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CONTEMPORARY ARTIST AND THE NOTION OF CENTER AND PERIPHERY

Abstract: Taking into account the division into centers and peripheries was an important component of modern artistic consciousness. Given the development of global culture in the second half of the twentieth century, one might think that this division has become outdated. Such a view, however, is overly simplistic. First of all, there are many models of globalization (imperial, network, reception, institutional). Each of them takes into account the tension between the center and the periphery and the desire to change their mutual relations. In my article, I will briefly characterize individual models of globalization, and then move on to discuss the work of Mirosław Bałka and Zbigniew Libera. These artists make the complexity of the contemporary relationship between the central (associated with the pursuit of generality) and the local the subject of their creative reflection. Bałka transforms the provincial into a component of the global culture, while Libera focuses on the implicit meanings of the products of the global culture. The discussed examples show that the boundaries between the center and the periphery in contemporary art have become complicated. The most important thing is not to keep up with what is happening in the center, but to observe how artists creatively and individually combine global with local elements.

Keyword: center – periphery – globalization – contemporary artist – Mirosław Bałka – Zbigniew Libera.

Taking into account the distribution of centers and peripheries has been an important component of modern artistic consciousness. In the case of modern artists, it drove them to obtain an education or to become involved in the activity prevailing in the art of the given period. Patrons, in turn, wanted the commissioned works to resemble those in the artistic centers. This led to the employment of the artists mainly deriving from leading art centers. As for the viewers, knowing the criteria applicable in artistic centers lets them think of

themselves as art connoisseurs having a good aesthetic taste. This generated a struggle for the primacy in art. Various places competed with each other for the role of the artistic center.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the situation became somewhat more complicated, but essentially it remained unchanged. Discussing the history of the classical avant-garde, Mieczysław Porębski drew attention to the formation of the three canons of its comprehension. The first, which he described as “French-Parisian”, was based on the concept that the retreat from Impressionism was a decisive step towards the shaping of modern art¹. It was to emerge mainly in France, and especially in the capital. The second canon, “German-expressionist”, emphasized the role of expressionist-constructivist art, in which “the Germans or the Russians almost equal the French”². The third model, referred to as “international”, seemingly did not entail any division into the center and the periphery, releasing modern art from being bound to a specific geographical location³. Avant-garde art could be practiced in different countries, as it was not the dwelling place of the artist that mattered but his conscious participation in the issues central to the development of the art of the moment. What was important for an avant-garde artist was not a particular point in space he occupied, but the state of mind (relevant information, inventiveness enabling him to recognize new opportunities, etc.), which determined his position at the forefront of creative exploration. Porębski pointed out that according to this model, avant-garde artists, “each in his own way and on his own, rationalized and interpreted the sequence of creative discoveries, experiences and events, overlapping between Paris and Amsterdam, Milan and Zurich, Munich, Berlin and Cologne, St. Petersburg and Moscow, Krakow, Warsaw and Łódź.”⁴

I believe, however, that all the three cases mentioned by Porębski entail a desire to centralize art. In the first two, centralization is localized geographically. There is only one problem: which country – France or Germany – is the artistic center of Europe or the world? In the third case Porębski mentioned, the division into the center and the periphery is not so obvious. On the one hand, it seems that modern art is created in a multitude of geographical locations. On the other hand, centralization has to do with ideas. Anyone who does not join the central idea of modernity is a peripheral artist, regardless of where he lives. Provincialism and peripherality in this case is a state of mind unable to keep up with the course of avant-garde art, and not the result of

¹ M. Porębski, *Czy istnieje historia sztuki XX wieku?*, in: *Sztuka XX wieku. Materiały z Sesji SHS, Słupsk 1969*, ed. M. Gantzowa, PWN, Warszawa 1971, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

geographical location⁵. The concept of international avant-garde, however, did not eliminate the disputes about the geographical location of the center of modern art. This is evidenced by the initiatives undertaken in the 1940s and 1950s, not only by artists and art critics, and also politicians, to make New York the capital of the avant-garde⁶.

Such concept of the avant-garde shows that the division into center and periphery can be made in various ways. Today, it is most clearly manifested in the debate on globalization. Typically, the concept of globalization entails the belief that it is important to search for the factors combining various geographical locations. From this point of view, some authors believe that the concept of the international avant-garde was a harbinger of globalization. It anticipated the later state of affairs in economy, business and politics⁷.

The theoretical approaches to globalization include the theory of cultural imperialism, the network model, the theory of reception, and the institutional model⁸. Each of them takes into account the tension between center and periphery and the desire to change their mutual relationship. The oldest and simplest theory of global culture is the thesis of cultural imperialism. It is based on the universally understood division into a geographically located center of power which imposes its culture, and the periphery which remains under its influence. This division leads to the homogenization of culture and art across the world. As pointed out by Diana Crane, the imperialist model presupposes injustice, an advantage of the center over the periphery, and although it is still quite widely accepted⁹, it has provoked the emergence of antiglobalization movements.

⁵ A very good example is the art by Władysław Strzemiński, who, although in 1922-1931 he lived in Koluszki and his physical disadvantage prevented him from travelling freely, believed that he was involved in the most important events, that he was in the center of the debate of modern art, since he was knowledgeable about ideas put forward at the time, and contributed his own notions to the new concepts.

⁶ S. Guilbaut, *Jak Nowy Jork ukradł ideę sztuki nowoczesnej. Ekspresjonizm abstrakcyjny, wolność i zimna wojna* [How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War], transl. E. Mikina, Hotel Sztuki, Warszawa 1992.

⁷ However, as Grzegorz Sztabiński noted, "modern concepts differentiate it [globalization – P.S.] from internationalization [typical of the interwar avant-garde – P.S.] not just because of the level and intensity of penetrating boundaries. The dispersion involves in this case a comprehensive, mutual penetration of world, national, local and individual aspects of social life. This leads to the compression of time and space, which causes that cultural phenomena are devoid of locations, distances and boundaries. They are deprived of territory". Cf. G. Sztabiński, *Inne idee awangardy. Wspólnota, wolność, autorytet*, Neriton, Warszawa 2011, p. 102.

⁸ Cf. D. Crane, *Culture and Globalization. The Theoretical Models and Emerging Trends*, in: *Global Culture. Media Arts, Policy and Globalization*, eds. D. Crane, N. Kawashima, K. Kawasaki, Routledge, New York 2002, p. 2, Cf. also G. Dziamski, *Sztuka w kulturze globalnej*, „Format” 2003, no. 43, pp. 3-5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Since the early 1990s, it is the network model that is becoming increasingly popular. The theory of cultural flows likens global culture to a network without any distinct center and periphery, or in fact a system with multiple centers. These flows are not unidirectional, and therefore the effect of globalization is not the homogenization of culture, but its hybridization. Selected elements of local and national cultures combine with cultural trends stemming from other sources¹⁰. The theory of network flows is coherent with the pluralization of the world, exploring cultural differences and using the possibilities inherent in them for the establishment of a fully global culture. A very important role is played by the concept of globalization, or adapting global trends to local conditions¹¹.

The third approach to globalization mentioned by Crane is the reception model. It emphasizes the active involvement of the recipients in the process of cultural transmission¹². However, as noted by Stuart Hall, “a message can be read in accordance with the code of the sender, but also in breach of it, it can be read in the oppositional or negotiated code.”¹³

The fourth approach quoted by Crane is the institutional model. The proponents of this theory believe that globalization is not a freely emerging process, nor a result of technological development. New modes of communication play an important role in the development of global culture, but equally important is the political situation. Dziamski wrote that “in the case of culture, this policy boils down to three recommendations: demonopolization, deregulation, privatization, abolition of borders for global trade.”¹⁴

The different concepts of globalization find an interesting reflection in the work of contemporary artists. Some of them view the relationship between center and periphery as primarily a matter of hybridization or creolization, consequently blurring the line dividing the familiar and the foreign, the owned and the borrowed, the near and the far. Others, however, emphasize the complexity of the contemporary relationship between the central (which entails the pursuit of generality), and the local.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ More on the subject: R. Robertson, *Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity*, in: *Global Modernities*, ed. M. Featherstone, S. Lasch, R. Robertson, Sage, London 1995, pp. 25-44. Cf. also G. Dziamski, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹² D. Crane, *Culture and Globalization...*, p. 4.

¹³ S. Hall, *Encoding/Decoding*, an edited extract from *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, in: *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, P. Willis, Hutchinson, London 1980. Cited after: G. Dziamski, *Sztuka w kulturze...*, p. 4. Cf. also S. Hall, *Encoding, Decoding* (1973), in: *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. S. During, Routledge, London–New York 1993, pp. 90-103.

¹⁴ G. Dziamski, *Sztuka w kulturze...*, p. 5.

It is interesting to observe the unique ways in which contemporary artists overcome the old understanding of the division into center and periphery. This issue may not be the explicit theme of their works, but it is one of the discourses that can be read off them. In this paper, I will focus on two Polish artists: Mirosław Bałka and Zbigniew Libera. I will attempt to show the discourses present in their art regarding the relationship between center and periphery. Each of them strives to go beyond the particularistic perspective to work in the trans-local dimension, but each does so by adopting a different model of globalization.

MIROSŁAW BAŁKA – TRANSFORMING THE PROVINCIAL INTO A COMPONENT OF WORLD CULTURE

Analyzing the work of Mirosław Bałka, one can see that the artist often oscillates between personal elements, relating to his private life and the memories of his childhood and youth, and references to the general and universal. Also, the relationship between his place of origin (Otwock – a typical Polish provincial town) and the great centers of art which now exhibit his work is a prominent theme of his art. In his works Bałka attempts to turn the provincial into the global, showing that certain experiences are universal. Such an approach can be attributed to both the network model of globalization and Crane's reception model.

In his early, figurative art, Bałka focused on the themes that on the one hand related to his childhood and youthful experiences, while on the other hand, due to the issues they addressed, were more general in character. A good example of such work is his *Souvenir of the First Holy Communion* [*Pamiątka Pierwszej Komunii Świętej*]. This work, relating to a specific event in the artist's life, was located in an old abandoned house in Żuków, reminiscent of his family home. Its appeal is, however, broader and more general. Young Bałka's religious maturity, signified by his taking the first Holy Communion, was associated with the exam confirming his later artistic maturity – his diploma at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. Speaking about the work, the artist has sometimes emphasized the religious context of the reference to the Holy Communion, while in other interviews he has focused on its link with his graduation from the art school. The artist shares his experiences in those domains with every Catholic (the first Holy Communion) and every student (diploma examination), regardless of their place of residence and origin. Depending on the country, the outfits and the script of those rituals may be somewhat different, but their general idea and purpose are the same every-

where. The local is linked with the global. This work, however, differs from traditional art in that the artist takes into account the process of its reception, which can be consistent with the code of the sender or depart from it. Bałka said, "The concept of this sculpture was created in a very intuitive way. It was an attempt to provide a plane of dialogue between me and the Church, between me and my childhood, my parents, punishment, and reward. First of all, I thought about taking a look at the experience of an eight year old boy forced into that oppressive formality, imposed by the dress and the order of ceremony. This work is a commentary on a very profound experience, based on a photograph – the souvenir."¹⁵

In his later works, the artist abandoned representation for minimalism¹⁶. A very interesting work of this type was the exhibition *Around 21°15'00"E 52°06'17"N + GO-GO (1985-2001)*, held at the Warsaw's Zachęta Gallery in 2001 and arranged in two parts. The title of the first one, *Around 21°15'00"E 52°06'17"N*, are the coordinates of Bałka's family home in Otwock. The second part of the exhibition was titled "GO-GO (1985-2001)" and, as Ewa Gorzadek wrote, "it was the artist's perverse take on the convention of a retrospective"¹⁷. In the work *Around 21°15'00"E 52°06'17"N*, the interior of the gallery was arranged to resemble a 1:1 scale layout of the artist's home in Otwock, where he was born, and where he had his studio. The main entrance door to the exhibition rooms were reduced to the dimensions of the door frames of his house, with metal tubes marking the location of three bedroom windows. Next to the walls, the artist placed thirty five terrazzo panels sized 70 x 70 x 8 cm, in a chronological order. Each panels was a headstone commemorating the artist's exhibitions. Each one had an inscription painted black and containing information about the title of the exhibition it commemorated and the date of its opening and closure. A number of connotations can be attributed to terrazzo in the artist's oeuvre. In the work + *GO-GO*, on the one hand it can be associated with the family home of the artist and the profession of his grandfather – a professional mason. On the other hand, it is evocative of traditional tombstones, commemorating the people beneath. In Bałka's work,

¹⁵ M. Bałka, *Każdy chłopiec boi się inaczej. Rozmowa Mirosława Bałki z Bożeną Czubak*, „Magazyn Sztuki” 1998, no. 19, http://magazyn-sztuki.art.pl/archiwum/nr_19/archiwum_nr19_tekst_1.htm (16.07.2014).

¹⁶ Given the limited time I do not address the analysis of these works, nor Bałka's most famous project *Mydlany korytarz* [Soap Corridor], which fits the network and reception model of globalization. I wrote more on this work in the context of the idea of performativization in the paper: *Performatywny charakter twórczości Mirosława Bałki* [Performative character of Mirosław Bałka's work] (presented during the Polish National Conference of Esthetics, *Estetyka performatywności*, Kraków 2012).

¹⁷ E. Gorzadek, *Mirosław Bałka*, http://www.culture.pl/baza-sztuki-pelna-tresc/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/miroslaw-balka (16.07.2014).

however, they do not carry information about persons, but about past exhibitions. The inscriptions on the panels were cut by the artist's father, who had made most of the inscriptions on the gravestones in the local Otwock cemetery. This gesture, as pointed out by Magdalena Kardasz, can be read as a symbolic combination of family creative activity, reenacting a fragment of private and public history¹⁸. Also important for the artist was the order of the exhibitions titles – their sequence¹⁹.

In the catalog accompanying the exhibition *Around 21°15'00"E 52°06'17"N + GO-GO (1985-2001)*, Magdalena Kardasz pointed out that the title of this work defines the "two intersecting areas of [Bałka's] thematic interests. The first one is a reflection on the place precisely defined by longitude and latitude (his childhood home, which now houses his studio) which was where his sensibility formed and where he now works. The objects created at this location can be seen at the exhibition. The second theme is being and passing away, remembering and forgetting. The tombstones of the exhibitions measure time."²⁰ This generalized sense provides an opening to the universal content concerning both the province and the center. Bałka's oeuvre shows that globalization is not a threat to locality; on the contrary, the local or even the provincial may function on a global scale. It creates a chance for the local to be disclosed to the world. Furthermore, Bałka's works show that the globalization of art is not the same as its Americanization. It turns out that what is typically Polish can become part of the art world.

ZBIGNIEW LIBERA – IMPLICIT MEANINGS OF PRODUCTS OF GLOBAL CULTURE

Zbigniew Libera approaches the problem of globalization in a different way. Like Bałka, the artist does not reject global culture, nor is he trying to create a counterweight, knowing that this strategy is ineffective²¹. His actions are coherent with the network model of globalization, but he implements it differently than Bałka. Libera is not trying to combine the local and the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ M. Bałka, *Ciało: Wędrowiec i jego Cień. Interview of Adam Szymczyk with Mirosław Bałka*, "MATERIAŁ – gazeta o sztuce współczesnej" 1998, no. 1, no pagination.

²⁰ M. Kardasz, *Around 21°15'00"E 52°06'17"N + GO-GO (1985-2001)*, in: *Around 21°15'00"E 52°06'17"N + GO-GO (1985-2001)*, exhibition catalog, Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Zachęta, Warszawa 2001, p. 77.

²¹ These strategies illustrated with different examples have been discussed briefly by G. Dziamski w przytaczanym już tekście *Sztuka w kulturze...* p. 5.

personal with the global. He introduces into his work elements of a global nature, residing in the mass awareness in different countries. He uses what is regarded as manifestations of the contemporary to formulate his own communications, treating them as complete sets of symbols, ideas and patterns. In his works, Libera exploits the components of international popular culture: Lego, Barbie dolls, etc., together with the meanings they entail: creative fun, cult of the beautiful, slim body, etc. However, he employs them to convey serious or tragic messages – about the Holocaust, or the concealed enslavement of an individual. Libera's projects are hybrids of sorts, they lack the division into the familiar and the foreign, the owned and the borrowed, the near and the far.

Libera is interested in toys, in their implicit educational role, the opportunity to shape the child through their use²². The “toys” proposed by the artist are designed primarily for adults, for those who produce them and introduce them into the world. As he has said, “Toys are not ‘really’ things. They are, however, not just gadgets; because of their ability to function in relation to real objects, their very function changes. Through toys, you can observe the mechanisms of our ideas about ourselves, about our world.”²³ The artist is particularly interested in the toys associated with the mechanisms of “disciplining the body”²⁴ and focusing on the roles imposed on the sexes (cf. for example the film *Jak tresuje się dziewczynki* [How to train little girls, 1987], *Ciotka Kena* [Ken's aunt, 1994], *Body Master dla dzieci do lat dziesięciu* [Body Master for children up to ten years old, 1995], *Możesz ogolić dzidziusia* [You can shave the baby, 1996]). Also important are the extreme “systems of control”, as in the case of *Lego. Obóz koncentracyjny* [Lego. The concentration camp, 1997].

In the works mentioned above Libera manipulates popular toys, arriving at their absurd, perverted versions. In a series of ten dolls entitled *You Can Shave the Baby*, the baby dolls have hairy armpits, genitals and legs, which is typical for adults. As noted by Izabela Kowalczyk, this work “refers to the cultural complex of a hairy body, which is the opposite of the desired appearance of a woman. The hair on a woman's body is usually treated as something savage, untamed, and unwanted, because the female body should

²² Cf. E. Jedlińska, *Polska sztuka współczesna w amerykańskiej krytyce artystycznej w latach 1984-2001*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2005, p. 465.

²³ Z. Libera, *Rozmowa ze Zbigniewem Liberą* (rozmawia Adam Szymczyk), „Magazyn Sztuki” 1995, no. 6/7, p. 41.

²⁴ More on the subject: I. Kowalczyk in the book *Ciało i władza. Polska sztuka krytyczna lat 90*. Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2002 (especially the chapter *Zbigniew Libera: techniki dyscyplinowania ciała*, pp. 185-217).

be perfectly smooth.”²⁵ The title, which is also the name of the toy printed on the packaging – *You Can Shave the Baby* – suggests a certain type of action, instruction for the “game”. In this way, Libera joins the global discourse on the contemporary care of the body, bordering on the absurd. In his work *Ken’s Aunt*, Libera uses a Barbie doll, which he deliberately makes fatter, distorting the familiar and universally accepted image of an ideal body.

Libera’s most famous work is *Lego. The Concentration Camp*. It consists of Lego sets produced in a very limited edition and packaged in boxes designed by the artist. The work bears the well-known logo of the Danish company. This project sparked much controversy, mainly due to its too literal reading. Explaining his intentions, Libera said that “this work was inspired by the very rationality which is the basis of the Lego system, and which seemed frightening: you cannot use these elements to build anything that the precise, rational system does not allow.”²⁶ Thus the work perversely alluded to the main principles of concentration camps, based on rationalism and order²⁷. Analyzing *Lego. The Concentration Camp*, Eleonora Jedlińska wrote that Libera’s work “is not about camps, but about images and the abuse of these images. The artist reveals in a drastic way that mass culture manipulates crime, turning it into a product. Juxtaposing the toy with the camp, the artist intentionally provoked shock – the same shock that is used in the rhetoric of contemporary consumerist ideology.”²⁸

The sample works discussed above show that in contemporary art the distinction between the center and the periphery has become more complicated. It does not matter in which country the artist lives, as the network model and the reception model of globalization involve the intermingling of different cultures. Unlike in the case of the international avant-garde, however, there is no attempt to create a single leading mainstream of contemporary art. Instead, the idea is to perform a smooth integration with the global, while maintaining one’s own identity (as in the case of Bałka) or to subversively disclose the hidden meanings of the globally familiar objects (as Libera does). Keeping up with what is happening in the center is not essential. What does matter, as Dziamski wrote, “are not so much the texts of

²⁵ I. Kowalczyk, *Ciało i władza...*, p. 198.

²⁶ Z. Libera, *Rozmowa ze Zbigniewem Liberą...*, p. 42.

²⁷ More on the rationality behind concentration camps, see Zygmunt Bauman in the book *Nowoczesność i Zagłada* [Modernity and the Holocaust], Fundacja Kulturalna Masada, Warszawa 1992.

²⁸ E. Jedlińska, *Polska sztuka współczesna...*, p. 468.

global culture, but what we do with them, how we use them, what meanings we give to them, how much we infuse them with our localism.”²⁹

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²⁹ G. Dziamski, *Sztuka w kulturze...*, p. 5.

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WSPÓŁCZESNY ARTYSTA A ZAGADNIENIE CENTRUM I PERYFERII (streszczenie)

Uwzględnianie podziału na centra i peryferie stanowiło istotny składnik nowożytnej i nowoczesnej świadomości artystycznej. Biorąc pod uwagę rozwijającą się w drugiej połowie XX wieku kulturę globalną, można by sądzić, że podział ten dezaktualizuje się. Pogląd taki jest jednak nadmiernie uproszczony. Przede wszystkim istnieje wiele modeli globalizacji (imperialny, sieciowy, recepcji, instytucjonalny). W każdym z nich brane jest pod uwagę napięcie między centrum i peryferiami oraz dążenie do zmiany relacji między nimi. W artykule krótko charakteryzuję poszczególne modele globalizacji, a następnie przechodzę do omówienia twórczości Mirosława Bałki i Zbigniewa Libery. Artyści ci czynią przedmiotem twórczej refleksji złożoność współczesnych relacji między lokalnym i centralnym (związanym z dążeniem do ogólności). Bałka dokonuje przekształcania tego, co prowincjonalne w składnik kultury światowej, natomiast Libera koncentruje się na niejawnym znaczeniach wytworów kultury globalnej. Omówione przykłady pokazują, że granice między centrum a peryferiami w sztuce współczesnej komplikują się. Najistotniejsze bowiem nie jest nadążanie za tym, co dzieje się w centrum, a to, na ile twórczo i indywidualnie artysta łączy elementy globalne z tym, co lokalne.

Słowa kluczowe: centrum – peryferie – globalizacja – współczesny artysta – Mirosław Bałka – Zbigniew Libera.