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Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:
Transformations of Polish Visual Culture
source:
Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 11 (2015)
URL:
https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2015/11-capitalist-realism.-transformations-of-polish-visual-culture/transformations-of-polish-visual-culture
doi:
https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2015.11.978
publisher:
Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture
affiliation:
SWPS University
University of Warsaw

keywords:

abstract:

Introduction to the eleventh issue of "View".

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Transformations of Polish Visual Culture



Jarosław Kozłowski, *European Standards, Polish Version*, 1999, courtesy of Galeria AT in Poznań

A Sony TV set is wrapped in a golden quilt. We are watching a looped image on it: a skilled hand is polishing black man's moccasin shoe, while the shoe rests on a golden cushion. A white sock is sticking out of the shoe and above the sock there is a black trouser leg from a suit. The white of the sock is a little blinding, as is the shine reflecting off the black of the shoe - which incidentally clearly does not need any more polishing. Despite this, the hand continues in its efforts, struggling to attain the (perhaps unattainable) goal which has guided the entire transformation process for Poland: to reach "European Standards". Is this at all possible, especially considering the kinds of embarrassing detail which dominate our impression of this image? White socks in the middle of an installation can only be taken as a symbol of lack of style, aesthetic excess and fashion philistinism: sure we are being presented with "European standards," but definitely in a "Polish version".

Jarosław Kozłowski's work entitled *European Standards in a Polish Version* (1999) is made up – besides the image described above – of twelve small tapestries hung on the wall. They include stitched slogans expressing a variety of ideological attitudes: from "Poland for the Poles" and "God, Honour, Fatherland" through "Market Economy" to "Democracy" and "Social Justice". The amateur form of the small tapestry, associated with folk culture, does not suit the expression of slogans and concepts which are more at home in printed books textbooks, or perhaps – in times of struggle for their implementation – on banners. The installation was created at the end of the first decade of Polish transformation and can be read as a commentary on the

incommensurability of Polish and European versions of the desired standards. This clash is expressed with surprising juxtapositions: white socks and black "elegant" shoes and evening suit, noble ideals stitched into folk art tapestries. From the point of view represented by "View," the most interesting point seems to be that Polish values and Polish versions of European standards move through the public sphere in the form of images. In Kozłowski's artistic commentary, the formal properties of images strengthen the recognition of the nature of Polish transformation. The looped video image, its grainy quality and poor overall quality (made worse by the low quality of the gallery installation recording) – this is less a sign of stunted social development in Poland, as much as an indication of a trap in the very desire to "catch up with Europe." Standards - defined by the technologically and economically advanced countries of Western Europe with the norms which present themselves as obvious and "natural" - remain unattainable for peripheral countries.

In the eleventh issue of "View," we present a series of close-ups of the culture of Polish transformation, perceived as a domain where change has been registered, but also where the performative development of a new, free-market reality has taken place. In the 80's and 90's, images, visual phenomena and practices become agents of change – they create a space for the working out of new forms of subjectivity, aesthetic ideals and aspirational directions and the site for negotiations between the old order and the new.

In the opening section **Viewpoint**, Magda Szcześniak and Mateusz Halawa test the concept of "capitalist realism" in the context of Poland's systemic transformation. They ask about its potential similarity to another famous Polish realism – the socialist realism of the turn of the 40's and 50's of the 20th century. Analysing the distribution, genres and aesthetic values of Polish Cap-realism, the authors point to complex relations between forms of representation and the new economic system.

This system, according to the ideologues of the transformation of Poland (and other countries), has no alternative. In the second analytical and visual presentation, Justyna Jaworska and Agata Zborowska take a look at the shifting aesthetic ideals of the 80's and 90's, picking out essential differences between "western" and Polish approaches to fashion: "The consumer society was playing with style, which was why opulence and glitter were not taken very seriously. The society on the threshold of transformation overdid it with forms that had already been somewhat overdone – and out of this double exaggeration came kitsch."

The authors of the section **Close-up** also discuss how the same images can function in both "advanced" societies and in those only at the stage of introducing capitalism. Krzysztof Świrek describes the shift in readings of American action films, during the era of transformation in Poland. These films were often critical of the cultural practice of capitalism (for example corporate culture or privatisation in a broad sense). The author analyses VHS – its technological properties, the features of its images, the means of distribution and circulation of films – as a metaimage and meta-technology of the "interim stage of Polish capitalism." One of the features of Polish capitalism (and Polish capitalist-realism) is the difficulty in identifying when it all started. The first video-hire stores and distribution companies appeared in Poland before 1989, i.e. before the watershed year in official historiography, . The story is similar with another medium of free-market ideology – the first computer or video games, as described by Mirosław Filiciak. In his article *The Capitalist Game*, the clear connection between the economic and political turning point and the IT revolution is challenged. His story of a bottom-up culture of games is filled out with the vision of a supportive (socialist) state encouraging the development of this new branch of industry and culture. On the other hand, Monika Borys considers the "low-art" aesthetics of "disco polo"

videos and relates the content of these free-market fantasies to romantic visions of being Polish. Disco polo's "bayerowanie" [*bayer* is Polish slang for 'fronting', or showing off with 'bling' or gadgets] in Borys' text and tactic for negotiating various orders and value-systems, as well as introducing into our field of vision something that had been marginalised (the provincial). Magda Szcześniak also takes look at aesthetic shifts, this time in a "top-down" case of dominant ideology, in her article *Poor images of the middle class*. She analyses the role of images in the development of the transformational middle class. New images become a means to communicate the developing "ethos" of the new class and a means of building aesthetic codes which allow those who aspire to the middle class to recognise each other. During transformation, aesthetic cracks of political and social significance begin to appear. These cracks divide the new class into the modern, pursuing western models and the non-modern, unfashionable nouveau riche, those unable to control their need to show off their wealth.

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Texts devoted to the changes in Polish visual culture of the 80's and 90's are complemented in this issue by two essays discussing the relationships of representative forms and the dominant ideological models. In his article *Authentic Resentment*, taken from his book *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* and here translated into Polish,Fredric Jameson analyses George Gissing's novels as strengthening the narrative of insurmountable class barriers and the impossibility of social advance. Jameson's text, read in the context of Polish capitalist realism, provides us with ever relevant tools for the critique of dominating forms of narration about class structure. On the other hand, in the title essay from her book *Cruel Optimism,* Lauren Berlant suggest the concept contained in her title on the basis of a description of complex affective practices undertaken by subjects who have been excluded and persecuted

under late capitalism – practices aiming to sustain the illusion of a good life, a mirage somewhere on the horizon.

In the remaining articles in the section **Panorama**, Aleksander Kmak suggests a reading of Sean Baker's film *Tangerine* (2015) by comparing this queer film to the already classic works of the French new wave. Agata Pietrasik analyses drawings depicting a dilapidated Warsaw just after WWII - drawing our attention particularly to the difference between ruins and rubble and the mutual relationships between these two concepts.

In **Perspectives** we propose a double meeting with the visual culture researcher Nicholas Mirzoeff: a conversation he had with Magda Szcześniak as well as a fragment of his latest book - just released in Polish - *How to See the World*, a book devoted to ways of presenting climate change. In this section, we also present a chapter of the book prepared by the film critic Jakub Socha, recounting the fate and creativity of Edward Żebrowski, who died in 2014.

In the section **Snapshots** we to some extent return to questions about the relationship of images and transformation of the economic system and class structure. Jakub Majmurek analyses the exhibition "Bread and Roses. Artists' reactions to class divisions" and asks about the possible tactics artists have for presenting class difference; Agata Pyzik review Claire Bishop's book *Artificial Hells. Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship* takes a look at how participatory art is intertwined with the mechanisms of the neoliberal system. Two remaining snapshots have been devoted to recently published books: Monika Talarczyk-Gubała writes about translating *Conversations about Godard* by Kai Silverman and Harun Farocki, and Krzysztof Wolański analyses *Nie-całość [Not-all]* by Kuba Mikurda.

The Editorial Team