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Allen J. Kuharski

Swarthmore College, akuhars1@swarthmore.edu

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Polish Literature, Postmodernism, and the End of the Millennium

The II International Gombrowicz Festival in Radom

by Allen Kuharski



Allen Kuharski is Assistant Professor and Resident Director in the Theatre Studies Program at Swarthmore College. His articles have appeared in leading theatre journals in the United States, England, and Poland.

Since its founding in 1993, the biannual International Gombrowicz Festival has proven one of the bellwethers of post-Soviet Polish culture. The Festival is the curious child of the entrepreneurship required in the new market economy and elements of the pre-1989 cultural scene found both in Poland itself and in émigré circles. The competition for ever-shrinking arts subsidies in Warsaw has resulted in the establishment of the Festival in the more provincial setting of Radom, where the regional government and a roster of local corporations have emerged as patrons of the event. The brain child of Wojciech Kępczyński, artistic director of Radom's Teatr Powszechny, the Festival makes full use of the company's large and well-equipped facilities — as well as of the resources of several other cultural institutions in and around the city.

In spite of its setting and modest financial means, the Festival has proven a cosmopolitan affair in both 1993 and 1995. Theater companies from France, Hungary, Slovakia, Italy, Croatia, Sweden, and Poland itself have participated, and a concerted effort has been made to reach out to the countries of the former Soviet Union and the English-speaking world. The Festival's programming includes film screenings, art exhibits, concerts, staged readings, and extensive symposia featuring academics, theater artists, translators and others involved with Gombrowicz's work. The focus of the 1995 Festival (June 7-11, 1995) was on Gombrowicz in relationship to his contemporaries Witkacy and Bruno Schulz.

The theatrical high points of the festivals to date have included the German-French actor Jörg Schnass in a one-man version of the short story "Attorney Krajkowski's Dancer," a young Hungarian company's lively production of *Operetta*, and Jacques Rosner's workshop staging of *The Marriage* — alongside two landmark Polish productions of *The Marriage* (one directed by Tadeusz Minc and the other by Jerzy Jarocki) and two excellent productions by the host company in Radom (which consisted of adaptations of the short story "Premeditated Murder" and Gombrowicz's last novel *Cosmos*). The 1995 Festival also featured a stunning performance piece (*Grzebanie*, or *Exhumation*) conceived and directed by Jerzy Jarocki, inspired by the life and writings of Witkacy and performed by the advanced acting students of the Cracow State Drama School. French film actress Emmanuele Riva and Polish-French actor Andrzej Seweryn (who has performed with Peter Brook's company in Paris and with La Comédie Française) have each provided

the Festival with evenings of dramatic readings from Gombrowicz's *Diary*.

The symposia to date have included speakers from Poland, France, Italy, Germany, Sweden, the United States, and Argentina. The symposia have drawn the most important names in Gombrowicz criticism and scholarship in Poland, including Jan Błoński, Jerzy Jarzębski, Aleksander Fiut, Włodzimierz Bolecki, Michał Głowiński, Piotr Kłoczowski, and Joanna Siedlecka. Rita Gombrowicz, the playwright's widow and literary executor, has been the guest of honor at both the 1993 and 1995 festivals, and has been joined by others in Gombrowicz's personal circles in both Argentina and France, including Zofia Chądzyńska, Jadwiga Kukulczyńska ("Koukou Chanska"), and Alejandro Rússovitch. American speakers and guests of the Festival to date have included translator and poet Lillian Vallee, director and theater historian Kazimierz Braun, and the young director Gail Lerner (who recently staged the New York City premiere of *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* at Columbia University).

Selected proceedings of the Radom symposia since 1993 have been published in Polish journals such as *Dialog* and *Teatr*. Appearing here for the first time in English translation are three papers from the 1995 symposium by Włodzimierz Bolecki, Aleksander Fiut, and myself. The articles are linked by their interest in the relationship of the writings of Gombrowicz, Witkiewicz, and Schulz to postmodern philosophy and aesthetics — and come to quite different conclusions. As Bolecki points out in his piece, the relationship of the three writers to postmodernism has inspired a critical debate already at least a decade old. This debate is clearly not over, and indeed it emerged as the dominant theme of the 1995 symposium in Radom as a whole — including, but by no means limited to, the three papers here. That Gombrowicz, Witkiewicz, and Schulz have reached their highest level of international recognition as the twentieth century comes to a close itself suggests an affinity between their works and the contemporary *zeitgeist* — an argument that both Bolecki and Fiut nevertheless reject. My own piece, on the other hand, could be subtitled "Gombrowicz, Witkiewicz, and Schulz Our Contemporaries."

The relationship of postmodernism to modernism is inevitably complex and paradoxical. Postmodernism at once acknowledges the philosophical givens of modernism and questions and redefines them. As with modernism

itself, postmodernism has manifested itself in various movements and schools of thought, and has passed through various stages of evolution — and may possibly have already ended, succeeded by an as yet unnamed new cultural and philosophical sensibility.

The key givens of modernism are located in the rise of essentially agnostic and materialistic philosophies in the nineteenth century developed both in reaction against romanticism and in response to new scientific discoveries and the spread of industrial development in Europe and North America. The key intellectual givens of modernism are to be found in the theories of Darwin, Marx, Comte, Nietzsche, and Freud — each of whom took agnosticism as a given and went on to define complex yet deeply unified and organic theoretical systems. Materialist feminism also arrived as part of this movement in the nineteenth century. In the arts, one wave of modernist culture was generated around realism and naturalism — the inevitable aesthetics of a materialist sensibility. The realistic novels of Balzac and Flaubert and the psychological theater of Stanislavsky and Chekhov are perhaps the clearest examples of this movement. A later wave included “high modernists” such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Martha Graham, or Picasso — each of whom created bodies of work defined by a deep organic unity to their artistic explorations — along with ideologically-defined artists such as Maxim Gorky, Bertolt Brecht, or the French existentialists.

One of the unresolved debates of modernist thought was the definition and significance of the individual subject, with some schools of thought embracing essentially deterministic models for identity formation (Darwin, Marx, Freud) and others an almost messianic definition of the self-created individual subject (Nietzsche, the existentialists). Postmodernism, as Bolecki points out, radically decenters the idea of the individual subject, and questions even the existence of a unified subject. Thus, one of key givens of modernism (organic unity of identity as well as of aesthetic form, content, and process) is shattered. Fragmentation and complication of individual identity categories thus becomes the norm rather than a problem to be overcome. Both Freudian case studies and linear narratives enacted by psychologically unified and motivated characters as a result begin to appear inadequate and schematic.

On the ideological and political plane, the end of modernist political theory and praxis is perhaps best symbolized by the collapse of the Soviet Union — though the real bankruptcy probably occurred with the revelations and failed reforms following the Stalinist period. The dissolution of the Soviet Union thus marks the end of modernism just as two hundred years earlier the failure of the French revolution marked the end of the Enlightenment. The Soviet Union and its satellites were great laboratory experiments for materialist political theory, the modernist principle of “organicity” implicitly justifying their totalitarian (or “total-

izing”) praxis. Tony Kushner’s recent play *Angels in America* aptly frames its study of global malaise at the end of the millennium with the system collapse of the Soviet Union and the symmetrical moral bankruptcy of American corporate capitalism under Ronald Reagan — and ties these to issues of the politics of gay identity and AIDS, crises in established religion, and environmental degradation.

The bankruptcy of ideology in late twentieth-century politics was starkly revealed through the geo-politics surrounding the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland: the army of a so-called workers’ state commanded to turn its weapons on the workers’ own efforts to organize collectively; the spectacle of Ronald Reagan blessing the Solidarity movement with one hand while systematically undermining American organized labor with the other; Margaret Thatcher, the scourge of Britain’s Labour Party, being invoked by the Polish communists in the late 1980s as a political role model for economic policy and state-labor relations, only to have Thatcher in turn snub the Party on an official visit to Poland in order to have an unscheduled meeting with Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa. Could Sławomir Mrożek have imagined a more absurd and farcical scenario? At worst, the only ideology embraced in the postmodern era is that of Macchiavellian *realpolitik*; at best, the postmodern sensibility is deeply skeptical of totalizing ideological paradigms, and indeed at times is openly anti-ideological in spirit. Postmodern artists and intellectuals such as Kushner embrace ideological complexity, heterodoxy, and even paradox as the norm of our historical moment.

As in theological debates, postmodern heterodoxy often assumes the form of modernist heresy. Like any prodigal child, postmodernism at times challenges the very givens of

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BRUNO SCHULZ

the modernism that gave it birth. In the realm of spirituality, the postmodern movement displays a schizophrenia analogous to the problematic role of the individual subject in modernism. Whereas modernism consistently celebrated the liberation from religious tradition and mystical thinking, the postmodern sensibility is markedly divided in its relationship to spirituality.

Significantly, this duality is linked to issues of science and technology. On the one hand, the consciousness of postmodernism is inseparable from the rise of mass media and, more recently, computer technology and cyberculture. Postmodern cultural critics and theorists such as the materialist feminist Sue-Ellen Case are currently working to define this phenomenon. The result of this trend is technologically mediated and deeply "inorganic" cultural production — manifested in popular culture by the likes of MTV. Linear narrative here vanishes alongside the unified subject and the expectations of organic form and integrity of materials.

On the other hand, however, a vanguard within postmodernism has consistently insisted on re-opening spiritual and artistic questions considered irrelevant — and even reactionary — by the adherents of modernism. This facet of postmodernism is essentially neo-romantic in spirit, responding to the confusion in secular thinking at the end of the twentieth century much as Goethe, Mickiewicz, or Emerson did after the end of the eighteenth. Like the romantics before them, these postmodern artists and thinkers do not take religious belief as a point of departure, but

rather begin with secular skepticism and its discontents. Theirs is a seeking for faith and possible religious meaning — and the fervor of their questioning is reflected in the often radical heterodoxy of their investigations and conclusions. In the theater, this sensibility clearly emerged in the work of artists such as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Joseph Chaikin, in part as a reaction against the absurdism of Beckett — or rather as a rejection of the givens that led to Beckett's worldview. In a different way for a younger generation, Kushner has continued this line of questioning. This openness to religious questions (if not to religious dogma) is combined with a skepticism regarding material culture and technology and is marked at times by a heightened ecological consciousness. As with the nineteenth-century romantics, this facet of postmodern philosophy and aesthetics has also led to an embrace of pre-modern and non-Western religious and artistic traditions.

Finally, the dissolution of the modernist subject goes hand in hand with the dissolution of the belief in a unified cultural field or tradition. The givens for the postmodern subject include a composite or aggregate identity, defined as the matrix of various lines of identity (language, religion, gender, sexuality, race, class, etc.). Thus, multi- and interculturalism are points of both departure and final destination in postmodern thought and experience. In contemporary British culture, such a position is perhaps best illustrated by playwright, novelist and film-maker Hanif Kureishi, whose heroes are typically the bicultural and bisexual children of dispossessed Moslem Pakistanis living in

England during or after Margaret Thatcher's rule. The most obvious counterparts to Kureishi's heroes in Polish literature would be Hela Bertz in Witkacy's *Farewell to Autumn* and the narrators in Gombrowicz's *The Memoir of Stefan Czarniecki*, *Trans-Atlantyk*, and *Diary*.

In contemporary Polish writing, it is perhaps Hanna Krall (especially in her recent collection of stories *Dowody na istnienie*, or *Evidence of Existence*) that most closely parallels the work of Kureishi and Kushner. In Krall, as in Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz before her, the individual subject is always *in process* in the crucible of identity formation and mutation — again negotiating conflicting cultural, sexual, and religious identities. Consciously or not, Krall, Kureishi, and Kushner are all worshippers in the tragic and ecstatic cult of Gombrowicz's interhuman church. Whether Gombrowicz is postmodern or not, there seems little doubt that Polish culture will enter the new millennium largely through the existential portals, naves, and crypts of this church's "virtual" and improvisational architecture.



WITKACY

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