

Piotr Juszkiewicz

Farewell to a Myth. On Close Relationships between Modernism and Totalitarianism

I

In 1967 Zofia and Oskar Hansen presented in Warsaw the principles of the Linear Continuous System (LCS), concerning a gigantic structure of urban and architectural development, which was to run in wide stripes from the North to the South of Poland, with the population of more than a dozen million people. The main assumption was to abandon the concentric structure of cities and towns, or any settlements in general, because of their growing inefficiency and failure to satisfy the needs of their residents both in functional terms, such as health care, and in psychological and ideological ones. The Hansens advised the zone-linear mode of planning as a solution to a number of contradictions troubling the historical and modern urban units, such as the shortage of space, high prices, scarcity of greenery and fresh air, and transportation problems caused by the wrong distribution of workplaces, supplies, and centers of culture and education. A modular zone system located along the main thoroughfare offered a chance to create an egalitarian space that guaranteed easy and common access to all its elements. On the one hand, functional accommodation units were situated near workplaces, educational institutions, services, and entertainment facilities, and on the other, they were isolated from the negative consequences of that proximity (i.e. living in the densely-populated city centre), so characteristic of the concentrically developed townships. In addition, the rational distribution of the zone-linear system allowed to impose on the chaos of everyday life a network of regulating principles concerning, for instance, the amount of healthy physical effort (measured by the length of pedestrian routes) and the types of human relations (by programming the ratio of privacy and collectiveness), as well as revealed the basic principle of community (i.e. cooperation) by combining the zones of the served and the service personnel. Economy was rationalized, too, since the designers assumed full em-

ployment, possible thanks to the preplanned functional and economic relations among particular zones. The number of residents had to be adjusted to that of stores, schools, hospitals, restaurants, libraries, etc.

The rational and functional order of the LCS, together with its aesthetics, makes it one of the major examples of modernism in the history of Polish art, contrasted with the town of Nowa Huta, developed near Cracow around huge steelworks, and considered to be a model of the socialist realism. The LCS is the other extreme of what is bright and modern, but also rejected, misunderstood, and, unfortunately, never implemented. Nowa Huta is what we must really cope with, since it exists, though contrary to our intentions and without acceptance. It is a symbol of coercion, restrained will, and disregard for reason, nature, and history.

Mislead by this contrast, Polish art historians tend to forget that Oskar Hansen motivated his idea of a new arrangement of space by the necessity to reject the degenerated capitalist forms of urban planning, which he described as “unhealthy human swarms,” calling for their “draining and reclaiming.” Moreover, he believed that such a fundamental spatial and social reconstruction was possible only with no private property, by central decision-making and centralized funding. He argued that the LCS was beneficial in its ideological aspects as well due to its enforced egalitarianism and military value determined by its modular and linear form. He praised it as a powerful instrument of “our” propaganda and as an advantage factor in the future war with the West.¹

It is, however, more important that the Hansens placed his linear city within a life project that was favored by the twentieth-century avant-garde of urban planning and architecture, particularly radicalized by the ideas of the Soviet designers of the 1920s and 1930s. Their new anthropology was rooted in the postulates of Marx

and Engels as well as many high-ranking Soviet ideologues who easily combined the Darwinian aspect of Marxism with eugenics or even sexology. In brief, that anthropology assumed a blurring of the difference between the town and the countryside (Marx, Lenin) and the reorganization of social life by planned destruction of historically relative family models (Engels) in favor of the collectivization of almost all walks of life, including raising children. The frame and instrument of that project was new functional urban planning, which allowed for the uniform distribution of the work force, and for accommodating people in apartments consisting of bedrooms occupied by single individuals or loosely related couples. The end to those social experiments in which the individual was reduced to an element of nomadic settlement structures moved according to the needs of economy (buildings were to be constructed from perishable materials) was put an end to after 1930 by Stalin who introduced a new family law, banned abortion, and abandoned the costly financing of new settlements with the system of collective catering, hygiene, and entertainment by the state.

II

The advocates of the Polish post-socialist-realist modernity, quite often former socialist-realists themselves, turned the Polish tradition of the constructivist avant-garde into a strongly negative point of reference. In their view, the avant-garde compromised itself by its naïve utopianism and equally naïve cult of the intellect, both undermined by the atrocities of war. The critics believed that the later Polish modernity opposed to that tradition direct life experience. Tadeusz Kantor reinterpreted in rationalist terms the gesture abstract painting of the West as an effect of inventing an immediate and music-like visual idiom which, in Kantor's view, not only liberated the emotional energy from the painterly form, but also, by the apotheosis of the matter, reached to its secret nature discovered in the laboratories of the physicists researching its atomic structure. Abstraction was thus interpreted as a visualization of the present knowledge of the microsm and macrocosm and as an analogue of the modern scientific imagination. Thus, the socialist-realist rule of connecti-

on between painting and reality was maintained in a specific manner.

Later essays of Tadeusz Kantor and Mieczysław Porębski (a leading critic of the time) brought still another reading of that relationship: both of them emphasized the role of the painterly matter and stressed the importance of chance as a starting point in the struggle with matter. Kantor wrote:

“Only the interference of chance in painting turned out decisive. Chance in painting occurs whenever the painterly matter of any kind defines itself and forms itself independently, while the human factor is reduced to the inspiring stimulus, the first gesture and primary motion... Only the control over chance creates a new reality... It is the moment when human action opposes the activity of the matter.”²

Consequently, the presented theories maintained the connection of painting and reality not by imagery, symbolism or the emotional atmosphere fostered by the control over the universe of the painterly form, but by the struggle with the element of the matter or, more precisely, by comparing that struggle with real life, and by the historically and subjectively specific “kind of behavior” in it. Such an idea of art, with no direct references to existentialism but very close to Rosenberg's action painting, made Kantor write: “Here there is no longer any imitation of the imagined reality. A painting becomes creation itself and a manifestation of life – its continuation.”³

As we can see, on the one hand, the modern, unrestricted abstraction echoed the avant-garde dream of the universal idiom, in that case exemplified by the control over the matter approached as the vehicle of meaning, while on the other, this abstraction makes a positive connection of art and life. The struggle with the matter thus became a basic value, as well as the analogy of artistic intention and scientific thought. In general, all that placed modern art within the socialist-realist system of values. In the quasi-ideological language, the artist's struggle with the painterly matter became close to the daily toil of the worker, which was supposed to make that new abstraction significantly and favorably different from the intellectual, theoretic-

cal, and autonomous geometrical abstraction of the pre-war avant-garde with its purely visual aesthetics. The truth conveyed by the work of art acquired an emotional value, while the form became emotive so that only approaching it through feeling might lead to truth. In the process of response, that feeling was translated into a series of associations articulated in quite a literary manner. Critics wrote about the green surfaces of fear, lines vibrating with nervous tension or a premonition of the catastrophe triggered by abstract forms. On the one hand, it was a continuation of the avant-garde ideas of the artistic language proposed by Kandinsky, on the other, an attempt to renew the socialist realism by the idiom of condensation and metaphor, able to convey the worldview developed by the communist ideologues.

III

One of the most spectacular scenes in Andrzej Wajda's film called *Lotna* (1959) shows a charge of Polish cavalry against German tanks in September 1939, right after the outbreak of World War II. The most expressive moment of that scene comes when a Polish cavalryman helplessly – and actually mindlessly – hits the barrel of a German tank with his sabre. The film presents the Polish military, particularly the officers in command, as completely inept – indifferent to the loss of life by rank and file soldiers. The point is, however, that in September 1939 such charges never took place since indeed they would not have made sense and, on top of that, would have denied the main idea of using cavalry for moving masses of soldiers along the frontline so that they could then fight as infantry. In fact, horses were used in World War II by different armies. No one remembers an attack of the Italian cavalry on the Don in the fall of 1942, the Soviet cavalry fighting in the battle of Moscow and surrounding the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad, or the German cavalry crossing the Seine. Still, the scene from Wajda's film has its historical antecedent – in the first decade of September, in the area of Bory Tucholskie in the western part of Poland, two squadrons of Polish cavalry attempting to surround the enemy troops were massacred by their armored vehicles. The evidence

was discovered on the next day by Italian war correspondents, informed by German soldiers that the Poles attacked tanks on horseback. The Nazi propaganda used that event to create the myth of the "foolish Polish cavalry," believed both in Germany and, after the war, in Poland. The Nazi propaganda films showed even the allegedly authentic charges of Polish horsemen against tanks to discredit the Polish military in general.

The charge scene is not exceptional in *Lotna*. There are many others like that, more effectively using modern filming techniques, in particular Eisenstein's mode of montage, allowing to achieve the intensity of meaning thanks to juxtaposed frames. What matters, then, is not the mimetic aspect of the moving picture but, on the contrary, the symbolic intensity of a cinematic image – for example: of a lonely Polish officer riding a white horse in a landscape with windmills, a dead commander and a butcher who is cutting a beef carcass with his blood-covered hands, or the shadows of soldiers combined with fish dying on a kitchen table, devoured alive by a village cat.

Many scenes of that kind can be found in other films by Wajda from the same period, including his most famous *Ashes and Diamonds*, where the members of the underground Home Army, in real history arrested, detained, and murdered by the Red Army by tens of thousands, in the film space walk out of shade to be shown against the para-Nazi, heroic, painted landscapes or, like the main protagonist, die on a heap of rubbish. In this case, the paradox is that on the one hand, Wajda's films, and in general the so-called Polish Film School of 1954-1965, have been interpreted by historians as examples of resistance against the socialist realism in cinema, while on the other, the same directors made a number of very persuasive and modern films whose symbolic meaning remained in ideological agreement with the propaganda of the regime installed in Poland by the Soviets.⁴

IV

In her book, *Eyes on Russia*, the American reporter and photographer Margaret Bourke-White illustrated her reportage from the Soviet countryside by a photo

resembling the semi-abstract photos by Rodchenko, packed with the images of rhythmically arranged parts of machinery. The point is, though, writes Susan Buck-Morss, that Bourke-White's photo is subtitled *An American Disc-Harrow*. What does this American piece of machinery do, asks Buck-Morss, as the centrepiece of the documentation of a visit in the second largest state farm in the USSR?⁵ An answer to this question that appears in the historical commentary of the author is connected in the first place with the economic cooperation of the Soviet Russia with the West, particularly the USA, continued in spite of the officially declared ideological conflict. On the one hand, Western Europe and the USA became for the USSR the model of intensive industrialization, on the other, the West supplied experts, designers, engineers, modern know-how, machines and technologies necessary for the building of the Soviet industrial centres. In other words, the rapid Soviet industrialization, with such examples as the tractor plant in Chelyabinsk and the whole industrial complex of Magnitogorsk would have never succeeded without the communists' cooperation with the leaders of modern industry from the western countries.

Notably, one of the sources of financing industrialization was selling works of art from the Hermitage collection. In 1930-1931 only Andrew Mellon spent in a most discreet manner seven million dollars on the paintings of the great masters, paying, for instance 1.7 million for *Madonna Alba* by Raphael, which was enough to cover half of the cost of the general design of Magnitogorsk.

Another paradox, writes Susan Buck-Morss, was that:

"[...] the profits of capitalism (surplus value withheld from the wages of American workers) moved (via the Mellon family fortune) to finance (via the capitalist firm of McKee Construction Company) the building of technologically advanced socialist factories, an increase in what Marx called "constant capital" that in turn increased the value of Soviet labour. Meanwhile, in the counterdirection, cultural "treasures" that had been owned by the Russian aristocracy and nationalized by the Bolsheviks became (via Mellon's "philanthropic" cover-up of tax evasion) the pro-

perty of the United States government – and the American public received socialized culture in the form of a national museum."⁶

For us now, however, it is not only important that the communist industry was built for the bourgeois money or that the tanks and cannons which it produced were used in alliance with Hitler against the West in the first phase of World War II, but also that communism, including its Stalinist stage, was in fact a project of modernization and that its close ties with modern technology, architecture, and art, both on the ideological and pragmatic level, have been duly forgotten by contemporary historians.

V

There are many similar paradoxes, but it is essential that they undermine the title myth of modernism that is well known to every student of art in East-Central Europe. One of the most important features of this myth is schematizing historical reality by means of binary oppositions whose elements are coherent and uniform. Consequently, on the one hand, we have the regimes installed by Moscow, and on the other; hosts of artists who favoured the culture of Western Europe and opposed the ideology and policies of the communist parties favouring, for ideological reasons, the socialist realism – the only officially acceptable formula of art concordant with the ideology underlying the institutional and political system of power.

Second, this myth includes a belief that eventually the binary conflict forced the regime to allow for some freedom of artistic expression and accept the presence of modernism in the visual sphere. According to Jindřich Chalupecký or Piotr Piotrowski, modernism, particularly in the period of the 'Thaw', was in fact the art of resistance against the communist power, with the issue of the autonomous values of art used as a weapon against its programmatic use for explicitly political purposes.⁷ Notably, Piotrowski claims that the belief in the political relevance of the modernist faith in the autonomous value of art stemmed from the naïveté of the East Central European artists, paving the way for the communists to practice political manipulation in

the form of apparent ideological openness demonstrated in international relations. Piotrowski considers the mythologization of the political significance of the autonomy of art a crucial element of the specific cultural identity of that region investigated by many scholars. Ultimately, however, in his opinion, the belief in the moral and, by the same token, political power of the *informel* or geometrical abstraction played a negative role, transforming modernism in a conservative tradition which actually supported the communist regimes through the institutional and conceptual elimination of the really political art, identified by Piotrowski with the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s.⁸

In another text, Piotrowski stresses in the context of the Central and Eastern European modernism not the problem of the autonomy of art, but the utopian aspect of the artistic projects from the 1920s and 1930s. He interprets the utopias of the rational reorganization of society as expressions of the resistance of artists on the left against the contemporary social and political demons, that is, fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism. In other words, the projects of social harmony designed to foster human development were to them the only imaginable alternative to totalitarian ideologies.⁹

It seems that the gist of the myth of modernism is the belief in a fundamental difference between modernism as an artistic outcome of the rational tradition of the Enlightenment and its opposites – the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth-century Europe. Whenever someone lists quite numerous examples of modernist artists cooperating with the fascists, the Nazis or the Stalinist regime, as usual the following counter-arguments appear: 1. There is no doubt that the modernists were in different ways harassed by all those regimes (true, but not all of them and not always – some were admired and many cooperated for a long time); 2. Cooperation resulted from ideological seduction, yet in the long run the artists were always betrayed by the regime (but Rodchenko praised the educational role of slave labour not only in 1930, when the Belomor Canal was under construction, but also in 1936 and 1937 in reference to the Dmitlager concentration camp near Moscow); and 3. The modernists did not really cooperate with the totalitarian regimes, but played with them a kind of a game, trying to save good art (yes, but Terragni or Michelucci were committed fascists and their

modernist buildings were supposed to express the fascist ideology).

The point, however, is not to exchange arguments but to put forward a historically tenable thesis that the complex relations between modernism and totalitarianism stem from the fact that the latter was not an alternative to the process of modernization of which modernism was an aspect, but its inherent element based on the same historical premises. What disappears in the bright light of the mythical contrast is the constitution of modernity, if only we define it not just in stylistic terms, but also in terms of an artistic aftermath of the anthropological revolution connected with the “disenchantment” of the world (Hegel, Weber), and the domination of the Cartesian rationalism combined with the Faustian loss of moral orientation replaced by the will to power and supported by the belief that the old world collapsed, requiring spiritual, moral, and physical regeneration. Roger Griffin demonstrates that Marxism, as well as Nazism or fascism, were actually ideologies of regeneration, which grew out of the claim that the world was in dramatic decline.¹⁰

The nihilist impulse deprived reality of its metaphysical meaning – its social construction collapsed as a result of a radical transformation “of traditional institutions, social structures, and belief systems under the impact of Western modernization.” A way out of the state of anomie was to be found in temporalizing history and “reimagining the future as a permanently ‘open’ site for the realization of Utopias within historical time.” According to Griffin:

“Between the 1860s and the end of the Second World War, modernism acted as a diffuse cultural force generated by the dialectics of chaos and (new) order, despair and hope, decadence and renewal, destruction and creation, manifesting itself in countless idiosyncratic artistic visions of how new representations of reality could act as the vehicle to revitalize ignored or forgotten principles of a redemptive vision of the world, and even help it regenerate itself socially and morally. Beyond the sphere of aesthetics and ‘high’ culture, the palingenetic dynamics of modernism have also shaped numerous personal projects and collective movements to establish a heal-

thier social and ethical basis for society, or inaugurate an entirely new socio-political order. This order is conceived as an alternative modernity which holds out the prospect of putting an end to political, cultural, moral, and/or physical dissolution, and sometimes looks forward to the emergence of a new type of 'man'.¹¹

Let us add to this that anomie and the fall of the so-called "sacred canopy," caused by desacralization and the Cartesian rationalization of the world understood as an explicable cause-and-effect mechanical system, disrupted, together with nihilism, the ideas of subjectivity, goodness, and moral norms which philosophers tried to recreate on the basis of rational pragmatism in a way that was very distant from what we nowadays call human rights or democratic principles. No doubt, the most striking example in this respect was eugenics, accepted in the early decades of the 20th century by many scientists from all over the world not as an ethically suspect practice of deciding about human life, but as a fully legitimate, scientific, and rational method of regenerating the humankind.

To conclude this part of my paper, I want to stress that the prospective and regenerative way of thinking, characteristic both of political ideologies and the practice of power, facilitated the cooperation of modern artists with totalitarian regimes. In such a perspective, the relationship of the socialist realism and modernism is not bipolar, since both of them belong to modernity, while the problem of stylistic differences and institutional tensions was related to political pragmatics rather than crucial doctrinal differences.

It seems that the mythical picture of modernism has its specific author or, rather, origin. It is an effect of identity building by those who chose more or less direct cooperation or coexistence with communism, believing that art could make things happen in politics.

VI

In fact, however, such a belief is rather unwarranted since the policy makers prefer actions that bring specific results. In other words, an alternative to the myth is a claim that the totalitarian regimes were interested

not so much in highbrow art, kept obviously under control, as in mass culture seen as a much more effective instrument of power.

Describing the mass society as an object of manipulation by the totalitarian power, Susan Buck-Morss argues that its rise cannot be separated from the modern mass media. Books or periodicals are too slow to organize the public opinion, and the disembodied word gives the masses no opportunity for cathexes, which require imagery.¹² She writes that the cinema, with its combination of technology and the need for a modern infrastructural revolution (access to electricity), was the key medium in the building of mass society. Still, if technology "hold(s) a mirror to the masses, it can also blind them, if their own image obscures the manipulating power behind the scenes."¹³ The power of the cinematic image gives form to the seemingly remembered pictures of reality. For instance, continues Buck-Morss, "when later Soviet generations 'remembered' the October Revolution, it was Eisenstein's images they had in mind."¹⁴

Even though the Soviet propagandists were aware of the power of Eisenstein's moving pictures, particularly their specific montage bringing together apparently unrelated images to create conceptual clusters, they knew that their most effective vehicle was not the avant-garde film, but melodrama or comedy addressed to the mass audience. By no accident, Boris Shumyatsky, before he perished in the purges of the 1930s, traveled to the United States to watch the devices used by American directors. He realized that the Hollywood model was "far more relevant for socialist realism than the experiments of the avant-garde, praising it for its desire to produce 'joyful spectacles' accessible to the masses and its realistic style of conventional narrative, including the *khepi end* (happy ending)."¹⁵

Therefore, to sum up shortly, to give up the myth means also to painfully abandon the heroic aspect of the East Central European identity, which has long served us as an analgesic for our mutilated ego.

Endnotes

1. Oskar Hansen, *Linearny system ciągły* [Linear Continuous System], in: *Architektura*, No. 4-5, 1970, pp. 125-135.
2. Tadeusz Kantor, *Abstrakcja umarła – niech żyje abstrakcja* [Abstraction Is Dead. Long Live Abstraction], in: *Życie literackie*, No. 50, 1957, p. 6.
3. Tadeusz Kantor, *O aktualnym malarstwie francuskim* [On the Current French Painting], in: *Życie Literackie*, No. 47, 1955, p. 3.
4. See e.g. *Eroica and Żezowate szczęście* [Bad Luck] by Andrzej Munk or *Krzyż Walecznych* [Cross of Valor] by Kazimierz Kutcz.
5. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and the Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in the East and West*, Cambridge, Mass., 2002, p. 161.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 172.
7. Jindřich Chaloupecký, *Nové umění v Čechách* [New Art in Czech Republic], Prague 1994, p.163; Piotr Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki*, in: *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji* [Art after Politics, in: Art after Politics. From „Melancholy” to „Passion”], Cracow 2007, p. 183-184.
8. Piotr Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jalty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1989* [Avant-garde in the Shadow of Yalta. Art in East-Central Europe, 1945-1989], Poznań 2005.
9. Piotr Piotrowski, *Sztuka w czasie końca utopii* [Art in the Time of the End of Utopia], in: Piotr Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki*, p. 78-79.
10. Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of the Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Basingstoke, New York 2007.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 55.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 134.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 140.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 147.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 159.

Summary

Regardless of changing historical situation in particular countries of the Eastern bloc modernism is usually referred to as a distinct artistic choice implying moral and political protest against totalitarian Stalinist power in favor of the cultural and democratic values of the West. Such a myth of modernism as a tool of resistance has shaped the worldview and intellectual perspective of many artists, art historians and critics from Central and Eastern Europe and can be found even in those studies whose authors realize that in some Eastern bloc countries modern art was officially tolerated (in Poland for example) and manipulated by the regime. This paper shows how a specific combination of modernism and many aspects of communist ideology (a kind of Socialist modernism) which impacted culture of Central and Eastern Europe Countries after WW II, confronts this mythical modernism with its own historical and ideological foundations and political history of the region.

Author

Piotr Juskiewicz, Professor at the Institute of Art History of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He is the author of *Wolność i metafizyka. O tradycji artystycznej twórczości Marcela Duchampa* [Freedom and Metaphysics. On Artistic Tradition of Marcel Duchamp's Art] (1995); *Od rozkoszy historiozofii do gry w nic. Polska krytyka artystyczna czasu odwilży* [From the Bliss of Historiosophy to the "Game of Nothing". Polish Art Criticism of the of the Post-Stalinist "Thaw"] (2005); *Cień modernizmu* [The Shadow of Modernism] (2013) and numerous texts in: *Artium Quaestiones*, *Centropa*, *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, *Journal of Victorian Culture*. Recently he is a leader of a research project on Polish documentaries on art 1945-1989.

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