nothing in the shops, or is she just amused with their earnestness? Using that expression from Tyrmand, *Applied Fantastics*, she stresses rather the ironic aspect of how living in PRL meant constant improvisation and miracle-making on an everyday basis. And somehow, she's then seduced by this miracle.

It's obvious that in the work of Elsner or Ołowska, where the communist past undergoes a painterly conceptual resurrection, there's a strong hint of nostalgia - a nostalgia often inspired by the disappointment the post-89 culture brought, also visually. But this seeming longing for PRL has to be constantly disavowed. 'Polish magazines stayed on a very poor editorial level, especially lithographic and print techniques' says curator/gallerist Łukasz Gorczyca in his text for a catalogue of Slawek Elsner's works. Yet, as we've seen, Polish magazines like *Przekroj* and *Ty I Ja* showed a rather high and even innovatory level of originality. Polish magazines weren't just simply the poor imitation of the Western model of consumption, as Gorczyca suggests, they were often trying to build their own version of lifestyle. Yes, they were restricted by the shabbiness and limitations of real socialism, but the lacks they had made them aspire to create something on their own. Interestingly, whenever the topic of nostalgia after the aesthetics of Soviet times comes up, commentators and theorists rush immediately to assure us it has nothing to do with the politics. The recent interest of young Russians in Soviet cinema or old games, or anything connected with the system is, apparently, apolitical. Maybe this is typical of the weakness of so much of current political aesthetics, which is not politicized enough,

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uprooted from its original meaning and in the end, pretty but meaningless. Photographs of people enjoying themselves in the DDR or USSR can be found all over the internet. But then people enjoyed their life and holidays also under fascism. An image proving that people enjoyed themselves playing ping pong under communism doesn't actually prove anything in particular.

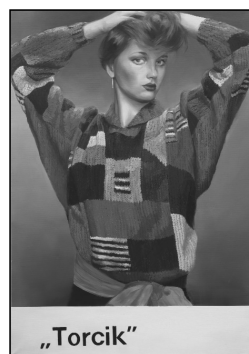
We'll never get an honest reassessment of the past if we keep denying that this nostalgia at play is also political. Or rather – that it suggests the death or lack of the politics which made certain positive elements of this reality possible. Yet the nostalgia or even sheer curiosity after this period is enormous. Any books, gadgets, memoirs, films issued from the post-war era, regardless of their value, are meeting with popularity, not only in Poland, but in all ex-Bloc countries. Socialist modernist architecture is being constantly revived. The most popular current books are invariably either memoirs from PRL (Lech Wałęsa's wife Danuta, the daughter of General Jaruzelski, or Jerzy Urban, the notorious government PR in PRL and in free Poland the king of the gutter press - to name just the biggest) or historical books, alternately endorsing and condemning PRL as a criminal regime or an "occupation". Blogs of the gadget and



„Polowanie”

5.19a DIY as a way of survival. A popular series of ideas for knitwear which will inspire artist Paulina Olowska decades later. Here 'Hunting'.

5.19b Spoof or original. Paulina Olowska playing with the aesthetics of PRL within post-modern painting. Cake, courtesy of Metro Pictures.



„Torcik”



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lifestyle aficionados mushroom everywhere. There're even attempts to "live in PRL" – people who have decided to live as if 1989 never happened: for a year one couple wore, ate, read and consumed only goods produced in PRL, after which they published a book about the experience.

In this way the creation of the phantasm called 'PRL' becomes just the superficial question of wearing a specific kind of clothes, living in cheesy design or eating retro bad-quality food, without any attempt to dig into the meaning of this time. There's just a façade, with nothing in terms of actual rethinking of the ideology, apart, of course, from total condemnation. But the dominating nostalgia does say more about us than we want to admit. We do feel traumatized by the transition, we do feel something is missing, but we don't openly address it. We don't want the simplistic narrative where Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik save the world, because we feel that this isn't true. There are many academic dissertations on that period published, but nobody is trying to look at the current financial crisis and the emerging protests and the current fascination with the past as part of the same phenomenon. We may live still among the – now shrinking – architectural decorations of communism, but communism itself still stands somewhere undiscovered in its practical essence.

## Afterword

This book has probably ended up having much more of a 'local' perspective than was originally intended. I wanted to render several obsessions of this greatly obscured era, and to rectify the omissions I saw in the literature. Since I began writing this book in 2012, the political and social situation of the countries discussed were (and are) changing every day. I also focused more on Poland and the closer 'East' and less on Russia, which right now seems to be facing the greater upheaval. I tried to capture the main currents and motivations of these countries and the perceptions the West (understood mostly as Western Europe and the US), has about it, or perhaps, doesn't have at all. Living between the constant wish of being 'more appreciated by the West' and a curious wounded pride is the current reality, but must it be necessarily the destiny of the East? There are many possible answers to that. There are attempts in today's scholarship at retrieving the positive out of the position of a 'Slav' which so often in history rhymed and combined with that of a 'slave'. We were the Slaves of Europe and the first real periphery of the capitalist West, and the center cannot live without the periphery.

It is hard to talk about any "specter haunting Europe" yet, but something has happened recently. As austerity measures are taking their toll, we are surrounded by the rhetoric of scarcity. There's no more money, politicians convince us – the resources have run out. But to demand more, to demand the return of the welfare state, would be more than just childishness on the part of the impoverished – it'd be calling for... communism! Even though according to the world news, we've just had two years of constant protests, dissent and revolution, Eastern Springs, riots, Greek and Spanish hot summers, it seems that the only thing we don't have is a consolidated left. Apart from SYRIZA in Greece, who were the only far-left party in recent decades to come close to forming a government,

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leftist parties are in defeat, never recovered since the 1970s. We are on the brink of the biggest crisis of capitalism in history, yet even at the slightest sound of reforms a Democrat like Barack Obama, much more economically conservative than the Republicans of the Roosevelt or even Nixon era, is called a “socialist”. In *The Communist Horizon*, Jodi Dean, a professor in New York from a new generation of American Marxists, gave a full list of the new Red Scare rhetoric in America and elsewhere. The welfare state, free healthcare, free education, equality, feminism, taxation – all this belongs to the great Communist Menace, socialists lingering just round the corner. ‘Communists’ protested against the Iraq war, didn’t vote for Bush Jr., want to tax the rich and regulate the market, support insurance and food stamps. Among the bank bailouts and cuts an unbelievable thing has happened: as we can see in Poland, it’s the capitalists who speak to us in the tone of victims.

How, in the face of the current upheaval, can we regain the positive meaning of communism and use it to the left’s empowerment? There’s an internet meme called “Full Communism”, a half-prank, half-serious critique, mostly from anarchist circles, of the left’s reformism. Dean is significantly more serious than that, but she insists on divorcing the meaning of the word from its previous historical applications. Her major aim is to release the left from the deep sense of shame into which the liberal critique of communism has put it. “The mistake leftists make when we turn into liberals and democrats”, she says, “is thinking that we’re beyond the communist horizon, that democracy replaced communism, when it serves as the contemporary form of communist displacement”, whereas “capitalism always interlinks with conflict, resistance, accommodation and demands. Refusal to engage in these struggles affects the form capitalism takes”. It’s a bit like Bertolt Brecht’s claim in conversations with Walter Benjamin: “It’s not communism but capitalism that’s radical.” Because it’s capitalism that destroys and creates, and goes forward no matter what, and communism that wants to put the brakes onto it, to stop

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it and make it think. Conservatives somehow succeeded in presenting themselves as those who come to help, despite destroying the bonds of solidarity and hence not being 'conservative' at all, pushing the destructive agenda of shock therapy. The left should stop being afraid of winning and being in the spotlight, says Dean, who wonders ironically why re-using the words "proletariat" or "bourgeoisie" seem ludicrous, while competition, efficiency, stock markets, bonuses and financial success, or the re-branding of feminism don't. All that serves to prevent us from recognizing and obliterating notions of class, work, division, inequality or privilege.

What, however, about those who remember a quite different 'communism'? It remains a dirty, bad word for those, including large parts of the left, who invariably associate it with the East, whether the USSR and its satellites, or China, to prove that it's invariably a failed project - moreover, a murderous one. In Poland, for instance, hatred of 'communism' is the only thing that unites our conflicting camps. In many ex-communist countries, especially those which joined the EU, this is a verboten word, that sends us straight back to the Gulag: when *Krytyka Polityczna* put out a selection of Lenin's works edited by and with a preface by Slavoj Žižek, it faced ostracism, and the right-wing government managed to put a ban on communist ideology equally with Nazism. You can't publish *The Communist Manifesto* in parts of the ex-Bloc without risking a fine or a ban. Meanwhile, East European representatives in the European Parliament recently tabled an official declaration that communism and fascism were equivalent. Žižek, as a former communist dissident himself, has had a huge role in rehabilitating and restoring the idea of communism as a possibility, beyond its failed realizations from the past. Dean, who does not have a background in Soviet studies, came to the idea via Western Marxism, and prefers to cite Latin American rather than East European Communists, which is admirably internationalist – but it would have been helpful if she had something to say to those for

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whom the word is anathema for more reasons than red-baiting.

‘The big transformative questions have generally been forgotten’, said the late Eric Hobsbawm, displaced by “fanzine history, which groups write in order to feel better about themselves”. Despite for the last three decades critiquing the Soviet Union, until the end Hobsbawm’s ‘unrepentant communism’ was still hugely controversial. There’s a good reason why the word instills fear during a capitalist meltdown. One of the toughest questions for any leftist is the political legacy of the Soviet Bloc. While many of us, their former residents, constantly refer to the socialist past as deeply flawed, we seem strangely possessive of the term, one that today, perhaps, has a completely different meaning and regains it in the time of crisis. Liberals in Poland routinely equate Vladimir Putin and Hugo Chavez, but their example couldn’t be more different. Socialist ideas of some sort are still vital in the parts of the world that are unified by the fact they’re not and never will be the ‘center’ – Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and others are now struggling to come up with new economic policies that claim to be socialist, while the former East of Europe only ever considered a singular, and Western, option. East-West binarisms haunt us still, though, because for five decades the Cold War provided the framework and a mutual narrative, which shaped people’s lives. Being from the East, and its consequences, was and is real.

I intended this book to be a counter also against another current way of treating the recent past, especially post-1945. On the liberal left we have currently a renaissance of the ‘spirit of ‘45’, to name it after the recent film by Ken Loach. From the last writings of the late Tony Judt, to the engaged intelligentsia, we experience a renewal of popularity of the post-war consensus as a reaction to the current rampant neoliberalism. This call for the social democratic spirit has its good sides, e.g. its defence of the welfare state, but it ignores completely the fact that the spirit of ‘45 also included Cold War imperialism, often involving the repression of (often communist)

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liberation movements through colonial wars in Indochina, Malaysia and elsewhere. With the exception of neutral Sweden and Finland, Western European countries were colonial empires and were all very pro-American, which all involved the isolation of Eastern Europe. At the core of this thinking there's a rejection and condemnation of what was happening on the other side of the Curtain and their post-war modernity. Modernity is good, but only that represented by the 'enlightened' part of Europe. Needless to say it's a narrative in which people from Eastern Europe cannot find themselves, nor find a positive proposition for the future.

The other approach is that of the hard left under the slogan of 'full communism'. In the works of Dean, Badiou, Negri and to an extent Slavoj Žižek, there is a radical vision of a new communism - yet, similar to their soft-left counterparts, they also don't see the communist East as a source of inspiration. They can only embrace the Cold War past of 'real socialism' through a disavowal. Removing Eastern Europe from the 'communist horizon' can result only in its marginalization. Somehow, we ourselves already did this work for the West. We so strongly believe we don't deserve the normal conditions of a social democracy that we hardly fight for it. Eastern Europe may continue to be the 'wild man of Europe', but it could use this position to remind the West of its errors and duties. Writing this book I realized how privileged we were as a part of the world which despite its tininess, could dictate and impose its ideals on the vast rest. Closeness to the Western world, especially the European Union, still is a massive advantage - it's sufficient to look at Poland and compare it to Belarus or Russia.

Because of that, what remains of the years '45-'90 east of the Elbe is mostly melancholia or nostalgia. The melancholic approach is visible everywhere: I described it in the chapter on Berlin, where there's either a restitution of the pre-war past at all cost, or the obsessive study over trauma. The 'traumatic studies' of communism occupy several books, where the work of 'mourning' replaces action in the present, from Charity Scribner's *Requiem for*

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*Communism*, to Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, or the architectural activity of Daniel Libeskind, whose most prominent projects, like the Jewish Museum in Berlin, or the Military Museum in Dresden, are done in the high-class kitsch poetics of buildings incarnating 'the wounds of old Europe'.

In contrast to that, we could be addressing the contemporary history of the former East countries, and speaking about its notorious past, but in a dialectical way, where the reshaping of the past by the present and the present by the past can become visible. The world of thought, the political world, all are in great need of ideas. From time to time there's an excitation, as if there was a great new idea on the horizon, yet most often it turns out to be just another demand for an idea. One of the ideas in this book is: "why the periphery must stay the periphery", but maybe it should be: "how can the center learn from the periphery?" In a recent interview, Russian Marxist dissident Boris Kagarlitsky recounts an anecdote about a meeting with some young Swedish revolutionaries. During the intellectual dispute it was pretty boring, but after the lecture the youth wanted to drink bottled beer in the park. Yet there was no bottle opener. Suddenly there was a fright in the eyes of the students: how are we going to open the bottles? Kagarlitsky then opened the bottles using the table and then explained there's at least half dozen of other ways. "This is the difference between the Russian intellectual and Swedish revolutionary. They know that a bottle is opened with a special tool, a bottle opener." The East of Europe, culturally a part of the West, was pushed into a parallel reality for 45 years and some of its countries are still paying the price for it today, especially compared to the affluent West. But maybe we still can come up with ways to open things that you don't and didn't have to know about.

Warsaw 4/07/13

## Acknowledgements

Writing this book was an incredible challenge. A double challenge because of the language, which is not my own, and because I dare to propose this book to the Western reader, on things which are often quite alien to him. It was initially thought as a polemical, shortish book on Ostalgia – nostalgia after communism, or rather the critique of this concept as it was becoming popular in the West. Soon enough, as my own migrant existence was becoming more intense, this occurred to me as rather too shallow for a whole book. If I wanted to achieve anything by writing it though, then it's a calling for compassion and consideration to this vast cultural and societal complex called "Eastern Europe", as it is now and as it used to be. Also, in the process of researching and writing it, from the initially hostile position towards this concept, I was growing warmer and more compassionate about it. I feel that to admit that one's an Easterner can sound ridiculous today, but I also feel this distinction can act to our own benefit. What kind of world do we want? What position should Eastern Europe assume today towards its more powerful Western counterparts? I still of course haven't found an answer for it, but this book is a start.

Several articles published before in *The Guardian*, *The New Statesman*, *Architectural Review Asia Pacific*, *Calvert Journal* and *The Wire* made their way, in a changed form, to the book. Thank you Natalie Hanman, Philip Oltermann, Helen Lewis, Daniel Trilling, Simon Sellars, Frances Morgan and Jamie Rann for commissioning them. Chapter 3 is partly based on an essay called *Forefather's Eve. On the Embodiments of the Uncanny in Polish Culture* I published in 2008 in the Polish arts journal "Obieg". Here I used a greatly modified version of the original translation of that essay into English by K. Majus. With the exception of that, all translations used here are mine.

I want to thank first and foremost my partner Owen Hatherley,



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without whom nothing: my stay in the UK, my immersion in the language, my decision to write the book and accomplishing it wouldn't be possible. He was cheering me on, always supportive and ready to help. I'm indebted to him in ways which I will probably never be able to reciprocate. I also thank to Tariq Goddard from Zero Books, who got interested and decided to publish a book by a Polish journalist. I thank Anna Aslanyan, Bobby Barry, Alex Niven and Daniel Trilling for reading my manuscript and for their instructive remarks. Special thanks go to Robert Jarosz, researcher, archivist and expert on Polish punk – his own research, his expanding archive "Trasa W-Z" as well as his assistance significantly widened my knowledge on this fascinating period of Polish underground culture in the last decade of communism. To his kind help I also owe several magnificent photographs in this book – here I thank the outstanding artists-photographers: Tadeusz Rolke – the legend of Polish photography, Mirosław Stępnia, Tomek Barasiński and Ryszard Gajewski, whose great works I have the honour to host in my book and who documented the last socialist avant-garde which happened in Poland. In the same way I thank Paulina Ołowska, charismatic contemporary artist of growing cult following, who kindly allowed her punk painting of band Kontrola W to be reproduced on this book's cover and whose captivating archival work of "repainting" the past, where the unobvious socialist glamour and grind go together hand by hand, embodies the "poor but sexy" spirit to me – the ways in which the past and present of the Eastern avant-garde cross their ways.

In this book I'm indebted to scholars David Crowley, Boris Groys and Justyna Jaworska, whose refreshing approach to the Eastern European studies and ways of seeing the communist past I find very inspiring and which encouraged me to make my own move and attempt my own contribution. Equally inspirational was the style of music journalism of Chris Bohn aka Biba Kopf, who put a bridge between the East and Western music already in the 80s and

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Warszawa, 21/08/2013

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— *Station to Station* (RCA, 1976)

— *The Next Day* (ISO, 2013)

Depeche Mode, *Construction Time Again* (Mute, 1983)

— *The Singles 1981-85* (Mute, 1985)

— *Some Great Reward* (Mute, 1984)

Deutsche Amerikanische Freundschaft, *Alles ist Gut* (Mute, 1981)

— *Die Kleinen Und Die Bosen* (Mute, 1980)

Joy Division, *Unknown Pleasures* (Factory, 1979)

Einsturzende Neubauten, whole discography, especially *Kollaps* (ZickZack, 1981), *Silence is Sexy* (Mute, 2000)

Kapitan Nemo, *Kapitan Nemo* (Tonpress, 1986)

— *The Best of Kapitan Nemo* (Sonic, 1996)

Krzysztof Komeda, *The Complete Recordings* (Polonia, 1996)

Andrzej Korzyński, *Possession* (Finders Keepers 2011)

— *Third Part of The Night* (Finders Keepers 2012)

— *Secret Enigma* (Finders Keepers (2012)

Laibach, *Opus Dei* (Mute, 1987)

Maanam, *The Singles Collection* (InterSonus, 1991)

The Sex Pistols, ‘Holidays in the Sun’ (Virgin, 1977)

Izabela Trojanowska, *Iza* (Tonpress, 1981)



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- *Układy* (Tonpress, 1982)
- Ultravox! *Ha! Ha! Ha!* (Island, 1977)
- *Systems of Romance* (Island, 1978)
- *Vienna* (Chrysalis, 1981)
- Urszula, *Malinowy Król*, (Polton, 1985)
- Vice Versa, 'Stilyagi' (Backstreet Backlash, 1980)
- Visage, *Visage* (Polydor, 1980)
- Wielkanoc, *Dziewczyny Karabiny*, (W Moich Ovwach Trasa W-Z, 2011)
- Xex, Group: *Xex* (What's that Music, 1980)
- Zagubiona generacja* (Noise Pop, 1998)
- Złote Przeboje Socjalizmu Cz. 1 (Golden Hits of Socialism)* (Polskie Nagrania, 2005)

#### Further Viewing

- 4 (Ilya Krzhanovsky, 2006)
- 4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days (Christian Mungiu, 2007)
- Academy of Mr. Kleks* (Krzysztof Gradowski, 1983)
- Bildnis einer Trinkerin* (Ulrike Ottinger, 1979)
- Born in 45* (Jürgen Böttcher, 1965)
- Border Street* (Aleksander Ford, 1948)
- Boys From Barska Street* (Aleksander Ford, 1953)
- Christiane F – Wir Sind Kinder von Bahnhof Zoo* (Uli Edel, 1981)
- Czarna seria* (Black series of Polish documentary) (J. Hoffmann, E. Skórzewski and others, 1954-59)
- Daisies* (Vera Chytilova, 1966)
- Decoder* (Mucha, 1984)
- Dekalog* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1988)
- Democracies* (Artur Żmijewski, 2008-ongoing)
- Divided Heaven* (Konrad Wolf, 1964)
- The Ear* (Karel Kachyna, 1969)
- Eskimo Woman Is Cold* (Janos Xantus, 1983)
- Ga Ga Glory to the Heroes* (Piotr Szulkin, 1985)
- Goodbye, See You Tomorrow* (Janusz Morgenstern, 1961)

#### Further Reading

*Generation* (Andrzej Wajda, 1954)  
*Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1961)  
*Hot Summer* (Joachim Hassler, 1968)  
*In A Year of Thirteen Moons* (RW Fassbinder, 1978)  
*Innocent Sorcerers* (Andrzej Wajda, 1960)  
*It's a Free World* (Ken Loach, 2006)  
*I was Nineteen* (Konrad Wolf, 1968)  
*Jowita* (Janusz Morgenstern, 1967)  
*Liquid Sky* (Slava Tsukerman, 1983)  
*Lift to the Scaffold* (Louis Malle, 1958)  
*Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner and others, 2007-present)  
*Man of Iron* (Andrzej Wajda, 1981)  
*Man of Marble* (Andrzej Wajda, 1976)  
*Mr Kleks in Space* (Krzysztof Gradowski, 1988)  
*The Murderers are Among Us* (Wolfgang Staudte, 1945)  
*The Murder of Mister Devil* (Ester Krumbachova, 1970)  
*Nirvana* (Igor Voloshin, 2006)  
*O-Bi, O-Ba, end of Civilisation* (Piotr Szulkin, 1984)  
*One, Two, Three* (Billy Wilder, 1961)  
*The Party and the Guests* (Jan Nemec, 1966)  
*This Love Has To Be Killed* (Janusz Morgenstern, 1972)  
*Possession* (Andrzej Żuławski, 1980)  
*Privilege* (Peter Watkins, 1967)  
*The Rabbit Is Me* (Kurt Maetzig, 1965)  
*Rotation* (Wolfgang Staudte, 1948/49)  
*Solaris* (Andrey Tarkovsky, 1972)  
*Solo Sunny* (Konrad Wolf, 1979)  
*Single Woman* (Agnieszka Holland, 1981)  
*The Sopranos* (David Chase and others, 1999-2007)  
*Sunseekers* (Konrad Wolf, 1958/72)  
*Stalker* (Andrey Tarkovsky, 1979)  
*The Pictures Came From The Walls* (Jeremy Deller, 2009)  
*Third Part of the Night* (Andrzej Żuławski, 197)  
*Trace of Stones* (Frank Beyer, 1966)

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*Travels of Mr Kleks* (Krzysztof Gradowski, 1985)  
*War of the Worlds* (Piotr Szulkin, 1981)  
*The Wire* (David Simon and others, 2001-2005)  
*When I'm Dead and Pale* (Zivojin Pavlović, 1967)  
*Workers Leaving the Factory* (Harun Farocki, 1995)  
*You Are God* (Leszek Dawid, Poland, 2012)



Contemporary culture has eliminated both the concept of the public and the figure of the intellectual. Former public spaces – both physical and cultural – are now either derelict or colonized by advertising. A cretinous anti-intellectualism presides, cheered by expensively educated hacks in the pay of multinational corporations who reassure their bored readers that there is no need to rouse themselves from their interpassive stupor. The informal censorship internalized and propagated by the cultural workers of late capitalism generates a banal conformity that the propaganda chiefs of Stalinism could only ever have dreamt of imposing. Zer0 Books knows that another kind of discourse – intellectual without being academic, popular without being populist – is not only possible: it is already flourishing, in the regions beyond the striplit malls of so-called mass media and the neurotically bureaucratic halls of the academy. Zer0 is committed to the idea of publishing as a making public of the intellectual. It is convinced that in the unthinking, blandly consensual culture in which we live, critical and engaged theoretical reflection is more important than ever before.