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MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

American and West-European authors have tended to link Postmodernism with a certain stage in the development of multinational capitalism. Fredric Jameson, for example, uses the term as:

"a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order... This new moment of capitalism can be dated from the postwar boom in the United States in the late 1940s and early 50s or, in France, from the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958. The 1960s are in many ways the key transitional period, a period in which the new international order (neocolonialism, the Green Revolution, computerization and electronic information) is at one and the same time set in place and is swept and shaken by its own internal contradictions and by external resistance."¹

Such an attitude excludes a wide spectrum of events from the discourse on Postmodernism. These events have been shaking a large part of the world between Berlin and Beijing. If the recent changes within Western societies are a result of the exhaustion or ideals of the Modern Era, how can one describe a much more spectacular rupture, which has occurred in so-called communist countries? What happened there certainly doesn't fit into the concept of Post-Modern society. An inhabitant of Moscow who cannot buy a pack of cigarettes, which are not even available for employer-issued coupons, will hardly agree that he lives in a Consumer Society, just as a farmer from a village in the Lubin district, who uses a horse to plow his land, will not believe that Poland has entered a post-industrial epoch. Nevertheless, I will insist that what is going on in the countries of the former Communist Block relates also to the issue of the crisis of Modernism, and can be described in terms of Postmodernism.

The contribution of avant-garde artists to the rise of totalitarianism is not an unknown story. Let me remind you that the Italian Futurists welcomed Fascism as the fulfillment of their minimal program. They fully supported Mussolini in his struggle for power and joined him during his "march on Rome" in 1922. Russian cubo-futurists also saw a chance for themselves in contemporary politics. "We would not refuse if

¹ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, in: H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Port Townsend 1983, p. 113.

we were offered the use of the power of the State in order to realize our ideas”, wrote Nikolai Punin in 1918.² In fact, during the first years after the Revolution, activists of the Avant-Garde took over all important positions in art education and cultural administration in the country. This love affair did not last long. Subsequent repressions converted the earlier supporters into the victims of the new regimes. It is not my intention to accuse those who were oppressed of opening the door for totalitarianism. Igor Golomstock, in his brilliant book on totalitarian art, advises us to resist this temptation. But he agrees that:

“It is clear that the artistic-structure of these (Avant-Garde) movements-like the political structure of the democracies of the time-contained a certain ideological component which helped the dictatorships during their rise to power, even if they later destroyed both the one and the other.”³

The declining communist regimes were, like Fascism, nothing more or less than the realization of the modernist dream of a totally controlled political system, breaking entirely with the already existing social status quo. For the first time in political history, theory preceded practice. Such a procedure had already been exercised in Modern art, and as it often happens in art, practice did not always conform to theory. Totalitarian doctrine resolves the problem easily: if a theory doesn't suit a reality, something must be wrong with the latter. Berthold Brecht presented this in a metaphorical way: a government announced its disappointment with people, so the decision was made up to dissolve... the society! The ideology of totalitarianism is always right. Golomstock writes:

“If the principal characteristic of totalitarianism is that it proclaims its ideological doctrine as both uniquely true and universally obligatory, then it is the artistic avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s who first elaborated a totalitarian ideology of culture. Only the art has right to exist which is an effective instrument for the transformation of the world in the necessary direction, while everything else is counter-revolution or bourgeois reaction: to the revolutionary avant-garde this was an absolute and unshakable truth.”⁴

The awareness of being fail-safe, so typical of totalitarian ideology, emerged directly from modernistic “rationality”. It is the shame of the Modern Era that the worst failures, including the crimes against humankind on a scale never seen before, were committed in the name of rationality. Anthropological arguments were developed to oppose one race against another. Gas chambers were built in accordance with a scientific principle of the economy of mass destruction. Institutes were founded to provide evidence that attitudes different from those approved by state are symptoms of mental illness. The reason why Marxism had been accepted as the official ideology in the communist countries, we were taught in school, was that it had represented the only one truly scientific current in philosophy. Leszek Kolakowski, a former Marxist and today's leading critic of Marxism, is right that “a totalitarian system which treats people as exchangeable parts in the state machinery, to be used, discarded, or destroyed according to the state's needs, is in a sense a triumph of rationality.”⁵

² Quoted from J. Golomstock. *Totalitarian Art in Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China*, New York 1990, p. 22.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁵ L. Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago and London 1990, p. 13.

Many avant-garde artists were used, manipulated and finally discarded by this crushing machine of totalitarianism which they helped to establish. In the 1930s the Avant-Garde had completely disappeared in the Soviet Union. Another cultural doctrine was proclaimed as "the only true" one: Social Realism. The rulers had developed explicit ideas about dealing with the people. They didn't need inventors of new social concepts. What they sought were craftsmen, not artists, capable of depicting their idealized vision of post-revolutionary society. They were seeking an apotheosis of themselves. Forms of pre-revolutionary academic art, hated and totally rejected by the Avant-Garde, returned to the galleries. Totalitarianism wore a pompous costume. Public buildings, even subway stations, were shaped like king's palaces, rather than Bauhaus-like factories. The sculptural ornament and historic detail anticipated the architecture of Postmodernism which was to appear much later in the West. The ideological content of these buildings was cogently revealed by Charles Jencks, who used the Moscow State University as an example.

"Classical realism, the architectural form of Social Realism, here borrows the repressive forms of czarism, the stepped pyramids, and the signs of bourgeois power. This coercive and boring symbolism — the architecture of monotony — is tied to an appropriate megalomania: the building houses 18,000 students in a kind of battery-hatch palace."⁶

The description is excellent, but I do not understand why Jencks (the main proponent of meaning in architecture) considers this building, which is rich in metaphors, to be monotonous. Many things can be said about this kind of architecture, that it is frightening, irritating, and ugly — but not that it is monotonous.

The Soviet vision of the city of the Future was not unlike the concepts of the Metropolis, formulated by modern utopians such as Hugh Ferriss. The meanings of architectural forms used by social-realists and modernist utopians were different, but the visual results were quite similar.

After Stalin's death the architecture of Social Realism was gradually abandoned, partly because of a disastrous economic policy — the palaces of power were costly — and partly because of a slow but continuous process of erosion the state ideology. The headquarters building of the Communist Party of Rumania, built by Ceausescu in the 1980s, was perhaps the last monument of Social Realism in European architecture. The collapse of the architecture of Social Realism soon revealed the full duality of the political system: that the monumental facades hid an unappealing reality. The reality of everyday life in the communist countries is perfectly expressed in the specific charm of housing projects which have shaped the urban landscape of many East-European cities. It is the charm of concrete barracks. If we are looking for a good example of boredom in architecture, we shall not find a better one than this. The demoralizing environment of these places is also a fruit of Modernism.

Soon after the birth of Solidarity in Poland a group of architects connected with the movement issued a document accusing "the modern city of being the product of an alliance between bureaucracy and totalitarianism, and singles out the great error of modern architecture in the break of historical continuity."⁷ Of course, the authors of

⁶ Ch. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, New York 1977, p. 91.

⁷ P. Portoghesi, *Postmodern: The Architecture of the Postindustrial Society*, New York 1983, p. 8.

the text had in mind mostly those cities which were built in accordance with the housing policy of the communist government. However, this policy corresponded directly to the modernist demands for standardization, functionality, and economy. Gropius's deliberations on the minimal dwelling, "establishing the elementary minimum of space, air, light and heat required by man in order that he be able to fully develop his life functions"⁸ were echoed in humiliating regulations which assigned to a family (or a single person) a strictly limited space for living, in accordance with the number of inhabitants. The most devastating impact on the town and social planning in the countries under Soviet control was a dokument known as *Charte d'Athènes*, formulated by the participants of the fourth Congress of the C. I. A. M. in 1933 (published 1941). The text (edited by Le Corbusier) described point by point what had to be undertaken to design a perfect modern city. The last sentence was: "Private interest will be subordinated to public interest."⁹

The East-European regimes were not the same. That life in Poland after 1955 became more or less bearable was achieved thanks to the fact that the disintegration of the system had started here early. If we agree, following Lyotard, Jameson, and Jencks, that one of the main characteristics of Postmodernism is schizophrenia, then Poland definitely approached Postmodernism very early. Since the mid-1970s, Polish intellectual and social life was schizophrenically split into two spheres: a so-called official sphere, controlled by censorship, and an underground one, which actually was not hidden at all. Books published by underground publishing houses were widely read by members of the ruling Party. The economy was divided by the same split: a state controlled market co-existed with a black market. Actually, the spectrum of choices was even wider. The phenomenon of the Cinema of Moral Unrest proved that despite the existence of censorship, some institutions, like film studios, developed their own policy, openly opposed to the doctrines of the Communist Party.

Jameson stresses one aspect of schizophrenia as especially present in the Postmodern world. It is the disappearance of a sense of the past and present. Tadeusz Konwicki recognized the same process within totalitarianism and described it in a satirical way in his novel *A Minor Apocalypse*. The events of the story, originally published in 1979 by the underground, before the Solidarity movement surfaced, take place during one day. The messiaid claims that this one day is July 22, the date of the most important communist holiday in Poland. The weather indicates that it must be the fall, probably November, but nobody knows for certain, because the calendar was manipulated so many times. The hero of the book is a writer, evidently Konwicki himself, who tries to determine the real date. He is seized by the secret police and at the police station he meets a party official, who has gone mad, done a strip-tease during a Party Congress, and been arrested. The writer takes an opportunity to ask him what truth is. This is their dialogue:

⁸ W. Gropius, „Die Soziologischen Grundlagen der Minimalwohnung”, „Die Justiz”, 1929. Vol. 5, n. 8. Quoted in: L. Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture*. Vol. 2: *The Modern Movement*. Cambridge 1977, p. 522.

⁹L. Benevolo, op. cit., p. 539.

"Only the know. The security forces. They probably don't know, either. Only the minister himself, or just the ruling council. They have an imported calendar hanging in a safe as big as a room. Every day like a ritual, the minister goes in that safe and tears off one sheet, which is then incinerated. No one knows the date, because for years they've been moving it, sometimes ahead, sometimes back. At one moment they're chasing the West, then they pass it, then they're chasing it again, and they're behind again. Every branch of industry, every institution, every state farm had its own calendar and had to struggle with it. Five months ahead, than twelve back. 1974 turns into 1972, then 1977 becomes 1979. Everything got all screwed up. We're still going around the sun, but it's a horrible mess."

"Maybe we could find out the right date from the West? I haven't listened to Radio Free Europe for quite a while."

"That's a possibility," Kobialka said, laughing, and then began to choke horribly. "The West took up the challenge. They started running away when we started chasing them, and then they slowed down when we ceased up. They're exhausted, too. They're straddling the fence, too."¹⁰

A truly postmodern vision!

¹⁰T. Konwicki, *A Minor Apocalypse*, transl. from Polish R. Lourie, New York 1983, p. 123, 124.