
Surrealism, Socialist Realism, Dialogue?

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Abstract: The text offers a critical and comprehensive review of Dorota Jarecka's book *Surrealism, realizm, marksizm. Sztuka i lewica komunistyczna w Polsce w latach 1944–1948* [Surrealism, Realism, Marxism: Art and the Communist Left in Poland between 1944 and 1948]. The reviewer appreciates the main methodological premise of the book, namely that the tensions and conflicts generated within the triangle "avant-garde – realism – emancipatory role of art" cannot be reduced to a binary opposition between totalitarian ideology and the legitimate art world. In fact, it reflects the contradictory dynamics of politically engaged art in general and the context of post-war Poland in particular. Despite the book's formidable factual support, the result of extensive and comprehensive query, the reviewer still regrets that the author remains primarily an art historian rather than social historian of art. This note of regret however does not diminish this noble contribution to understanding the logics of Polish visual arts in the aftermath of World War II. This area is much less known generally than the literature of this very period.

Keywords: Socialist Realism; avant-garde; Marxism; contemporary art; Communism; emancipation; post-war Poland; Dorota Jarecka

In her book *Surrealism, realizm, marksizm. Sztuka i lewica komunistyczna w Polsce w latach 1944–1948* [Surrealism, Realism, Marxism: Art and the Communist Left between 1944 and 1948] Dorota Jarecka narrates the story of a certain dispute that played out in the field of Polish visual arts in the first years after World War II (Jarecka, 2021). To put it more precisely, she tells a local fragment of the history of a dispute that was constitutive for contemporary art. At the same time, she proposes a significant modification of the arena of this conflict:

I move away from the binarism of avant-garde and modernism, as well as from the polarization of Socialist Realism versus avant-garde, or avant-garde versus colourism. I instead propose the triad of Surrealism, Realism and Marxism. Surrealism is a touchstone for attitudes and approaches, Realism is a relational concept accompanying Surrealism, Marxism is an ideological framework in which the described antagonisms and conflicts take place. (Jarecka, 2021, p. 22)

This modification is only seemingly a narrowing of scope, as the opposition between avant-garde and modernism is considered from a third, non-aesthetic point of view: the perspective of the revolutionary Left. The original antagonism is to be interpreted precisely in relation to the calls for changing the social world. However, it is just this perspective that reveals not so much the illusory nature of this historical opposition as the impossibility of its ultimate establishment. The triad which thus emerges is not a Hegelian triad – "Marxism" is unable to reconcile the two orders. It does, however,

show their mutual mediation, albeit a Derridean mediation, in which the opposition constantly takes the form of *différance*, a play of mirrors and displacements. However clear it is that there is no such thing as Marxist art, Marxism poses a number of aporias for art. How can one be faithful to reality when that reality is a product of human practice permeated with contradictions? Is not all realism the realism of the existing? Is the rejection of reality an act of revolutionary resistance or of vain aestheticism? What does it mean to do aesthetic justice to the cursed people of the earth? Who is the working class as an audience? Is the famous phrase from the *Communist Manifesto* proclaiming that “all that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned” a suitable motto for an art program? Is the 11th thesis on Feuerbach, which asserts that “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” applicable to artists as well? And if so, how (to be fair, it must be admitted that Marxist philosophers themselves were far from unanimous on this issue)?

The author shows that these problems did not arise at the intersection of art and totalitarian power, nor did they concern only the tribulations of artists associated in various ways with the communist movement in the West. Their genesis dates back to the very beginnings of modernism and its problems with Realism – the dilemmas of Coubert or Manet (whom, unfortunately, the author does not cite in this context). In any event, this gesture of universalization of the artistic situation in post-war Poland takes place not only diachronically, but also synchronically. For authors such as Mieczysław Porębski, Stanisław Kott or Tadeusz Kantor, the direct points of reference are Breton, Aragon, Sartre and Camus, but also the dark ideologue of the French Communist Party, Roger Garaudy. This is not to say that Jarecka interprets Polish disputes from a French perspective: this is what their protagonists do by way of transfer, translation and appropriation. Extensively reconstructing the French wars around Surrealism, the author makes the correct assumption that without them the Polish disputes would become obscure, not because they are immature, but because the French ones are a constant point of reference for them. In addition to the French reference point, a Russian one is also present, but this one is rather diachronic. It is not, however, the official Soviet interpretation of the role of art in Socialism as formulated by Andrei Zhdanov in 1946, but rather the disputes and dilemmas of the early revolutionary period: the Russian avant-garde, the Proletkult, Lunacharsky's and Bogdanov's dispute with Lenin.

Yes, there were times when the avant-garde received clumsy blows in the poetics of a Soviet textbook, where “the practice of Surrealism is a manifestation of the decadence of Western art and the aesthetics of modern bourgeois individualism,” but Włodzimierz Zakrzewski's “Surrealist tricks, shocking to the ordinary peasant” did not appear until 1949 (Jarecka, 2021, p. 80). However, on closer inspection, the categories in which the artistic left formulated its arguments, vitalism, irrationalism, hermeticism and even the opposition of realism and idealism, usually turn out to be ambiguous, contextual or even reversible. Porębski's critique of the avant-garde is a balanced one, calling

for self-reflective transformation, not an accusatory denunciation. Meanwhile, the political situation of the avant-garde was not enviable. In France, from the 1940s onwards, Surrealism was associated with Trotskyism, not entirely justifiably, the mother of all heresies according to the Soviet version. But the situation of Polish avant-gardists is even more tenuous as many of them were affiliated with the Communist Party of Poland before the war and participated in the anti-fascist movement during the years of the united front. After the war, on the one hand, people from the Communist Party of Poland constituted the power elite; on the other, their mother party was still officially considered a renegade (bloodily dissolved by Stalin in 1937, “rehabilitated” decades later by Khrushchev).

One can venture to say that even artists sincerely committed to communism maintained a significant distance from Soviet authority. Their polemics with the art doctrine of Marxism-Leninism are balanced, but sometimes acutely malicious.

Porębski and Kantor consciously used the word “Nazism”, reminding us of the presence of “concentration art galleries and of degenerate art in Nazi Germany”. It was a clear indication that although the art of the avant-garde may seem unnatural, different from everyday experience, and even scandalous to the average viewer, there can be no greater mistake than locating it on the side of fascism. (Jarecka, 2021, p. 196)

In other words: whoever accuses the avant-garde of being decadent, demoralized or demoralizing is repeating a fascist gesture, and it is no secret who makes such accusations.

The caesura of 1948 is connected precisely with the Polish version of Zhdanov’s approach, i.e. the extreme top-down (albeit, as it will turn out, short-lived) restriction of artistic autonomy. At the same time, there is more at stake than periodization. Jarecka rejects the totalitarian scheme of description, in which the only significant opposition runs between “pure art” protected by the cloak of the artist’s conscience and his genius, and the sinister power of the state ruthlessly striving to organize art for ideological and propaganda purposes (such a picture was presented, for example, by Andrzej Wajda in *Powidoki* [Afterimage]).

In the study of art, I abandon the binary divisions in the synchronic plan, power – artists, artists against communists or, what often follows from this division as a supposition: supporters of artistic freedom against supporters of authoritarian control. (Jarecka, 2021, p. 20)

In other words, the dispute between Surrealism with its rejection of mimesis and undermining of the authorial agency of the creator and Realism (including in its Socialist Realist form) operating with pathos and didacticism should be understood neither as ostensible (after all, every literate consumer of culture realizes that it is Surrealism that embodies legitimate art and Socialist Realism – kitschy pseudo-art), nor as imposed on the field of art by external forces (which does not mean, of course, that the state authorities did not commit brutal interference). This thesis resonates most strongly in

the book. The point is not so much to rehabilitate Socialist Realism, but to certify the authenticity and importance of the dispute between Surrealism and Realism as a legitimate part of art history (for this is the discipline to which this otherwise strongly multidisciplinary treatise adheres most closely). And like any legitimate dispute in cultural history, it turns out to be a conflict of variable geometry, full of masks and reversals of alliances, in which the poles approach each other like horseshoes placed at the extremities. But the force that sets this arrangement in motion is precisely leftism, the conviction common to Realism and Surrealism that the true meaning of art lies outside art, that it itself faces an external tribunal. The dispute revolves around the form of this tribunal. There is no doubt that the way art exists in society is not only through criticism, but also, of course, through constant self-criticism.

It is true that in the end, in the second part of the work, clearly distinguished from the first by its explicit art criticism, the author singles out three artists who qualify as Surrealists. However, Zbigniew Dłubak's *postcolonial Surrealism*, Bogusz's *Surrealist anti-fascism* and Erna Rosenstein's *traumatic Surrealism* remain in their own way indebted to Realism, subversive of Surrealist orthodoxy, concerned about truth and justice. This triad is, of course, composed by Jarecka as a kind of system of signifiers constitutive of the post-war Left: colonialism, fascism, the Holocaust. The author goes even further: the biographies of artists are also signifiers: Bogusz and Dłubak had been camp prisoners, Rosenstein was a Holocaust survivor. What distinguishes these Surrealisms from the French original is their solemnity and darkness, they are Surrealisms of dissonance more than of absurdity, they lack vitality and levity, instead they are sustained by the imperative not only to engage, but also to do justice. Is this a trace of the struggle with Realism or simply the stigma of reality?

From the perspective of the history of ideas, Bogusz's painting *Mr Brown Salutes Fighting Palestine*, exhibited in December 1948, is extremely interesting. The work is a tribute to those fighting for the liberation of Palestine. However, this well-known phrase refers to a completely different historical reality, as the fight for liberation from British colonial rule was waged by Haganah fighters. The establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine is treated not as colonialism, but precisely as anti-colonialism. Is there an endorsement of Zionism behind this? If so, then not in the contemporary meaning of this word. The imperative of solidarity with the Jewish people is undoubtedly present on the artistic Left. At the same time, there was still an internationalist belief that between two oppressed peoples, community and cooperation was not merely possible, but rather a matter of course. British imperialism was the true enemy. It must be admitted that this faith was naive not only because the British-Israeli-Arab war was already underway in Mandatory Palestine, but also because of the gruesome wartime experience of central Europe, undermining faith in the solidarity of the oppressed.

In any case, as Jarecka rightly points out, the ideological and biographical formula for the "Surrealists" of the 1940s, just as for their Realist adversaries, was anti-fascism.

However, the problem is not only that the formula of anti-fascism is no longer handy for the authorities, or even that anti-fascism itself had been already unceremoniously instrumentalized by Stalin before the war (from the social-fascists of the SPD to the Popular Front and back again), but the question of what anti-fascist art should actually be in a fundamental sense. And it must be admitted that this question remains relevant to this day, or rather that it acquires new relevance today.

Reviewers have a habit that authors dislike intensely, one that is extremely common at that, namely pointing out what has not, but could have been, put in a book. I will not shun this habit either. Although the author provides a laborious reconstruction of disputes expressed in now-dead languages and is steeped in contemporary aesthetic theory from Bakhtin to Derrida and Latour, I believe there are theoretical addresses that would have been particularly handy for illuminating the aporias, dilemmas and dynamics of post-war art, which the author completely omits. These addresses are, incidentally, very distant from each other. On the one hand, it's Theodor Adorno with his famous 1951 declaration that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbarism combined with a new categorical imperative: to think and act in such a way that Auschwitz will not be repeated, that nothing similar will happen again". This imperative also goes hand in hand with the assertion that "it is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives" (Adorno, 2004, p. 365). However, Adorno's, as well as Porębski's, materialistic motive needs precisely the avant-garde and its language. Of course, this is not to say that Adorno is to provide the philosophical solution to the aesthetic dilemmas of Polish artists. The key point is to what extent Adorno's aesthetic theory without synthesis resonates with these dilemmas.

The second absent point of reference is Pierre Bourdieu. And it is not about applying the theory of the artistic field constituted by the struggles within that field from *The Rules of Art* (Bourdieu, 1992). Such a task would be both formidable and more than likely doomed to fail. It is more about the sociology of the audience from *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1979), which links issues of artistic taste, social division of labour and class in an unparalleled way. From this perspective, Socialist Realism's main weapon in the dispute with the avant-garde would be its non-distinctiveness, unambiguousness, directness bringing it closer not only to propaganda, but also to commercial cultural production. But the most important question is one that Bourdieu poses stronger than anyone else: is emancipatory art socially possible at all?

In this context, it is worth recalling the case of the last of the currents of French Surrealism, the Situationist International (1957–1972). Revolutionary artists, grouped around Guy Debord, called for the abolition of the autonomy of art in relation to politics, and internally banned the creation of artistic works of all kinds. Their artistic potential was to be used for direct interventions in the social world, the production of revolutionary situations, active and concrete subversion. They believed that fulfilled art is abolished art. The Situationists were the creators of most of the graffiti and slogans

of Paris in May 1968 (Viénet, 1968). However, in the end, drawing the “ultimate consequences” from Surrealism’s programme did not protect them from artistic fate in bourgeois society. In 2009, France’s right-wing culture minister listed the Guy Debord archives as a “national treasure”, protecting it from being fragmented or taken out of the country. It didn’t matter that in 1978 Debord wrote: “I have merited the universal hatred of the society of my time, and I would have been offended to have any other merits in the eyes of such a society” (Behar, 2003, p. 118).

Translated from Polish by Maja Jaros

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Surrealism, socrealism, dialog?

Abstrakt: Tekst stanowi krytyczną i wyczerpującą recenzję książki Doroty Jareckiej *Surrealism, realism, marksizm. Sztuka i lewica komunistyczna w Polsce w latach 1944–1948*. Recenzent docenia główne założenie metodologiczne pracy, a mianowicie to, że napięcia i konflikty powstałe w ramach triady „awangarda – realizm – emancypacyjna rola sztuki” nie mogą być sprowadzone do binarnej opozycji między ideologią totalitarną a prawomocnym światem sztuki. W rzeczywistości odzwierciedla ono sprzeczną dynamikę sztuki zaangażowanej politycznie w ogóle, w szczególności w kontekście powojennej Polski. Pomimo imponującego zaplecza merytorycznego książki, będącego wynikiem obszernej i wyczerpującej kwerendy, recenzent żałuje, że autorka pozostała przede wszystkim historykiem sztuki, a nie stała się społecznym historykiem sztuki. Żal ten nie umniejsza jednak uznania dla jej cennego wkładu w zrozumienie logiki polskich sztuk wizualnych po drugiej wojnie światowej. Obszar ten jest ogólnie znacznie słabiej znany niż literatura z tego samego okresu.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: socrealizm; awangarda; marksizm; sztuka współczesna; komunizm; emancypacja; Polska powojenna; Dorota Jarecka



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