

"The Post-Party Spleen"

The Topos of Crisis in Polish Art Criticism of the 1930s

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Abstract

The 1930s in Polish art criticism were marked by crisis and exhaustion of previously respected artistic values. Critics of that time were surprisingly unanimous in their belief that the fault rested with the artists – particularly those whose pursuit of increasingly innovative artistic means led them to break ties with the society, enclose art within the ivory tower of avant-garde '-isms', those hermetic laboratories of theoretical speculation. In the eyes of the majority of then-active

journalists, it was modernism that became the synonym of the crisis that afflicted contemporary culture – a crisis whose basic symptoms included the lack of spirituality, power of expression, or interest in the human being. Those statements identifying the general 'malaise' of the era came with attempts to pinpoint the reasons for this state of affairs as well as find solutions to overcome the obvious impasse of Polish (or wider, European) culture, and visual arts with it.

Introduction

[1] According to Reinhart Koselleck, crisis – along with notions such as revolution and progress – constitutes a fundamental category that defines European modernity.¹ Originating from the Ancient Greek tradition, where it stood for choice, struggle, and decision-making, over time the notion of crisis took on new meanings as well as became more commonly used (particularly so at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, together with the decline of the Enlightenment worldview). Its career developed rapidly by the end of the 19th century as a result of the collapse of historicism and its attendant belief in progress and cognitive objectivism. At the time, the notion of crisis can be seen functioning in many different contexts and disciplines, becoming a staple of Western self-reflection. Today, the semantic field of the term is very wide, with two dominating understandings: first, crisis is conceived as a breakthrough, a turning point, an epochal change (positive or negative), and therefore also as a transitional stage that can be overcome (despite symptoms such as stagnation or lack of new ideas), and second, crisis as a radical end, decline, and final resolution. Debates on crisis – crisis of values, knowledge, cognition or, more general, Western civilisation – have been a recurring motif in philosophy and other social sciences since the late 19th century, often triggered or inspired by critical events or historical periods (WWI, shifts on the global map, economic downturns).²

[2] Art, by way of its multiple links with social life, was often seen as a response to crises and as a kind of seismograph of changes observed in various spheres of life.³ It was only after World

¹ Reinhart Koselleck, "Neuzeit. Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement", in: Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe, Cambridge Mass. 1985 (= *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, ed. Thomas McCarthy), 231-266.

² Notable in the context of Polish philosophy and sociology is Florian Znaniecki, whose book *Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej. Szkic z pogranicza filozofii, kultury i socjologii* [The decline of Western civilisation; first published in 1921] was a valuable contribution to the discourse of the crisis of civilisation. The titular diagnosis is Znaniecki's starting point, yet he identifies possible remedies, predominantly in what he understands as the crucial role of the intellectual elites in the historical development of humanity. In this respect, his ideas are reminiscent of those of Le Bon and Ortega y Gasset. See: Leszek Gawor and Lech Zdybel, *Idea kryzysu kultury europejskiej w polskiej filozofii społecznej. Analiza wybranych koncepcji pierwszej połowy XX wieku*, Lublin 1995, 120. A catastrophic idea of civilisation, with strong affinities to the ideas of Oswald Spengler, which were popular in interwar Poland, can be found in the writings of Marian Zdziechowski and Jan Karol Kochanowski-Korwin, as well as in the historiosophically and aesthetically oriented writings of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. See: Gawor and Zdybel, *Idea kryzysu kultury europejskiej w polskiej filozofii społecznej*. See also: Marian Zdziechowski, *W obliczu końca*, Vilnius 1937. Ideas formulated by Witkiewicz (aka Witkacy), although they do show similarities to those of Spengler, whom he often quoted, are the Polish writer and artist's original contribution. More on Witkacy and his historiosophy in: Bartłomiej Janus, "Historiozofia Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza", in: *Pamiętnik Literacki* 93 (2002), no. 4, 7-32. For an analysis of Witkacy's ideas as compared to the writings of Spengler see: Władysław Kaniowski, *Oswald Spengler. Filozof i pisarz polityczny*, Łódź 1997, 140-156.

³ This view of modernist and avant-garde art is proposed by Richard Sheppard, among others, who traces the relationship between cultural crisis and European art from 1880 to 1936 and examines art as a variety of responses to this crisis. See: Richard Sheppard, *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism*,

War I when the crisis within art itself became the subject of heated debates and arguments within the art circles. The war led to the bankruptcy of middle-class values, questioning also established models of art valuation. Dadaism, as a movement directly responding to the war, challenged artistic tradition and most recent art, becoming thus both the last avant-garde breakthrough as well as a perfect embodiment of crisis in art. In 1929, the crash of the US stock market caused a global economic crisis, shaking not only the socio-economic and political, but also moral and spiritual foundations of the modern world.⁴ The 'frivolous' 1920s ended, definitely closing the era of avant-garde revolutions. "Cheap sentimentalism was back [...]. And with it came the longing for strong rather than intellectual authority figures."⁵ The *malaise* that affected Western Europe did not spare culture either; the critical discourse of the 1930s presented culture not only as a witness of the problems and anxieties of the post-war world, but commonly also as their source. Crisis observed *in statu nascendi* afflicted the visual arts as well, which shared the fate of literature, theatre, and music, becoming the object of fatalist prognostics and revelations of self-appointed prophets of catastrophe.⁶

[3] Artists and critics in Poland also succumbed to this crisis-driven fever and doomsday mood regardless of their worldview or political affiliation. In Poland, as elsewhere, the debate on crisis in art developed in strong connection with the sense of decline and devaluation of ideals observed on various levels of contemporary life. Much like a united chorus, critics wrote about the stagnation of art, its inertia, apathy or indolence, but they also reached for metaphors of illness and words connoting old age, decay or death. In Poland, however, due to a different geopolitical situation and the specificity of the position of young post-war art, this debate took on a different note than the one in Western Europe, despite their many similarities.⁷

[4] The aim of this paper is to offer a possibly thorough analysis of diverse participants in the debate on the notion of crisis as it was perceived in the context of visual arts. Without setting any strict frameworks for the definition of crisis, I will seek to investigate how critics

Northwestern University Press 2000.

⁴ Opinions on the impact of economic crisis on the so-called artistic life vary significantly among Polish as well as international scholars. Nevertheless, there is a shared agreement that the 1930s came with a universally felt crisis of European humanism that had been growing for a long time. Changes of mentality and intellectual climate in the 1930s were discussed by Jean Laude, among others; Jean Laude, "La crise de l'humanisme et la fin des utopies. (Sur quelques problèmes de la peinture et de la pensée européennes 1929–1939)", in: *L'Art face à la crise. L'art en Occident, 1929–1939* (actes du 4e colloque d'histoire de l'art contemporain, Saint-Étienne, 22-25 mars 1979), Saint-Étienne 1980, 295-391.

⁵ Mieczysław Porębski, "Oblicze lat trzydziestych", in: Mieczysław Porębski, *Interregnum*, Warsaw 1975, 237-263: 248.

⁶ See: Anna Wierzbicka, *We Francji i w Polsce 1900–1939. Sztuka, jej historyczne uwarunkowania i odbiór w świetle krytyków polsko-francuskich*, Warsaw 2009. See also: René Huyghe, "Après l'art moderne", in: *L'Amour de l'Art* 4 (1935), 140-141.

⁷ For a discussion on the crisis of art in French discourse see: Andrzej K. Olszewski, "Krytyka sztuki nowoczesnej we Francji w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym", in: *Sztuka dwudziestolecia międzywojennego. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Warszawa, październik 1980*, ed. Anna Marczak, Warsaw 1982, 47-55.

understood this notion, to what they referred it, and where they identified the remedy to art's critical condition. I will outline the subject of the debate and offer an interpretation, while focusing also on the rhetorical aspect of the texts under discussion. The latter involves the discussion of a variety of figures of crisis hidden behind metaphors, paraphrases, and similes, which worked as rhetorical weapons in this (often ideological more than artistic) conflict around the principles of the era. Analysis of the art critical language seems necessary to fully depict the dynamics of the critical discourse in interwar Poland, since art criticism is more than ideas and doctrines communicated through texts, it is also the rules of this communication. Art criticism, as it was demonstrated by scholars of literary criticism in the 1970s, is a particular kind of linguistic system, with its own terminology and grammar, and therefore constituting anything but a 'transparent' document of cultural life. Instead, art criticism is a document that testifies to its times primarily through the type of discourse – or language – that it employs.⁸

[5] Despite the growing interest in the Polish art discourse of the interwar period in the recent decades,⁹ research on the language of art criticism is still very scarce, even in publications dedicated strictly to the period's artistic press.¹⁰ The interwar critical debate on crisis has not been discussed by Polish scholarship either,¹¹ even though an entire edited volume was dedicated to the issue of crises in art.¹² It seems, however, that the problem is worth addressing, as it allows us to pose important questions on the power relations in the artworld of interwar Poland, on the changing perception of the avant-garde, on the criteria of valuation and appreciation, and finally on the social status of art and the artist's social responsibilities. All these issues, which emerged in the critical discourse in the first years after WWI, became fundamental problems in the 'devilish decade' of the 1930s. It was then that all these issues came together under the embracing term of crisis – a connector, a keyword hiding a variety of often mutually exclusive content.

⁸ Janusz Sławiński, "Krytyka literacka jako język", in: *Nurt* (1968), no. 11, 34-36.

⁹ Among recent publications on this topic are: Agnieszka Chmielewska, *Wyobrażenia polskości. Sztuki plastyczne II Rzeczypospolitej w perspektywie społecznej historii kultury*, Warsaw 2020; Piotr Słodkowski, *Modernizm polsko-żydowski. Henryk Streng/ Marek Włodarski a historia sztuki*, Warsaw 2019; Dorota Jędruch, Marta Karpińska and Dorota Leśniak-Rychlak, eds., *Teksty modernizmu. Antologia polskiej teorii i krytyki architektury 1918–1981*, vol. 2: *Eseje*, Cracow 2018; Jakub Kornhauser, Małgorzata Szumna and Michalina Kmieciak, eds., *Awangarda i krytyka. Kraje Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej*, Cracow 2015; Iwona Luba, *Duch romantyzmu i modernizacja. Sztuka oficjalna Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Warsaw 2012.

¹⁰ Exceptional in this respect are books by Piotr Juszkiewicz (*Od rozkoszy historiozofii do "gry w nic". Polska krytyka artystyczna czasu odwilży*, Poznań 2005) and Diana Wasilewska (*Przełom czy kontynuacja? Polska krytyka artystyczna 1917–1930 wobec tradycji młodopolskiej*, Cracow 2013).

¹¹ This debate constituted one of many themes addressed in my recent book publication. This paper is an extended and revised version of two chapters from this volume. See: Diana Wasilewska, *Mieczysław Treter – estetyk i krytyk sztuki oraz "szara eminencja" międzywojennego życia artystycznego w Polsce*, Cracow 2019.

¹² See: Elżbieta Karwowska, ed., *Kryzysy w sztuce. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Lublin, grudzień 1985*, Warsaw 1988.

Polish art and artistic debate in the interwar period

[6] In November 1918, after 123 years of absence from the European political map, Poland finally regained its independence. The end of the Great War, which in Western European art came together with a longing for a classic composition and a call for a "return to order", became in Poland a catalyst for formalistic changes.

[7] In the period of the Partitions (1772–1918), Polish art was grounded upon a strong Romantic myth, impossible to eradicate by realism informed by positivist worldview. Moreover, this myth took on additional meanings at the turn of the nineteenth century, when Art Nouveau and Impressionism inspired a new generation of painters, with the leading example of Stanisław Wyspiański. The newly founded Sztuka [Art] association (established in Cracow in 1897) prioritised a high artistic level of its members' works and exhibitions, bringing together artists with a variety of inspirations and stylistic choices. All of them, however, attached great importance to the notion of Polishness, land, and folk (S. Wyspiański, J. Malczewski, F. Ruszczyk, L. Wyczółkowski, J. Chełmoński and others).

[8] When Poland regained its independence and opened its borders, new aspirations and possibilities emerged. It seemed unfounded to keep making art that testified to Poland's glorious past and, at the same time, expressed the suffering of the subdued nation, its continuous struggle for freedom and cultivation of old traditions and values. The feeling of unrestricted freedom, the opportunity to free oneself from the yoke of great national themes liberated the need to practice art as fun, but it also triggered the perception of art as an arena where artists struggled to form new criteria and new artistic principles.¹³ During the first years after WWI new slogans attracted only a "handful of partisans", but with time they encouraged more and more "innovators of form".¹⁴ These changes found their expression in the founding of numerous literary and artistic groups and a plethora of newly launched journals and magazines. *Zdrój* [Spring], *Formiści* [Formists], *Zwrotnica* [Switch], *Blok* [Bloc], *Reflektor* [Reflector] as well as numerous one-day newspapers [jednodniówki] and ephemeral magazines created space for an open debate on new art. Contacts with foreign magazines, especially those published in Paris and Berlin, resulted in reprinting the statements of leading avant-garde theoreticians translated into Polish, as well as reports, often extensive, on their

¹³ Equally notable, however, are several art events which testified to meaningful changes in this respect occurring several years before the outbreak of WWI. Particularly important among them were the First Exhibition of Independent Artists ("I Wystawa Niezależnych"), organised in Cracow in 1911 by the Popular Association of Polish Artists (Związek Powszechny Artystów Polskich, founded by Tytus Czyżewski and the Pronaszko brothers as a counterpoint to the monopoly of the Sztuka Association of Polish Artists and bringing together the newly emerging avant-garde), as well as the Lviv exhibition of German, Czech and Italian Cubists, Futurists, and Expressionists, organised in 1913 by the Berlin-based Der Sturm gallery as an initiative of Adolf Basler, a Polish critic based in France. Basler, a Paris correspondent and once also Apollinaire's secretary, played a significant role as one of those Polish critics and journalists who lived abroad and contributed to bringing to Poland the avant-garde fever from the West.

¹⁴ Konrad Winkler, *Formiści polscy*, Cracow 1927.

content. Artists, associated in newly created artistic groups, played a significant role in these magazines; they needed their own periodicals for promotional purposes, but also to create a counterbalance to the older generation of colleagues that attacked their art, and to facilitate the reader's understanding and proper interpretation of their art.¹⁵ Despite their ephemeral character, these groups and periodicals played a significant role in the formation of new art. "Art quickly caught the bar of new life, boldly reaching for the conductor's baton",¹⁶ wrote Konrad Winkler (1882–1962), painter and critic, and member of the Formist group.

[9] Formism, previously known as Polish Expressionism, was one of the first examples of a Polish modern art movement (1917–1922), proclaiming a departure from Realism and the superiority of form over content. Inspired by Cubism and Futurism, the artists who belonged to this group shared an aversion to the tradition of mimesis and the concepts of symbolism; they also moved away from the decorative nature of the art of Young Poland. Although the Formists were not a radical group, but rather a moderate avant-garde wing, attacks on their work by the press demonstrated that Polish society was unprepared for new art, unveiling at the same time a lack of appropriate descriptive tools and methods of artistic analysis.¹⁷ It is not surprising that the art of the Constructivist avant-garde, which emerged on the artistic scene in 1923, leading to the formation of the Blok (1924) and Praesens (1926) groups, met with complete misunderstanding on the part of Polish critics.¹⁸ Yet, it had some allies, as art historians Stefania Zahorska (1890–1961) and Mieczysław Sterling (1883–1945) or writer and poet Deborah Vogel (1902–1942).

[10] On the other side of the barricade stood the supporters of naturalism, as well as moderate conservatives, who still admired the Young Poland movement (especially the Cracow-based

¹⁵ The interwar period witnessed a rapid development of the press – both professional magazines as well as daily newspapers – but also an increase in the number of art critics. In earlier decades, art related issues were mainly covered by writers, particularly poets. Those were later supplanted by artists as well as a large group of so-called professional art critics (mostly art historians and philosophers), who argued with artists about which group had more authority to speak about art.

¹⁶ Konrad Winkler, "Exegi Monumentum", in: *Głos Plastyków* 5 (1938), no. 8-12, 37-40: 37.

¹⁷ See: Diana Wasilewska, "Na wieczorne obłąkańców. Sztuka formistów w krzywym zwierciadle krytyki międzywojennej", in: *Pamiętnik Sztuk Pięknych* 13 (2018), 25-33.

¹⁸ The radical avant-garde in Poland started with the foundation of the Blok Group of Cubists, Constructivists and Suprematists (Grupa Kubistów, Konstruktywistów i Suprematystów Blok), active in Warsaw from 1924 to 1926. The most significant members of the group were: Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro, Henryk Berlewi, Aleksander Rafałowski, Henryk Stażewski, Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarnowerówna. Constructivists took up many new problems concerning the issue of the construction of an objectless image, the use of unusual materials (including industrially manufactured products) and the issue of placing art in a modern society. The postulates of utilitarianism in art were conceived in different ways by Blok members, leading to a break-up in the Polish Constructivist circles. Strzemiński, the leading figure of Polish Constructivism, formulated the theory of Unism. Although the theory evolved from an analytical stage to a more practical one, its crucial element remained the idea of the unity of the work of art with the place of its creation, the principle of organicism, and the utopian belief in the ability of the work of art to organise life and its functions. See: Andrzej Turowski, *Konstruktywizm polski. Próba rekonstrukcji nurtu 1921–1934*, Wrocław 1981.

Impressionism and the Art Nouveau-oriented Sztuka association) and were eagerly searching for a new national style. The latter, such as Mieczysław Treter (1883–1943), one of the most influential 'critics of the middle ground', shaped the tastes of the readers, trying to dismiss artistic opponents by revealing their alleged immaturity, lack of competence and, above all, by claiming that the avant-garde misunderstood the essence of art.¹⁹ The decade of the 1920s was a time of fierce clashes between the allies of the avant-garde and the older generation supported by the critics of the middle ground, whose ideas were embraced in the work of groups such as Rytm [Rhythm] and Bractwo Ś. Łukasza [Brotherhood of St. Luke].²⁰ At the time, crisis was hardly a commonly used rhetorical device. Instead, it was common to talk about breakthroughs, struggles (particularly between generations) for new artistic models, and changes.²¹

[11] However, after the period of 'storm and stress' came a more quiet time, a time to recapitulate but also to settle accounts. Many actors on the art scene were eager to do so, both the conservative circles that attacked the avant-garde, as well as the avant-garde artists themselves. Contemporaneity presented itself as a transitory stage, devoid of militant movements and new slogans – while the old ones had been exhausted, the new ones were still to crystallise. "There is nothing going on in Polish art nowadays", wrote Mieczysław Treter.

*No temperament, youthful force, no vivid pulse or fervent work, no voice in the throat to call out new slogans; no power or will to overturn outdated dogmas [...]. Nothing! There is a terrifying emptiness and torpor, a strange marasmus that is perhaps more dangerous to the younger than to the older generation.*²²

¹⁹ Mieczysław Treter, "Psychopatologia a twórczość", in: *Przegląd Filozoficzny* 4 (1909), 514. Mieczysław Treter was a prominent Polish art historian, celebrated critic and museologist. In 1926 he was appointed the director of the Association for the Promotion of Polish Art Abroad (Towarzystwo Szerzenia Sztuki Polskiej Wśród Obcych, TOSSPO), responsible for the programme policy and frequently also for the organisation of exhibitions of Polish art abroad. See: Wasilewska, *Mieczysław Treter*.

²⁰ The Brotherhood of St. Luke (Bractwo Św. Łukasza) was an artistic group of painters, set up in 1925 by Tadeusz Pruszkowski and his students: Jan Gotard, Bolesław Cybis, Antoni Michalak, Eliasz Kanarek and others. They referred to the painting traditions of the 16th and 17th centuries, painting historical compositions, landscapes, portraits, genre and biblical scenes. In the interwar period, they obtained numerous governmental commissions for interior decoration.

²¹ In this context, the aforementioned Witkacy occupies a special position, as immediately after the war he heralded the end of both religion and art. In his conception, the avant-garde was not a turning point, but a harbinger of an imminent collapse, and he perceived its deformations and formal simplifications as symptoms of the last, terminal stage of art. The so-called Pure Form, although in his opinion the only correct path, was nothing more than an act of despair "against the increasingly greying life". And that is why, wrote Witkacy, contemporary forms "are twisted, bizarre, disturbing, nightmarish in relation to the old ones. It [Pure Form] compares to the old form like a feverish vision to a beautiful, peaceful dream." See: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, "Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia" [first edition Warsaw 1919], in: idem, *Nowe formy w malarstwie. Szkice estetyczne*, eds. Janusz Degler and Lech Sokół, Warsaw 2002, 7-214: 195.

²² Mieczysław Treter, "Dwa salony", in: *Warszawianka* 2 (9 January 1925), no. 9, 4-5.

To describe the crisis of Polish culture, Treter employed terms that connoted infirmity, sickness, and impotence. Increasing thus the persuasive function of his statement, he attacked recent art, which in his view was lacking expected vigour, enthusiasm, or aggressive conquests. By the mid-1920s the Formist group had dissolved, while Constructivism – suggested Treter – as merely a poor copy of its Western predecessor²³ was unable to satisfy the longing for refreshing novelty.

[12] Several years later a similar diagnosis of contemporaneity was shared by radically opposite groups of artists. Konrad Winkler, a recent advocate of Formism, wrote about "complacent modernism" that had become "an almost official art", while a painter and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Tadeusz Pruszkowski (1888–1942), an adherent of new classicism, rhetorically asked: "Why should we care about some modernist formulas embraced only by senile old men?"²⁴ Announcing the end of the carnival era, critics joined in their anxious expectation of approaching "times of crisis-related troubles", bankruptcy of ideas, betrayals, and even demise of established values.

[13] The doomsday mood of the 1930s demonstrated a much stronger correspondence with the general climate in Europe at the time, additionally reinforced by the deteriorating economic situation in Poland, an increase in the activity of nationalist and anti-Semitic circles, and a clear polarization of positions in intellectual circles. The difficult economic situation of those working in the cultural sector, along with the lowering of their social status, led them to look longingly towards fascist Italy on the one hand and communist Soviet Russia on the other, seeing in both cases not only an opportunity to improve the lives of artists, but also to change their thinking about art and its social mission.

Bread instead of games! The end of the carnival era

[14] The symptoms of crisis were identified in external circumstances – in artists' difficult material situation, but primarily in the lack of interest in art from both the authorities as well as society. Those were, however, closely connected. The Polish authorities, doubtful about the relevance of images for propaganda and prone to consider art a luxurious addition to life, pushed artistic issues beyond the sphere of national necessity, into the category of things to be dealt with in an indeterminate future. It does not mean, of course, that there were no governmental commissions during this period. However, compared to other countries, especially to fascist Italy, which all critics at the time, regardless of their political views, regarded with undisguised jealousy, the social position of artists in Poland was not distinctly optimistic.²⁵

²³ Constructivism, much like other avant-garde trends, was treated by most critics as an achievement of the West, which appeared in Polish art as a result of its excessive focus on Parisian art.

²⁴ Konrad Winkler, "Słońce na półmisku", in: *Tygodnik Artystów* (1 December 1934), no. 3, 3; Tadeusz Pruszkowski, "O Bractwie św. Łukasza i Szkole Warszawskiej", in: *Plastyka. Czasopismo poświęcone sztuce polskiej* 1 (1930), 46-47: 47.

[15] This indifference of the state, too busy patching 'the holes' left by the crisis in the socio-economic sphere, led to a decrease in subsidies for the arts and the art press, a consistent degradation of cultural offices and regional administration, as well as, particularly in comparison to the situation in other European states, only insignificantly growing numbers of governmental commissions in culture.²⁶ Critics and artists jointly alarmed about the situation, convinced that fighting the general crisis should not ignore purely artistic issues, because – as Władysław Skoczylas (1883–1934), a graphic artist and member of Rytm, emphasised – "art has for human life the same biological function as air, bread, or a roof over one's head".²⁷ This opinion was shared by numerous critics, such as Stefania Zahorska, Konrad Winkler, and Mieczysław Treter. The latter, occupying managerial positions in art institutions founded by the state, repeatedly emphasised that even in the difficult period of rebuilding the country after the war, even during economic crisis and growing problems of society's welfare, the state should be active in all areas simultaneously, without ignoring any discipline. "If Poland is to exist and develop, the role of art", he claimed, "needs to be very important."²⁸

[16] Art, as Jan Białostocki wrote, is often a transmitter of crises occurring in various spheres of life, which, however, do not necessarily cause a crisis in art itself.²⁹ Polish critics of that time saw it a bit differently. Their attacks against the government that did not understand the meaning of art were accompanied by the conviction that the responsibility for this rested also with the artists themselves and the works they created. The main culprit was abstract art. On the front of ideological struggle, when great themes displaced artistic utopias and penetrated every area of life, when culture, powerfully linked with politics, more and more often became an instrument of power, abstract art seemed to be completely alienated, detached from important matters and social conflicts. In Poland, unlike in the US for instance, it was not believed that it was abstract painting, more than any other, that could reveal man's alienation or create a vision of a future brave new world.³⁰

²⁵ The activities of the fascist government in Italy, which perfectly understood the importance of art for building the power of the state on the international stage, was seen as a model of state patronage. See: Diana Wasilewska, "Polska krytyka artystyczna lat 30. XX w. wobec faszystowskiego modelu sztuki państwowotwórczej i mecenatu artystycznego ówczesnej Italii", in: *Quart* 52 (2019), no. 2, 53-66, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/quart.2019.2.68805>.

²⁶ Mieczysław Treter, "Sztuka polska w powojennej dobie", in: *Sztuki Piękne* 1 (1924/1925), no. 5, 231-235: 232.

²⁷ Excerpt from the speech given by Skoczylas at the conference of delegates and artists in Cracow in 1932, organised on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the death of Stanisław Wyspiański. Cf. "Kronika artystyczna", in: *Sztuki Piękne* 8 (1932), no 12, 363.

²⁸ Mieczysław Treter, "Zapiski. Wiedza obywatelska a sztuka", in: *Przegląd Warszawski* 4 (February 1924), no. 29, 279-280: 280.

²⁹ Jan Białostocki, "Kryzysy w sztuce", in: *Kryzysy w sztuce. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Lublin, grudzień 1985*, ed. Elżbieta Karwowska, Warsaw 1988, 9-25: 17.

³⁰ See: Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art", in: *Marxist Quarterly* 1 (1937), 77-98, cited in: Piotr Piotrowski, "Wielkie kwestie i martwa natura", in: *Sztuka lat trzydziestych. Materiały z Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki Niedzica 1988*, Warsaw 1988, 5-17: 10.

The avant-garde as the source of crisis

[17] Critics put the blame on artists for widening the gap between art and society, which was visible both in decreasing attendance numbers at salons as well as in constantly dropping sales numbers of art works and art magazine subscriptions. In their view, society turned its back on art because art ceased to be the product of the spirit and the expression of humanist values, and, instead, became the sphere of laboratory experimentation or excessively speculative intellectual practices that reduced the significance of the artist's temperament and emotions. The radically constructivist avant-garde was accused of producing formal jugglery incomprehensible to most viewers, of excessively theoretical approach, and of reducing art to laboratory experiments made for savants and snobs. Piotr Piotrowski, in his essay on the reception of Constructivism in the interwar press, argued that Polish critics who discussed avant-garde art completely ignored its primary focus on social revolution and concentrated solely on the issues of purely abstract visual form.³¹ However, a careful reading of the 1930s art criticism suggests that such links between art and society were observed, yet they led critics to conclusions that put art in a pessimistic and unfavourable light. What was primarily emphasised was the difficult nature of abstract art, incomprehensible to a common viewer, rendering the artist's mission not only utopian but also detrimental to art itself, further deepening the already large gap between art and society.

[18] This belief was shared by numerous critics, both the so-called centre writers (e.g. M. Treter, Przemysław Smolik, Mieczysław Wallis) as well as advocates of traditional art, with right-wing sympathies (T. Pruszkowski, Jan Kleczyński), but also by a large group of left-wing journalists (Ignacy Fik). In the eyes of the majority of then-active critics, modernism (which in Polish art criticism was synonymous with the avant-garde) was now the source of crisis that was understood as an illness that afflicted contemporary culture – an illness whose basic symptoms included the lack of spirituality, power of expression, or interest in the human being. The overwhelming sense of crisis evoked nostalgia for a style in which formal innovation would go hand in hand with a new worldview that would also be expressed in new subject matter. Abstraction, especially geometric abstraction, seemed to be very remote from this postulate. Critics (such as Waław Husarski, T. Pruszkowski, M. Treter or J. Kleczyński) were shocked primarily by the intellectual definition of the creative process and the rejection of inspiration, talent, emotionality and fantasy, which, in their opinion, were replaced by the mechanised work of "philosophising robots" who produced dehumanised, because decorative (not artistic) works.

The compass and mathematical formulas, Treter argued, cannot exhaust the content of the human spirit, satisfy its longings. Nor will they be able to construct a hymn to the joy of life as

³¹ Piotr Piotrowski, "Awangarda między estetyką i polityką. Konstruktywizm w opinii publicznej, 1921–1934", in: *Władysław Strzemiński 1893–1952. Materiały z Sesji zorganizowanej w Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi (1993)*, Łódź 1994, 108-124.

*powerful – in shape, timbre, word or sound – as only the genius of imagination and affection can achieve.*³²

Denying the legitimacy of abstract art, the critic reduced it to purely artisanal and mechanical production, consisting in "shaping matter by processing it in accordance with the physical properties of the material".³³ Deprived of creative predispositions and the spiritual foundation responsible for individual expression of art, avant-garde artists were dismissed by Treter as "machines that copy and transpose existing forms",³⁴ or as "intellectual and artistic infants" testifying to the "underdevelopment of Polish culture".³⁵ Dehumanisation, as well as degradation to the stage of infancy or accusations of dilettantism, imitation and simplicity, were not only to denigrate the artistic value of the artists under attack, but also to prove their wrong approach to art, which, as Treter argued, led to absurdity, nihilism, spiritual bankruptcy, and unnecessary confusion of the viewer. And here again, the critic's metaphor of illness worked to justify his claims, perfectly harmonising with his vision of crisis and decay. Describing the works of avant-garde artists, Treter wrote about "creative impotence", "mechanic-constructivist deviations" or "aborted creations".³⁶ The critic was not alone in his rhetoric. For instance, the well-known psychologist of the time, prof. Władysław Witwicki, attacked extreme modernists in a similar way, seeing in their works only "Kabbalistic signs", "smeared canvases", "mutilated boards" and unreadable zigzags of the "seriously deranged".³⁷

[19] The metaphor of crisis, connoting collapse, stagnation or illness (both physical and mental), was a rhetorical weapon to fight the well-known 'enemy' – the art of the avant-garde, which in the previous decade still held the bold banner of youth and novelty. Now, this "subdued modernism" had lost this advantage as well. Reduced to craftsmanship and sterile experimentation, it lost virtually any value, ceasing to count in the race for an honourable place on the artistic scene of that time. At least this was the picture painted by the crisis-oriented rhetoric of critics who opposed the avant-garde, who shared the belief that the name of art was reserved only for those artifacts that were born from the depths of the spirit and were an expression of the artist's individualism, the result of his or her deep experiences and sensations.

³² Mieczysław Treter, "Tadeusz Pruszkowski (a raczej: o tęsknocie za nowym malarstwem)", in: *Świat* 22 (3 December 1927), no. 49, 13.

³³ Mieczysław Treter, "Zarys estetyki", in: idem, *Wybór pism estetycznych i krytycznych*, ed. Diana Wasilewska, Krakow 2019, 173.

³⁴ Mieczysław Treter, *Rozwój sztuki polskiej 1863–1930*, Warsaw 1930, 76.

³⁵ Mieczysław Treter, "Rodowód zamętu w sztuce współczesnej", in: *Rzeczpospolita* (1924), no. 272, 4.

³⁶ Mieczysław Treter, "Artyści, malarze i epigoni modernizmu (Nowe Wystawy w I. P. S.: "Kazimierz Dolny w Malarstwie", Grupy 'Kolor', Konst. Mackiewicz, Grupy Plastyków Nowoczesnych)", in: *Gazeta Polska* 5 (18 June 1933), no. 166, 7.

³⁷ Władysław Witwicki, "O pewnej psychologii sukcesu", cited in: "Kronika", in: *Sztuki Piękne* 7 (1931), no. 2, 62-63.

[20] Another reason for using sharp discrediting tools was the universalistic nature of the avant-garde, especially abstract art. In the opinion of contemporary critics, it was abstraction's excessive focus on Parisian art, and the resulting rejection of the national element (which many of them, including Kleczyński, Treter and Skoczylas, identified not so much in the predilection for national themes, but in the specific mood, colour or expression), that condemned Polish art to becoming merely one of many nations producing unoriginal art of this kind. This way, abstraction was not only incapable of lifting art out of the crisis, but even intensified this crisis: artists who transfer new forms observed abroad into their homeland, argued Treter, cannot be "pioneers of national progress". "Pappagalismo snobistico", he mocked, is the 'virtue' of pseudo-modernism, excessively influenced by short-lived fashions of the Parisian *le dernier cri*. Thus, the critic considered the main sin of the avant-garde to be its cosmopolitan character, which turned it into an 'exotic bush' in its native environment, devoid of a racial element – the guarantor of the nation's distinctiveness, its uniqueness among others.

[21] The doomsday mood, which dominated the journalism of the time, created a climate favourable to anti-avant-garde artists, both to those recruited from the traditionalist or nationalist camp, and from moderate centrist positions. The critics had no qualms about taking advantage of this favourable situation. In this case, the struggle with the crisis was primarily a struggle for artistic position, a struggle against the camp, which, in their opinion, threatened the national and at the same time humanist concept of art. Thus, the crisis, as an effective and popular concept, functioned here to a large extent as a rhetorical tool, as an effective strategy of discrediting an artistic and, in a way, also an ideological opponent.

[22] It should be noted, however, that in the 1930s the calls against abstraction were eagerly heard not only in circles previously opposed to radical changes in art. The editors of *Głos Plastyków* (1930–1939), a magazine created by painters, mainly Colourists (Jan Cybis, Henryk Gotlib, Józef Jarema, Józef Czapski, Tytus Czyżewski and others), took a critical stance towards geometric abstraction, even though the magazine was the greatest counterweight to *Plastyka* (1935–1938), a journal run by traditionalist painters, advocates of the national style, defending the romantic tradition of Polish art (Stanisław Woźnicki, Eugeniusz Arct, Tadeusz Pruszkowski, Wojciech Jastrzębowski, Wiktor Podoski and others).³⁸ In this case, the positions of the conflicting art camps turned out to be surprisingly similar. For instance, the editors of *Głos Plastyków* scolded extreme avant-garde artists suggesting that by creating the art of pure intellect, they eliminated the meaning of "looking"; the Colourists instead claimed that painting was supposed to be created as a result of a balanced cooperation between the eye and the thought controlling it.³⁹

³⁸ Artists associated with these magazines also belonged to two conflicting trade unions: the Trade Union of Polish Artists and Designers, which brought together moderate and extreme modernists, and the Professional Bloc of Polish Artists and Designers, representing artists creating more traditional art.

³⁹ Cited in: Piotrowski, "Wielkie kwestie i martwa natura", 13.

[23] The milieu of former avant-garde artists also changed. They were equally aware of the fact that the time of the formal revolution had already ended, and the old, proven tools of artistic polemics had been devaluated, having lost their rhetorical power. For example, this problem was identified by Marek Włodarski (1903–1960), whose art in the 1920s was influenced by Fernand Léger. Shifting his attention in the 1930s to figurative art, Włodarski wrote about abstract art as outdated, excessively experimental, speculative, and suicidal, as it had no connection with the viewer and the world.⁴⁰ This opinion was shared by numerous former advocates of the avant-garde. Understandably though, proponents of the pre-war artistic 'order', who ferociously attacked all kinds of so-called new art since the emergence of Formism, reacted with much greater force. Lacking any understanding for the avant-garde, masked in the 1920s with an unsophisticated and often aggressive rhetoric, conservative critics welcomed the universally acknowledged crisis of art as an opportunity to triumphantly declare the avant-garde's demise and its spectacular defeat in the race for the defining style of the era.

Colourists take the offensive

[24] However, in the 1930s, a more powerful 'enemy' than Constructivists emerged in the artworld, displaying a voracious appetite for artistic hegemony. In 1931, a group of young Colourist painters led by Józef Pankiewicz (1866–1940) came back to the country in the glory of their Paris triumph and, preaching the cult of purely visual values, attempted to create an alternative to overly intellectual abstract art, but also to that vein of figurative painting that overly focused on the relevance of literary anecdote. Their work received a varied response from the press. Conservative and nationalist critics voiced their protest and soon organised an open attack. To express their hostility, critics employed tested rhetorical devices, striving to demonstrate the emptiness of the young artists' attitudes, their attempt to avoid the disaster climate through escapist aestheticism. Stanisław Piasecki (1900–1941), a renowned right-wing journalist and political activist, expressed his views in the *Tęcza* magazine:

*In the period when everything around us falls, [...] when all our ideas are being re-evaluated, [...] when the war of ideas, beliefs, and programmes is at every front – [...] we don't need any trinkets. [...] Art strives to be at the forefront, rather than safely removed. It wishes to transform life, rather than merely decorate it.*⁴¹

Critics accused the Colourists of disregarding emotional and sentimental concerns, but primarily of their lack of interest in humanity and social issues, assessing their works in terms of stencilled superficiality, focused merely on the composition of form and colour at the expense of any deeper content. Wojciech Jastrzębowski (1884–1963)⁴² claimed that art should

⁴⁰ Henryk Streng [Marek Włodarski], "Walczymy o żywą sztukę", in: *Sygnaty* (1936), no. 17, 6.

⁴¹ Stanisław Piasecki, "Urządowanie sztuki", in: *Tęcza* 8 (1934), no 3, 17-18. Similar statements can be found in the *Prosto z Mostu* magazine edited in 1935–1939 by Piasecki.

⁴² Wojciech Jastrzębowski, an established graphic artist and painter, whose work represented Art Nouveau style, was a former director of the Department of Art in the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Education (1928–1930), a rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, and,

be linked to the life of its nation in the name of free Europe: "I believe that, in the present circumstances, there is more at stake than a well painted cabbage or paying homage to the École de Paris."⁴³ Colourists were also criticised by Antoni Słonimski (1895–1976), a poet involved with the Skamander group⁴⁴ and the liberal magazine *Wiadomości Literackie*, who argued that still lifes and portraits by colourist painters such as Zbigniew Pronaszko, Jan Cybis and Józef Czapski, devoid of content, requiring no effort from the viewer and addressed to cultural aristocrats rather than common people, contradicted the very essence of art:

*The frenzy of painting violins and apples, this isolation within the craft of painting [...] hardly seems like art capable of [...] expressing the artist's individuality [...]. A simple composition of several colours is more of an element of architectural decoration.*⁴⁵

[25] *Sztuki Piękne*, a magazine founded by artists and art historians, complained about "the great sin of contemporary painting" and published Jan Kleczyński's translation of Émile Henriot's⁴⁶ eponymous text from *L'Art Vivant*.⁴⁷ This sin consisted in that art had been deprived of any spirituality and imagination, that artists approached their creative process with a pre-conceived conception of colour planes and composition, championing technique but ignoring the spiritual dimension "which is hard to find in guitars, apples, bread or bottles". "Colour mongers are hardly painters", concluded Henriot. "Painters create life, they reach to the heart and make us hold our breath." The chronicler of this magazine, possibly Mieczysław Treter, cited these words with open satisfaction, delighted that he could use the authority of the famous French writer to scold local painters, focused on theory and blindly following Paris, whom he called "occasional reformers of art".⁴⁸

[26] The painter Tadeusz Pruszkowski also awaited "a Polish Aristotle who [...] could start the fire of reason, knowledge, and great artistic endeavours", convinced that art is unable to employ still lifes to express the spirit of the new era.⁴⁹ Even such aesthetic pluralist critic as Mieczysław Wallis (1895–1975), who called for the co-existence of diverse types of art, emphasised in the mid-1930s that Colourist painting was outdated, offering little but visual

between 1935 and 1938, a senator of the Republic of Poland.

⁴³ Wojciech Jastrzębowski, "W sprawie Kolumny Plastyki", in: *Wiadomości Literackie* 11 (21 January 1934), no. 3 (530), 6.

⁴⁴ Skamander was a Polish group of experimental young poets founded in 1918 by Julian Tuwim, Antoni Słonimski, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Kazimierz Wierzyński and Jan Lechoń.

⁴⁵ Antoni Słonimski, "Kronika Tygodniowa", in: *Wiadomości Literackie* 11 (21 January 1934), no. 3 (530), 5.

⁴⁶ Émile Henriot (1889–1961) was a French poet, novelist and literary critic.

⁴⁷ Émile Henriot, "La grand péché de la peinture moderne", in: *L'Art Vivant* (1933), no. 168, 19, cited in: "Kronika artystyczna", in: *Sztuki Piękne* 9 (1933), no. 8/9, 343.

⁴⁸ "Kronika artystyczna", in: *Sztuki Piękne* 9 (1933), no. 8/9, 344.

⁴⁹ Tadeusz Pruszkowski, "O wielką popularną sztukę", in: *Wiadomości Literackie* 11 (28 January 1934), no. 4 (531), 2.

pleasure, and as such approaching non-figurative art. Meanwhile, contemporary times, he argued, long for a subject, a topic, but above all – for human figure. "Even the most beautiful colourful mosaics, the greatest music of colours, will not be able to replace it for a long time."⁵⁰ Many critics shared the belief that art could create a bridge that would reconnect it with society. A painter and politician, Stanisław Teisseyre (1905–1988), reluctant towards Colourism, formalism as well as the traditional painting of the Brotherhood of St. Luke, looked for possible rescue in Surrealism, which he saw as a chance for a modern expression of the problems of contemporary man:

*The state when the painter ceases to be human and is suspended in a zone of painterly concerns isolated from life can be as dangerous as is an infertile aesthetics of any kind of painting immersed in intoxicating fumes of Renaissance; both lead to purely superficial jugglery of forms and colours.*⁵¹

[27] The aesthetic traditionalism of 'connoisseurs' hiding in a 'glass jar' of purely visual concerns in spite of the difficult times of crisis was considered escapist also by Polish Constructivist artists.⁵² Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951) interpreted "formless, fluid phantoms" as the most vivid manifestation of contemporary crisis. Colourists, she claimed, in their ambition to elevate painting and make beautiful pictures, escaped the problems of contemporary world into the land of colourful illusions, expecting to find utopian compensation.⁵³ Naturally, the sculptor and other Constructivists did not consider figurative art with pro-social subject matter a fitting solution to art's problems – they shared a utopian belief that abstraction found its explanation in the specificity of life in that period, whose new artistic forms were believed to "shape [...] new forms of experience", "create different psychological patterns".⁵⁴ The subject matter worked merely as a factor that "pulls one down – towards overcome art forms", dictates formal solutions, and incapacitates formal improvement. Therefore, Kobro claimed that the focus on the subject matter, especially externally imposed, reduces art to "a supplement to a primer developed for the use and de-intellectualisation of the masses", this way squandering all purely artistic efforts and also any chance of overcoming the crisis.⁵⁵

[28] This time, it was the aversion to artistic escapism that united (although only in theory) the opposing milieus – the avant-garde movement, i.e. the Constructivist avant-garde and artists

⁵⁰ Mieczysław Wallis, "Wystawy. Zwornik i Pryzmat w IPS-ie", in: *Wiadomości Literackie* 12 (24 November 1935), no. 47 (627), 9.

⁵¹ Stanisław Teisseyre, "Światopogląd a styl w malarstwie", in: *Sygnaly* (1936), no. 15, 6.

⁵² In the 1930s, the avant-garde, although still marginalised, 'caught a second breath' by moving from Warsaw to Łódź. In 1929, Władysław Strzemiński formed the a.r. group and set up a foundation to form a collection of the most radical and experimental international art of that time. The main outlet of the Łódź avant-garde was the *Forma* magazine.

⁵³ Cf. Katarzyna Kobro, "Funkcjonalizm", in: *Forma* 4 (1936), 9-13: 10.

⁵⁴ Henryk Stażewski, "Nowa sztuka a spuścizna sztuki epok minionych", in: *Pion* 1 (1933), no. 5, 4-5: 4.

⁵⁵ Kobro, "Funkcjonalizm", 10.

close to Surrealism, with the defenders of national, traditional art. They were united by a conviction about the social mission of art, although they saw this commitment quite differently. Thus, they claimed that the Colourists, who appeared on the art scene already burdened with the stigma of crisis, only deepened this crisis with their attitude, widening the gap between art and society.

[29] What did the attacked artists say to this? These defenders of pure art, for whom still life was supposed to be an argument against the totalisation of life, did not shy away from political involvement organising numerous boycotts, protests, writing petitions to improve the lives of artists, etc.⁵⁶ However, they strictly separated matters of art and life, guarding the autonomy of the image, guarding the inviolability of purely artistic values. Moreover, still life or landscape, untouched by the ills of modern times, gave them a specific foundation, a permanent support in times of crisis, when so many values were relativised or degraded. Their attitude, based on faith in the possibility of defending the pure values of culture, can be seen as an element of heroism, as Piotr Piotrowski claimed.⁵⁷ Colourists believed that a compromise that reduces art to didactics defies the ethos of painting and promotes diletantism, risking the loss of the organic unity of painting in which form and content constituted a synthetic whole. They argued that the efforts made to connect art and society should prioritise developing the mass viewer's sensibility and advance their skill of the "painterly experience of colours", rather than focus their attention on narrative elements. Standing in contrast to the general climate of the decade, Colourists claimed that the crisis of art was invented by discontent artists. They refused to acknowledge a connection between the crisis in art and the economic crisis, suggesting that the economic conditions of the artists' lives in general "have not changed". Their disengaged attitude stemmed perhaps from their belief in the permanence of life forms that would guarantee equal permanence of the laws of art.⁵⁸ Their opponents tried to demonstrate, instead, that the conditions of life and the very essence of societies had undergone significant changes and, with that in mind, art, including its avant-garde movements, should take a different direction.

'Return to subject' as an antidote for crisis?

[30] Since Colourism could not offer a remedy for the crisis, and the ideological background of Constructivists in connection with their hermetic art convinced only a limited audience, what kind of movement stood a chance of bringing art out of the impasse? Karol Hiller (1891–1939), one of the prominent Polish Constructivists and the pioneer of experimental heliographic technique, wrote in 1934 in the avant-garde *Forma* magazine that only Surrealism had a

⁵⁶ See: Joanna Sosnowska, "Kapiści na tle dyskusji o sztuce narodowej", in: *Nacjonalizm w sztuce i historii sztuki 1789–1950. Materiały z konferencji zorganizowanej przez Instytut Sztuki PAN i Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki w dniach 5 7 grudnia 1995 r. w Warszawie*, eds. Dariusz Konstatynow, Robert Piaseczny and Piotr Paszkiewi, Warsaw 1998, 211-225.

⁵⁷ Piotrowski, "Wielkie kwestie i martwa natura", 15.

⁵⁸ Cf. Strzemiński, "Hasło przeciw stabilizatorom sztuki", in: *Tygodnik Artystów* (1935), no. 14, 2.

chance to restore the subject of modern art, while at the same time strengthening its form. In the artist's opinion, Surrealism, like a phoenix rising from the ashes of naturalism, was supposed to be content-based painting, but in a new form – in place of "factual content" it introduced "psychic content".

[31] Interestingly, emphasising the meaning of the message itself, its comprehensibility, universality, and maximum simplicity (which placed it in opposition to Strzemiński and other editors of *Forma*), Hiller continued to advocate objectless shapes, simplified to the formula of a sign, and therefore close to abstraction. His position did not enjoy wide appreciation – either among the Constructivists with whom he finally parted in the middle of the decade, or among artists and critics with less radical views. Even Artes, Poland's only Surrealist group,⁵⁹ had a completely different vision of how to overcome the crisis of art. Its members, who had just abandoned Surrealist poetics and formulated a programme of realist Constructivism (factorealism), sought to create new content that would respond to present social needs.

[32] On the other hand, left-wing artists and critics from outside the Constructivist circle most commonly suggested that an effective antidote to "formal jugglery" could be found in art that directly addressed social issues. Ignacy Fik (1904–1942), a poet, critic and political activist, called for an intense search for a new outlook on life. He proclaimed the closing of an era of still lifes and avant-garde, and formulated a conception of art that analysed social issues and translated them into artistic content.⁶⁰ Fik did not write about the defeat or discredit of the avant-garde, as other critics so eagerly did, he only announced "the historic bankruptcy of its role".⁶¹ He appreciated the achievements of the pioneers of modernism, but he believed that experiments resulting from the widely understood crisis of the humanities were necessary and understandable in its first phase. However, in the long run, they only prolonged the chaos, without leading to the crystallisation of new ideas or the reconstruction of reality: "Permanent avant-garde", he wrote, "as a pursuit of tireless eccentricity, becomes an expression of rebellious subversion. An eternal revolutionist becomes a burdensome and rebellious anarchist. An individual avant-garde artist – is a tramp and a buccaneer."⁶² According to Fik, the place of the avant-garde was already in the past, while prolonging its duration only isolated society and artists from the current problems of the era.

⁵⁹ The Artes Association of Artists and Designers was active in Lviv between 1929 and 1936. It was founded by three painters, Jerzy Janish, Mieczysław Wysocki, and Aleksander Krzywobłocki. Among its members were also Otto Hahn, Ludwik Lille, and Henryk Streng (Marek Włodarski). Artes was the only group in Poland which was close to French Surrealism. Although its artists applied several surrealist methods of depiction in their works, they did not care about the basic theoretical foundations for their artistic expression, and instead emphasised the importance of an emotional element in art.

⁶⁰ Ignacy Fik, "Rzeczywistość sztuki", in: *Sygnaty* (1937), no. 26, 8.

⁶¹ Ignacy Fik, "Awangarda i awangardziści", in: *Sygnaty* (1938), no. 39. Cited in: Ignacy Fik, *Wybór pism krytycznych*, ed. Andrzej Chruszczyński, Warsaw 1961, 73.

⁶² Fik, "Awangarda i awangardziści", 71.

[33] A sense of mission, particularly art's debts to society, was a recurring issue on criticism's agenda throughout the 1930s, yet this mission was interpreted in a variety of ways. Conservative circles, including Blok Zawodowych Artystów Plastyków [Bloc of Professional Visual Artists] founded in 1934, promoted art with a clear, simple subject matter, addressed to the lowest classes of society. Art that could become "the daily bread for the hungry", rather than a "delicacy for the connoisseurs".⁶³ Tadeusz Pruszkowski argued that the greatest masterpieces had been made from the need to connect with the common people. Referring to Adam Mickiewicz, Jan Matejko, but also to Fryderyk Chopin and Miguel de Cervantes, he claimed that only art born from the depth of the spirit, religion or an important idea can aspire to greatness – inaccessible to aesthetes – and reach "the masses with at least basic artistic sensibility".⁶⁴ Art historian and museologist Alfred Lauterbach (1884–1943) encouraged artists to abandon salons, closed clans, artistic coteries, and sectarian 'isms', while a journalist Marian Dienstl-Dąbrowa (1882–1957), known for his nationalist views, encouraged them to search for a forgotten language of Artur Grottger, Jan Matejko, or Józef Chełmoński as painters who fervently reacted to the problems of their nation. Artists, he claimed, should become socially relevant again; authors of "still lifes and deformed nudes", with their experimental art isolated in a golden cage of painting's autonomy, could not fulfil this mission.⁶⁵ "We need images today", claimed the nationalist literary critic Jan Bajkowski (1905–1942), "but not images stuck in a lab, closed and inaccessible. What was once a breath of fresh air, is now gasping for air. And all that needs to be done is to enter life itself. Nothing more."⁶⁶ In practice, this re-entry into life, that is, reconnecting with society, meant giving up formal experiments for the sake of a simple subject matter comprehensible to the masses, even at the price of sacrificing one's individualism. Skoczylas argued that the artist should not create art only as a reaction to an internal impulse. "Art made for privileged individuals should be replaced by art for the masses."⁶⁷

[34] Even more radical views were promoted by the painter Franciszka Szenkierowa, who joined in the struggle of tackling "the crisis of content" and thematic impoverishment that brought art to internal decomposition, suggesting a remedy in following the unrivalled model of realist Soviet art.⁶⁸ Szenkierowa was also one of the most ardent advocates of socialist realism, shown during the exhibition of Soviet art in Warsaw in 1933. The exhibition, treated as

⁶³ Tadeusz Cieślewski Jr, "Chwalebny prowincjonalizm. O postanowie Bloku Zawodowych Artystów Plastyków", in: *Sztuki Piękne* 10 (1934), no. 6, 234-235: 235.

⁶⁴ Pruszkowski, "O wielką popularną sztukę", 2.

⁶⁵ Marian Dienstl-Dąbrowa, "Salon 1933 w Towarzystwie Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych", in: *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny* 25 (6 January 1934), no. 6, 11.

⁶⁶ Jan Bajkowski, "Obok życia", in: *ABC Literacko-Artystyczne* [weekly supplement to the daily newspaper *ABC Nowiny Codzienne*] 3 (1934), no. 8, 2.

⁶⁷ "Sztuka w Rosji Sowieckiej, Odczyt prof. Skoczylasa w IPS-ie", in: *ABC pismo codzienne* 9 (20 January 1934), no. 19, 6.

⁶⁸ Franciszka Szenkierowa, "Sztuka a społeczeństwo", cited in: "Varia", in: *Sztuki Piękne* 10 (1934), no. 10, 399.

a major cultural event, was received with excitement worthy of discovering an exotic, mysterious and unknown culture. The Warsaw audience, driven primarily by curiosity about what was going on 'behind the walls', stormed the halls of the Institute of Art Propaganda, breaking the box office and attendance record worthy of the most famous European artistic events. Ultimately, the exhibition disappointed some, positively surprised others, and for a large group it was above all an important point of reference, prompting a discussion on the meaning of the subject matter and the social mission of art.⁶⁹

[35] The show enjoyed a positive response particularly among the critics who were combating what was seen as the Colourists' Parnassianism. The interventionist approach of the Soviet artists was eagerly contrasted with the social escapism of the Colourists. Apart from several extreme cases of those who openly sympathised with socialism, most critics were unanimous in their assessment of the poor artistic level of the exhibited works, which was not so much linked to the imposed subject matter (Skoczylas argued that "even the greatest masterpieces were often made to meet very specific requirements"⁷⁰) but to the imposed form – one reduced to the level of the masses and constrictive to creative freedom. Similarly, Konrad Winkler, even though he appreciated the naive optimism of Soviet art and its cult of collective labour, concluded that such art was actually digging its own grave, not so much due to its thematic programming, but because it abandoned purely artistic concerns, i.e. reduced the form to the role of medium of ideological content, and art itself to the role of an explanatory tool for communicating these ideas.⁷¹ Thus, it was the disagreement with the instrumentalization of art, with the 'violation' of its autonomy and artistry, that constituted the dominant object of criticism. The commonly shared view was that addressing social narratives, this triumphant return to the subject and plot, represented new and interesting issues that reflected the joys and ills of the new Soviet man.⁷²

[36] Such a position was shared, for example, by Stefania Zahorska – one of the most eminent critics of the interwar period, who wrote about Constructivism with great expertise. In an interview she gave to *Tygodnik Artystów* in 1935, she defended Soviet art and claimed that its thematic programme was a result of a personalistic turn – a search for the human being and an attempt to show him "in the fullest light of his new life".⁷³ Zahorska, however, did not want to allow this slogan to support artists whose work resembled "l'art pompier", who championed anachronistic, outdated art of the past. Thus, she did not reject the very concept of socialist

⁶⁹ Władysław Baraniewski, "Wobec realizmu socjalistycznego", in: *Sztuka polska po 1945. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki. Warszawa, listopad 1984*, ed. Teresa Hrankowska, Warsaw 1987, 174.

⁷⁰ Władysław Skoczylas, "Sztuka sowiecka w Warszawie (z powodu wystawy w Instytucie Propagandy Sztuki)", in: *Sztuki Piękne* 9 (1933), no. 5, 165-172: 167.

⁷¹ Konrad Winkler, "Wystawa sztuki sowieckiej w IPS", in: *Droga* 12 (1933), no. 5, 482-483.

⁷² Wallis, "Wystawy. Zwornik i Pryzmat w IPS-ie".

⁷³ Lech Piwowar, "Nowa droga sztuki sowieckiej. Rozmowa ze Stefanią Zahorską", in: *Tygodnik Artystów* (1935), no. 12, 3.

realism, in which she saw elements of a new psychological analysis and construction, but she believed that in the field of painting it was realised in an overly reactionary manner, without channelling realism's true potential. In Zahorska's view, much more successful in this respect were Soviet theatre, and especially Soviet film.

[37] The exhibition of Soviet art turned out to be an extremely fruitful event. Socialist realism met with almost universal criticism, but mainly due to the low artistic value of the works presented at the exhibition. Nevertheless, the exhibition was rated as "full of vigour"⁷⁴ and "alive with youthful charm".⁷⁵ Most commentators seemed to believe that art in the service of ideas could bring interesting results if it did not lead to the loss of individual artistic expression by serving the needs of humanity and society.⁷⁶

[38] It transpires that such hopes were also shared by Polish artists with a leftist worldview: the discourse around the Soviet exhibition had an impact on the programmes and concepts of art they formulated – art that would use the advantages of Soviet art but remain at the height of artistry and therefore save the artist's autonomy. In 1935, the Czapka Frygijska [Phrygian cap] group was established, the first attempt to transplant pure socialist art onto Polish soil. However, the influence of the artists associated there was marginal. Compromise solutions were sought more often, leaving the avant-garde paradigm in force. An attempt at such a compromise solution was, for example, the programme of new realism formulated on behalf of the Artes group by the painter Henryk Streng (pseudonym of Marek Włodarski), who in the 1920s had worked under the influence of his master Fernand Léger. The artist admitted that the new art "does not yet have a specific form of expression". He believed, however, that it would be modern and at the same time accessible, reflecting new social content and the values that followed, thus becoming an expression of a truly new, emerging world.⁷⁷ Streng outlined here a clear opposition between art referring to the masses of workers and peasants and the dance-salon culture. He expressed his hope that it was the masses who would create the new avant-garde and that, by opposing the poisoned atmosphere of the salon, they would contribute to create a living and true art.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Konrad Winkler, "Na lewym skrzydle polskiej plastyki (Pokłosie wystawy grupy Plastyków Nowoczesnych w IPS)", in: *Droga* 12 (1933), no. 9, 827.

⁷⁵ Wacław Husarski, "Sztuka sowiecka w IPS-ie", in: *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 74 (1933), no. 12, 229-230: 230.

⁷⁶ More on this topic in: Diana Wasilewska, "Spory krytyczne międzywojnia. Wystawa plastyki radzieckiej w Warszawie (1933 r.) – wokół dyskusji o socjalizacji sztuki", in: *"Spojrzenie z ukosa". Literatura i kultura rosyjska w międzywojennej Polsce*, eds. Grażyna Pawlak and Anna Sobieska, Warsaw 2019, 127-141.

⁷⁷ Henryk Streng, "Walczy my o żywą sztukę", in: *Sygnaty* (1936), no. 17, 6.

⁷⁸ The new realism proposed by Artes, drawing conclusions from Soviet art, was to be an alternative to both laboratory abstract art and painting of "beautiful souls", in a way preparing the ground for the post-war doctrine of socialist realism in Poland.

Art for the masses – remedy or a syndrome of crisis?

[39] The call to adapt creative ambitions to the needs of society was seen as a possible remedy for the crisis. Meanwhile, the growing expansion of popular culture, which lowered the general level of artistic production, hindered the march of the avant-garde, and regressed to forms of the past that had seemed long exhausted – neo-impressionism, classicism, as well as realism –, was interpreted by some critics as a token of a dangerous crisis. Its source was not art itself, but socio-economic and political changes occurring in society. The former Formist artist Konrad Winkler claimed that, in the times which "prioritise banality and sensation, there is no place for art that transcends the ordinary and aims for true creativity". The critic warned against a dangerous repercussion of this situation in countries such as Poland, with no strong artistic traditions. "Heavy vulgar hands of post-war businessmen" can easily thwart "any higher instincts, healthy judgements, and direct experience of art" by elevating "degenerate tastes and naive outlook on life".⁷⁹ In his view, the symptoms of a critical condition of artistic culture in Poland were manifold, such as the popularity of the Styka family's painting and high attendance numbers at exhibitions in the Zachęta gallery,⁸⁰ where hastily arranged exhibitions satisfied the unsophisticated tastes of the public, hungry for anecdotal treatment of the subject matter and familiar landscapes. Defending high or "true" art – as he termed it – from the tragic consequences of pauperisation of culture, Winkler, in fact, promoted a romantic-modern conception of art. Paradoxically, some representatives of Constructivism did so as well, going against the avant-garde paradigm.

[40] A similar diagnosis of the contemporary art world can be found in the critical writing of Karol Hiller. In his view, crisis provided a perfect opportunity for the triumph of epigones and, even worse, snobs, whom he characterised as having "skilful fingers, emptiness in the soul, and a cynical approach to art". As a result, he wrote in the Łódź-based magazine *Forma*, "nowadays we have very few artists and too many painters" who create "stereotypical export products of craft-like finesse", who seem to "indulge themselves in all kinds of easy tasks", and prey on the work of other artists. Echoing Winkler's diagnosis, Hiller blamed this situation on the conservative masses of society, reluctant to accept new values and their accompanying changes, unable to discern the affinity between modern art movements and changes occurring in fashion, politics, and education. The majority of viewers of contemporary art, he ironically observed, are people of the past, and "the essence of their vegetative existence" is to "avoid

⁷⁹ Konrad Winkler, "Dziesięciolecie Polski a sztuki plastyczne" [response to a survey], in: *Sztuki Piękne* 5 (1929), no. 12, 489.

⁸⁰ In the interwar period, the Zachęta Society of Fine Arts (Towarzystwo Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych; at present the Zachęta National Gallery of Art) was an extremely conservative, not to say parochial institution, favouring traditional, thematic art and fighting against even moderate avant-garde forms. The Styka family, i.e. three painters: Jan, Tadeusz and Adam, were the gallery's favourites. Jan Styka (1858–1925), the senior of the family, was a painter noted for his large historical battle-pieces and Christian religious panoramas. His older son Tadeusz (1889–1954) was a portrait painter. Adam, his younger son (1890–1959), represented the Orientalist movement, painting images of the American West, exoticized foreign motifs, and religious themes.

waking up, avoid moving, avoid digesting". No wonder, then, that they "only have eyes for those who represent their belated cultural development". It was Hiller's belief that the crisis of art consisted not so much in society turning its back on "true art", but in overproduction of painting by "imitators and followers", who failed to "work in keeping with the spirit of their times" and "push art forward" and instead indulged the least sophisticated tastes of mass viewers.⁸¹

[41] Władysław Strzemiński was equally radical in his assessment. In 1936, writing for *Budowa* [Construction], a Łódź-based art and literary magazine, this founder of Unism argued that the sources of crisis in contemporary culture could be found not so much in the avant-garde and its alleged hermeticism and isolationism; these were unjustly identified as sources of crisis in contemporary culture. The avant-garde, in his view, was a small group of generally underappreciated artists who sought to meet the demands of a highly industrialised society by developing concepts available for further utilitarian implementation. In Strzemiński's assessment, cultural crisis rather stemmed from the excess of disorganised consumption, inadequate to the potential of contemporary technology. Failing to see this potential, or unwilling to see it, the consumer demanded art that "comes from a falsified image of reality". Terrified with unlimited possibilities of modernity, the modern viewer yearned for fabrications and lies, choosing realism and finding peace and a sense of stability in the contact with vernacular art and old masters. In contrast to critics for whom the incomprehensible, speculative and overly intellectual aspects of abstract art contradicted the very essence of art, Strzemiński argued that it was the movements and styles embracing the mimetic conception of painting that deserved to be seen as mere surrogates of art, particularly in the face of civilizational change. Therefore, it was mimetic art, he claimed, that was responsible for the crisis of aesthetics. To overcome this impasse, artists should educate society rather than reduce their art's potential. Paradoxically, in this statement, Strzemiński expressed views that were consistent with opinions voiced by Colourists – artists whom he eagerly criticised.⁸²

Conclusion

[42] Polish art as strongly anchored in the romantic-national myth on the one hand, and on the other hand struggling to break free from the shackles of tradition and looking for role models in the Western avant-garde – this is the commonly reproduced image of the polarised Polish art scene of the interwar period. However, during my research on art criticism of the 1930s, this picture turned out to be highly simplified. Undoubtedly, there was a distinct division in this increasingly radicalized environment – but a division that was much more complex, multi-layered, and resulted from well-established, though often contradictory artistic traditions and models of art valuation. The debate on the crisis in art seems to perfectly reflect this complex nature of the interwar art scene. The only common ground uniting all those who wrote about art at that time was the awareness of living in "times of critical concerns" – and this phrase

⁸¹ Karol Hiller, "Malarstwo nowoczesne wobec epigonizmu", in: *Forma* (1933), no. 1, 2-6: 5.

⁸² Władysław Strzemiński, "Surogaty sztuki", in: *Budowa 1* (1936), no. 1, 3-6: 3.

applied both to the difficult living and social situation of artists and to the condition of art itself. What were the hallmarks of this crisis, where were its origins and who was responsible for it?

[43] As we have seen, this question received a variety of answers. Moreover, even with the same diagnosis, both the concept of crisis and its markers were identified differently, as were its sources and the possibilities of overcoming the impasse. The camp of traditionalists spoke the same voice as the followers of Surrealism and Colourism when it came to locating the sources of crisis in avant-garde art, especially in geometric abstraction. Colourists, on the other hand, as propagators of pure painting, i.e. rejecting art directly involved in expressing the ills of modern times, became the target of attack by both Constructivists and supporters of traditional art. The common front did not mean speaking in unison – some sought contact with society by returning to tradition, others through new forms, for some only art for the masses could offer a solution, others yet preferred to educate these masses rather than adapt their work to the level of an average viewer. This constant 'change of guard' also proved that the debate on the crisis in art became a battleground not only for a new vision of art, but also for influence in the artistic milieu, for a change in the power distribution on the artistic scene of the time. And in this struggle, 'crisis' seemed to be a particularly handy rhetorical tool, used both for persuasion as well as for depreciation of artistic opponents.

[44] Which of the described artistic strategies was more appropriate or more effective? It seems that there is no clear and definitive answer to this question, even from the present perspective. Certainly, both the belief in the possibility of saving art from grand subject matter, as well as the hope to tear down the wall between art and society – regardless of the means – turned out to be utopias; especially in the collision of theory with artistic practice. Would any of these concepts be likely to be fully realised if history had turned out differently? It is difficult to say. There is no doubt, however, that in Polish art the 1930s brought "a multitude of pulsating points and lines of development that were never allowed to mature".⁸³

⁸³ Elżbieta Grabska, "Lata 1914–18 i 1939–49. Z problemów periodyzacji okresu zwanego dwudziestolecie", in: *Sztuka dwudziestolecia międzywojennego. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki. Warszawa, październik 1980*, ed. Anna Marczak, Warsaw 1982, 29-47: 39.

Acknowledgements

This text was written as part of a research grant funded by the Polish National Science Centre (Sonata programme, UMO 2014/15/D/HS2/03262).

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