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THE ARTIST AS A CONTEMPORARY CONTESTANT IN LITERARY ESSAYS OF LECH MAJEWSKI

Lech Majewski, a Polish humanist and total artist of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, makes a critical diagnosis of the present in three volumes of his essays: *Oficjalne centrum świata* (*Official Center of the World*, 2016, first ed. 1998), *Pejzaż intymny* (*Intimate Landscape*, 2017) and *Ukryty język symboli* (*The Hidden Language of Symbols*, 2020). In his deliberations on the contemporary human condition, the artist starts from a critique of contemporary art, and more precisely the art of the 20th century. He has the right to do so as one of its representatives. This Polish artist is a painter, sculptor, novelist, poet, film and theatre director. Contrary to contemporary art, which breaks with the tradition of the old centuries, proclaiming the end of transcendence, the art created by Majewski is a form of communing with a higher power, because Majewski is a classicist artist (Majewski, 2022). Contemporary art, on the other hand,

devoid of this metaphysical mystery [...]; too often it tries to shock, scandalise and beat on the head with his fist clenched on the form, and does not allow to penetrate into the picture, to live in it. [...] does not give in to contemplation (Majewski, 2017, p. 17),

the values that are ascribed to it today cannot be compared with the values of the painting of the old Masters.

The human figure has been ousted from the aforementioned art. It was replaced by *the attack of colours and abstract forms on the canvas – broken forms, disintegrated by artists with axes, who hacked the existing canons of beauty* (Majewski, 2017, pp. 136–137). Majewski refers here to Picasso and the Cubists, Stravinsky and Joyce, Moore, Giacometti and de Kooning, and wonders what made the man of the 20th century *turned into ashes and pulp, substances anticipating the atrocities of the 20th century* (Majewski, 2017, pp. 136–137). Was it due to the forgetfulness of figurative art? Was the fact that man *evaporated from art* preceded by the fact that *deformed bodies later evaporated from the front lines and from the concentration camps during both world wars* (Majewski, 2017, p. 137)? The artist poses an extremely important question about the genesis of Auschwitz:

Are painters destroying the human form complicit in the process of annihilation? Were they merely prophets, or did they authorize their activities? Have they stood at the cultural root of the fact that the body has disintegrated in such a simple and easy way, changing to all kinds of soaps and mattress hair? (Majewski, 2017, pp. 137–138).

The question posed by Majewski is as follows – is contemporary art to blame for this, or has it only sensed or intuited such a state of affairs? To what extent was it a premonition of this? Or does it merely reflect the existing situation?

Majewski alludes to the cruelty of world wars and longs for categories that are now forgotten: beauty, truth and faith:

[20th century] bombed with a carpet raid everything that artists and craftsmen worked with Benedictine patience in previous centuries, that is, to bring us closer to the beauty identified with the concepts of truth and faith. And these canons of destruction still triumph. The state of grace in art has been abolished. The existence of Arcadia¹ was denied. Transcendence was swept away. The artist depends on the bestiality of the modern world. The past was also cruel, but it was not as horrendous as in the 20th century (Majewski, 2017, pp. 136–137)².

¹ Those followers of Arcadia were the early artists who tried to *find the principle of harmony, arcadia, beauty* (Majewski, 2017, p. 121; see also Majewski, 2020, pp. 8–9).

² Majewski contests elsewhere: *Our times have lost the notion of beauty; why did the twentieth century irrevocably massacre what motivated artists over the next centuries, i.e. their attempts to get closer to God, Beauty and Truth?* (Majewski, 2017, p. 78), and

The author of *Intimate Landscape* laments the destruction of form in art, which happened thanks to the founders of modern art movements. That is not the problem, however, as the precursors of contemporary art were geniuses. The problem is that their inept followers are responsible for *the widespread academism of ugliness*. Beauty has become a dangerous word that should not be talked about. It used to be the goal of more than art. And the goal of wisdom was to reduce ugliness. Contemporary art has turned this rule upside down. From now on, everything can be art, and any destruction of form today becomes an alibi for the ineptitude of contemporary art creators. Contemporary art has ceased to mean anything – says Majewski. It is dominated by the *poetics of the garbage can*. It illustrates the void, so only a few pages can be written about it, as opposed to the works of past epochs, which the treatises were devoted to. Contact with it impoverishes, as it deprives of spirituality, while contact with ancient art enriches. It is *mainly a financial game that creates names that are later turned into a commodity* (Majewski, 2017, pp. 121, 138–141).

What is the human condition today, in a world dominated by such art? The present day destroys its greatness. The present day eliminates it. This is due to the removal of three dimensions of our humanity – mythical, symbolic and eschatological from art and also from life. This is due to the breakdown visible in contemporary art and its inability to create a comprehensive vision of the world (Majewski, 2017, pp. 77–78): *It has broken down into millions of parts and has become so trivial that it is difficult to grasp its essence, find a formula that would describe the whole* (Majewski, 2017, p. 163). Majewski summarizes the post era accurately:

Today we have created a fear of a big metaphor, a big topic. Are we terribly afraid of it, or are we unable to find it? Any tone that is serious is inadvisable. In the masters of the past, with whom I speak, I respect their seriousness. While nowadays, we live in times of irony, giggles, in times incapable of synthesizing (Majewski, 2017, pp. 166–167, 154–155; cf. Majewski, 2020, p. 82; regarding the irony of the post era, see: Rorty, 2009, passim).

However, we are the only species on Earth *animal symbolicum* and as such we will not escape from the symbol. It humanizes us – Majewski repeats after Casirer. We communicate with the world through the language of symbols, and vice versa – the world, as a symbol, communicates with us. Existence without

in *The Hidden Language of Symbols*, he even lists, following historian E. Hobsbawm, their number: 187 million victims (Majewski, 2020, p. 19).

symbols causes modern man to run away from himself, exist at a distance from himself, lose himself, drift *between nothingness and emptiness*. It is the archetype that allows us to survive. For this reason, according to Majewski, we should learn the language of a symbol from childhood, because *the inability to read symbols makes us slaves to false ideas and emotions* and also because *a large part of our psyche, ego or self-sense is related to the archaic reception of reality* (Majewski, 2017, pp. 75, 79–81; Majewski, 2020, pp. 10, 7–8).

The theme of the escape appears in Baudrillard, to whom Majewski refers many times. Baudrillard mentions it in reference to a postmodern world in which individuals flee the *desert of reality* into the ecstasy of hyper-reality and a new realm of computer, media, and technological experiences. *In this universe, subjectivities are fragmented and lost* (Kellner, 2019, accessed on 23 VI 2022). Majewski recalled this flight, this escape after Baudrillard many times, writing that the formula for escaping from oneself – be it drugs, boosters, action movies or television – is a guarantee of success in the modern Western society, ideally embodied by the United States of America. *Escape, lull, non-existence* where does it come from? Out of self-aversion or self-fear? We do not receive a specific answer to these questions asked by Majewski. What are we escaping from in America? From poverty, from hunger, from being humiliated – as the inscription on the Statue of Liberty says? Not. Here Majewski is sure – first of all, there is an escape from oneself, but also from values, from seeing and from logic (Majewski, 2016, p. 16; Majewski, 2017, pp. 75, 180; Majewski, 2020, p. 168).

This is because of the reality in which we live. Or rather – referring to Baudrillard – hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1998, pp. 41, 127, 138, 176, 179, 184; Baudrillard, 2001, p. 69; especially Baudrillard, 2005, pp. 6–7, 12, 19, 62–63, 103, 149, 152–153, 189), because now, in the post-era, reality no longer exists. We live in a virtual reality, more real than what is real, in a hyper-reality in which a dematerialized being is freed from the body (Majewski, 2020, p. 83; cf. Kellner, 2019, *passim*). We are no longer a pre-modern society organized around symbolic exchange, nor a modern society organized around production. We are a postmodern society organized around *simulation* – a cultural mode of representation that *simulates* reality such as television, computer cyberspace and virtual reality (Kellner, 2019, *passim*).

Virtual reality will materialize all our desires, hyperrealise all possibilities:

Unconditional fulfilment, without afterlife, without the impossible, without transcendence, without escaping. The end of the alienated man: an individual fulfilled, of course virtually fulfilled. It is the virtual dimension that monopolizes the world today, totalizes reality [...]. Just at the moment when it ceased to coexist with the imagination and plunged into the virtual, reality really died. The individual has become identical with himself. [...] The end of a separate subject, this prophecy has come true (Baudrillard, 2001, pp. 68–69).

The omnipresence of virtuality also affects the art of the new reality, contemporary art extrapolates from still painting to the ground of moving images – cinema, television and the Internet. For this reason, Majewski carefully examines these media in his essays. Here, too, similarly to static contemporary art, the diagnosis of contemporaneity is pejorative – film is no longer an art – it becomes *the art of counting money* (Majewski, 2020, p. 168), it is no longer the poetry of the image, as it was in the 1950s and in the 1960s. It tells stories forgotten right after leaving the cinema, and its sophisticated language has now been replaced by the poetics of television series. The highest-grossing contemporary American cinema is produced for teenagers who want a sense of waking sleep (see Majewski 2017, pp. 20, 74; Majewski 2020, p. 70). Film today is a culture of temporary creations – it must die in a year, similarly in literature – a book dies in a month, music lives even shorter – a song dies in a week (see Majewski 2020, p. 171).

The danger posed by television and the Internet lies in the dissemination of *kitchen art*, the lower art that is fed to the masses, and is reproduced in millions of copies (Majewski, 2017, pp. 74–75). Moreover, man is separated from the world because today *we are dealing with the world behind the glass. Whether it will be the glass of a computer, TV, car or a display window, we constantly interact with the object of dreams through glass* (Majewski, 2017, p. 69). We become absent. *This kind of wakefulness is very widespread – we stare at screens, no matter what; computers, televisions, games* (Majewski, 2017, p. 181). This universal isolation of man from the world and man from man causes us to register ourselves, thus confirming our own existence:

We record everything we do and eat, and we post almost everything to social networking sites. What for? Because we disappear more and more in the untouchable, virtual world behind the glass of a TV, computer or car, and by multiplying images of ourselves and our lives, we try to prove to ourselves and to the world that we do exist (Majewski, 2017, p. 105).

Television has become a contemporary drug for the whole society: *The alcohol of television overwhelms, does not soothe, puts me to sleep, it puts me back for an indefinite future* (Majewski, 2016, p. 37). Today man

puts aside: work, food, sleep. He puts away memory and imaginations. He puts himself down. Billions of people live at the same time in a fluid rainbow of television, the illusion of tangibility, putting aside sleep, memory and imaginations. Putting aside oneself (Majewski, 2016, p. 37).

Thanks to the moving images of television and the Internet, the *explosion of stimuli* leads to the *implosion³ of meaning and feeling* (Majewski, 2017, p. 144), the *explosion of means of communication* leads to the *implosion of meaning* – the content disappears. Contemporary communication is communication devoid of meaning – an abundance of different communication options in the face of content disappearance. Nowadays, we talk without saying anything – says Majewski, regretting – If only we wanted to have a conversation on a deeper level through art, which should be the communicator of the soul (Majewski, 2017, p. 182).

This implosion is immanent – and Majewski refers again to Baudrillard – in the postmodern Western society, in the simulation society, the masses will implode into a silent majority, but also the spheres of economy, politics, culture, sexuality and society implode into each other:

In this implosive mix, the economy is essentially shaped by culture, politics and other spheres, while art, once a realm of potential differences and opposition, is swallowed up by economics and politics, while sexuality is everywhere. In this situation, differences between individuals and groups implode in the rapidly changing breakdown of social and previous boundaries and structures upon which social theory once focused [...], specific face-to-face social relationships disappear as individuals disappear into simulation worlds – media, computers, only virtual reality (Kellner, 2019).

Implosion, in the sense that it is the liquidation of opposing poles, had extremely negative effects: *Evil and Good changed places, and then merged into*

³ Implosion is the collapse of the power of discrimination (Kellner, 2019; Baudrillard, 1998, p. 180): *Industrial (modern) culture was characterized by explosiveness: the dissemination of goods, science and technology, services with a simultaneous sharp limitation of social spheres, classes and discourses. Postmodernity, on the other hand, is characterized by „implosiveness“.* For more on *implosiveness* see: Baudrillard, 2005, pp. 45, 69, 91–94, 104–107.

an inextricably chaotic substance, neither good-nor-bad (Majewski, 2020, p. 18)⁴. Similarly, Baudrillard says: *Today our curse is the inability to distinguish between good and bad, truth and falsehood. [...] We fell into an amoral panic of not distinguishing, mixing up all criteria* (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 100).

Is there a way out of this situation and salvation for the man of the present day? Majewski condemns our forgetfulness of the language of art leading to the implosion of moral categories and postulates its *anamnesis*. Platonic *anamnesis*⁵, a reminder, is a way to discover beauty and vice versa – longing for beauty, which in ancient times was *communing with the transcendence and synonymous with truth*, the desire to rediscover it enables anamnesis, a return to the state of Arcadia, Paradise Lost. Beauty is the highest good, meaning truth (Majewski, 2017, pp. 78, 121). *Anamnesis* is also possible thanks to the fact that we become familiar with the symbolism of the Greco-Roman antiquity and the Bible, which are the foundations of European culture. Without knowledge of this symbolism, the contemporary understanding of the works of art of the past centuries, as well as the world and the present day, is one-dimensional, and the cultural space in which we function paradoxically remains hidden from us, and even ceases to exist for us.

Majewski's diagnosis makes us disillusioned – contemporary art is *the art of annihilation, destroying forms and traditions* (Majewski, 2017, p. 141). In my opinion, however, contrary to Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 67), he hopes to return to the realm of meaning through the art of past centuries, Greco-Roman and biblical symbolism, and modern science. After the postmodern era, this return will enable the reconstruction of the lost identity, or the building of a new identity – the identity that Baudrillard longs for – and regaining forgotten harmony. In this way, the hiatus will be abolished, the gap between the sense of past epochs and its lack in the present, between the identity of the past and the scattered identity of the present.

⁴ Regarding the implications of the implosion on the sphere of morality, see also: Baudrillard, 2001, pp. 9, 11.

⁵ The concept of *anamnesis* appears in several works of Plato. According to this Greek philosopher, in a past life, we were in harmonious places, arcades, the images of which remained in our minds – see more: Plato 1, no year; Plato 2, no year; Plato 3, no year.

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STRESZCZENIE

Przedmiotem wystąpienia jest krytyczna diagnoza współczesności wypowiedziana językiem Lecha Majewskiego – współczesnego humanisty, artysty totalnego XX i XXI wieku – w trzech tomach jego esejów: *Oficjalne centrum świata* (1998), *Pejzaż intymny* (2017) i *Ukryty język symboli* (2020). Artysta piętnuje nasze zapomnienie języka sztuki i postuluje jego anamnezę jako artysta zadomowiony w świecie symboliki antyku grecko-rzymskiego i *Biblii*, podwalin kultury europejskiej. Bez znajomości wspomnianej symboliki współczesne zrozumienie dzieł sztuki minionych wieków, a także współczesności jest jednowymiarowe, a przestrzeń kultury, w której funkcjonujemy, paradoksalnie pozostaje przed nami ukryta, przestaje dla nas istnieć. Jak twierdzi Majewski: *Eksplozja bodźców prowadzi do implozji znaczenia i odczuwania, eksplozja środków komunikacji prowadzi do zaniku treści*. Ponieważ człowiek to *animal symbolicum*, egzystencja bez symboli powoduje, że współczesny człowiek ucieka od siebie samego, istnieje w oddaleniu od siebie samego – *współczesność nas niweluje*. Diagnoza Majewskiego pozbawia nas złudzeń – współczesna sztuka to sztuka anihilacji. Fakt, iż w XX wieku człowiek wyparował ze sztuki, Majewski wiąże z ogromem wojen ubiegłego wieku i pyta, czy to sztuka naśladuje naturę, czy natura sztukę.

Słowa kluczowe: świat współczesny, sztuka współczesna, anamneza, ukryte znaczenie, symbol