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Neither West nor South: Colour and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism in Urban Poland¹

Abstract: By exploring *the cliché* that socialist cities are ‘grey’, this paper seeks to employ the anthropology of colour for unravelling the peculiarities of the East European urban experience. By analyzing the oeuvre of Władysław Reymont, I show that greyness in Eastern Europe has a distinct lineage. It is not, like in the West, a colour poised between black and white, but the very opposite of red. I show how greyness emerged as the central trope for narrating Polish agrarian capitalism, and how after 1945 it was moved onto the urban turf. Greyness became salient because it captured the very essence of the contradictions of nascent urban Poland: a blend of freedom and oppression, equality and hierarchy, solemnity and joy. I describe these conflicting meanings of greyness and show how colour suddenly became the fulcrum of the struggle to generate an urban experience beyond capitalism and socialism that would be East European and cosmopolitan at the same time.

Key words: colour, communism, greyness, urbanization, capitalism, Eastern Europe, public space, everyday life, cosmopolitanism

Colour seems to be the “key symbol” for narrating urban change in the post-socialist world. Moscow, wrote Karl Schlögel, is the “scene of the transformation of the world’s greyest capital city into a Babylon iridescent with colour; a place where time stands still and yet one of frenetic acceleration”.² In Beijing, according to Thomas Campanella, the “once dull field of concrete blocks” of the Tienanmen Square was “transformed into a dazzling expanse of pink granite trimmed with well-groomed lawn panels – an appropriate metaphor for China’s metamorphosis from monochromatic Maoism to the polychromy of affluence and arrival”.³ Warsaw too, as David Crowley noted, is subject to the “alchemy of the market”, peppered with new “attention-grabbing landmarks” whose “neon brightness and synthetic colour seem to render the socialist city, already fading away, all the more grey and habby”.⁴ In short, as Ivan Szélényi put it, the post-socialist world seems to be becoming “almost as

¹ I began working on this paper back in 2010, and a number of people read and commented on its many versions. I am grateful to them all; in particular I would like to thank Feike de Jong, Daniel Kalder, Jorge Lizardi Pollock, Ewa Rewers and AbdouMaliq Simone for their comments and encouragement. Needless to say, responsibility for all potential shortcomings is entirely mine.

² K. Schlögel, *Moscow*, Reaktion, London 2005, p. 7.

³ T.J. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon*, Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton 2008, p. 128.

⁴ D. Crowley, *Warsaw*, Reaktion, London 2003, p. 100.

colorful as a Third World metropolis”.⁵ But what do these metaphors actually mean? Are post-socialist – and especially East European – cities really ‘going South’?⁶

I wish to unravel this conundrum, and show the reasons why urban change is narrated in terms of colour. My intention is to tackle the specificity of the urban experience in East and Central Europe, and I will try to pin it down by employing the discussion on the geography of colour as developed in anthropological literature, and analyze the different, historically construed and embodied, ways of experiencing the urban landscape. Eastern European cities, I argue, are neither ‘going South’ nor ‘lagging behind’ the West, but rather have been treading their own largely idiosyncratic path to global urbanity. I show that both colour and greyness have a distinct lineage in Eastern Europe. I describe how greyness emerged as the central trope for narrating Polish capitalism, and how after 1945 it was moved onto urban turf. It became salient, because it captured the very contradictions of urbanizing Poland: a unique blend of freedom and oppression, equality and hierarchy, solemnity and joy. I describe these conflicting meanings and show how colour suddenly became the fulcrum of the struggle to generate an urban experience beyond capitalism and socialism – a mode of urban life that would be locally East European and cosmopolitan at the same time. It is *via* colour, I argue, that Polish working classes have been “worlding” their cities⁷ – even today, when they paint Poland’s modernist housing projects in gaudy colours (and in so doing incite condescending critique from high-brow commentators who, not unlike Goethe a few centuries ago, believe that fondness for colour is a mark of cultural and moral backwardness⁸).

Suffering the city

Colour is ubiquitous in narratives of urban life in Poland, past and present. The expression “grey reality” (*szara rzeczywistość*), denoting the grit and grime of everyday life, or “grey person” (*szary człowiek*), i.e. a nobody, a person alienated from both their workplace and/or community, are used extensively.⁹ A group of intellectuals recalled the 1980s thus: “pigsty, grime, greyness, and overwhelming dejection ... dreariness at home, the unremitting slog of daily life. You moved like a steamroller from Monday to Tuesday, from Tuesday to Wednesday”. This involved the ordeal of canvassing the city for consumer goods, standing in long lines, and travelling by overcrowded buses. Everyday greyness was experienced

⁵ I. Szelényi, *Cities under Socialism – and After*, [in:] G. Andrusz, M. Harloe, I. Szelényi (eds.), *Cities after Socialism: Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies*, Blackwell, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 312.

⁶ L. Elliott, D. Atkinson, *Going South: Why Britain Will Have a Third World Economy by 2014*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2012; J. Commaroff, J.L. Commaroff, *Theory from the South: Or How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa*, Paradigm, London 2011.

⁷ A. Roy, A. Ong (eds.), *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, Routledge, London 2011.

⁸ One pundit even coined the term “pastelosis” in order to denounce such practices; cf. F. Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą*, Czarne, Wołowiec 2013.

⁹ For example here: E.C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland*, Duke University Press, Ithaca 2004, p. 141.

as an alien “substance”, an obstacle to meaningful existence: “I expected my life prospects to be the never-ending crawl through thick mud – you muddle on with your life, but you are constantly obstructed by this nasty grey matter, that mud in which the Napoleonic army trudging across Russia sunk”.¹⁰ There is a direct association of greyness and the industrial landscape in most West European languages. Victorian cities were by and large drab and inspid. By 1900, department stores with items produced thanks to synthetically obtained colour, and urban life, centered around collective consumption, and the neon lights gave a new colourful countenance to European cities. By 1900, “brightly colored trolleys cruised city streets from Glasgow to Budapest”. At the same time industrial cities, no longer at the cutting edge of expansion, remained “grey, sad-looking cit[ies] – earth, sky and water blending into a leaden hue”.¹¹ Thus, the standard argument about East European greyness, runs like this: the incapability of the socialist regimes to foster a thriving consumer culture in their presumably ‘Fordist’ cities (recall that the only colour tolerated by Ford was black) may seem to have been the main reason why socialist cities, especially by Westerners, are still perceived as grey. My argument is that the greyness in Poland is not, as in the West, a colour poised between white and black, or, in the urban context, a residual, or diluted, coal-like black – the nineteenth century symbol of progress and modernity – but if anything an equivalent of the colonial blue. Grey is the colour of death and absence, of non-existence and exploitation, and it is the opposite of red – the colour of blood and life. This is why it is ubiquitous in the vernacular narratives of “suffering the city”.¹²

Colour, as Michael Taussig argued, is for the painter what style is for the writer; it is nature transformed into an object. Indigo, one of the key “spices” produced in the colonies, represented the “intense deep blue of the ocean in stormy weather”; it was, in other words, a commodified ocean – “that supreme entity which, of all the things in the world, at least can never be converted into a commodity”. Desire for vivid colours became one of the key “motors that propelled Europe to take over the world”. As an ersatz ocean, indigo is a part of nature, but as a commodity, it is a product of capitalism – one of the most impeccable examples of “manufactured” nature. It was not merely extracted but produced in a long and complicated formula. Hence, indigo both communicated the dazzling sensation of the non-European landscape and contained “a medley of history and horror, science and poetry”. The “diabolic penetrative power of blueness” was enormous: coolies beating indigo would “spit blue for some time after work. An egg placed near a person working an indigo vat would, at the end of a day, be found to be altogether blue inside”. Indigo, that “mother of all color” as Taussig called it, has hence become the colour of work (as in the blue jeans) and authority (as in army and police uniforms), and the horror stories it encapsulates provide the background for the English expression “feeling blue”.¹³

¹⁰ M. Zmarz-Koczanowicz, *Pokolenie '89*, Telewizja Polska 2002.

¹¹ A. Lees, L.H. Lees, *Cities and the Making of Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 138.

¹² J. Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2008, p. 235.

¹³ M.T. Taussig, *What Color Is the Sacred?*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2009, pp. 5–8, 141–157.

Colour as spice

The “secret of color”, according to Taussig, is that it is a stimulant germane to spices, drugs, perfumes and medicines. As with spice, colour is, as Taussig suggested, both ‘authentic’ and ‘deceitful’ – spices could both improve the taste of a dish and serve as a cover-up for foul ingredients, and by the same token gaudy clothes were often regarded as a mask for unpleasant bodily odour. For centuries dyestuffs (called initially dye-drugs) were imported to Europe in exchange for slaves and bullion. With the rise of the wool industry in Flanders, black replaced white as the European colour of mourning. It expressed the Christian notion that the afterlife was not a continuation of the stratified earthly existence but an egalitarian state wherein one was judged by their inner rather than outwardly worth. Black dress became the symbol of austerity, fraternity, European economic independence and a denouncement of ‘Oriental’ conspicuous consumption.¹⁴ In Jacobinian France, for example, feudal distinctions were deemed obsolete and ‘plain clothes’ introduced. It was a rebellion against a society in which people were born into tied and divinely ordained stations. Instead they formed a horizontal community of fraterned and monochromatic citizens.¹⁵ Black thus became radical, democratic and revolutionary, while colour, as evident in the word ‘tainted’, was increasingly perceived with a jaundiced eye as feudal, Oriental and hierarchical.

The heyday of the European colour-phobia came with the Industrial Revolution. Its “dark, colourless, acrid, evil-smelling” landscape was perhaps best captured by Lewis Mumford. In industrial cities “the prevailing color was black. Black clouds of smoke rolled out of the factory chimneys, and the railroad yards, which often cut clean into the town, mangling the very organism, spread soot and cinders everywhere”. In this polluted environment, continued Mumford, “black clothes were only a protective coloration, not a form of mourning; the black stovepipe hat was almost a functional design – an assertive symbol of steam power”. Black was indeed omnipresent: the black boots, the black coach or carriage, the black iron frame of the hearth, the black cooking pots and pans and stove. “Under such conditions”, noted Mumford, “one must have all one’s senses blunted in order to be happy”. As a consequence, affluent urbanites started eating canned foods even when fresh foods were still available, because “they could no longer tell the difference”. This “enfeeblement of elementary taste-discrimination extended to other departments than food: ... the Pre-Raphaelites and the Impressionist painters were reviled by the bourgeoisie because their pure colors were thought ‘unnatural’ and ‘inartistic’”.¹⁶

It was in the context of nascent industrialization and colonial expansion that Goethe noted in his *Farben Lehre*: “men in the state of nature, uncivilized nations and children have a great fondness for colours in their utmost brightness ... People of refinement seem to banish them altogether from their presence”.¹⁷ Once the industrial revolution made colourful

¹⁴ J. Schneider, *Peacocks and Penguins: The Political Economy of European Cloth and Colors*, “American Ethnologist” 1978, no. 5 (3), pp. 413–447.

¹⁵ D. Priestland, *The Red Flag*, Penguin, London 2009, p. 3.

¹⁶ L. Mumford, *The City in History*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York 1961, pp. 470–472.

¹⁷ M.T. Taussig, *op. cit.*, p. 1, 11.

attire relatively cheap and attainable, the elite embraced the monochromatic style in order to demonstrate their contempt for the popular tastes, while the rank and file seized on what used to be an aristocratic cachet. The urbanization of blackness went thus hand in hand with the ruralization of colour. These are the origins of the phase ‘local colour’ – the ‘real thing’ (vide: colour’s authenticity) that most ethnographers have been after since the nineteenth century. Yet, since urbanization was associated also with social mobility, as black broadcloth became the basic material for the street-wear of the urban elite, it too became the ‘Sunday clothes’ of the working classes. Victorian fashion became notorious for its dowdiness. It was, as Richard Sennett demonstrated, “the beginning of a *style* of dressing in which neutrality – that is, not standing out from others – was the immediate statement”.¹⁸

Vampiric capitalism

Yet in Eastern Europe, and especially in Poland, I wish to argue, greyness has its own distinct lineage. In the Polish ‘colour-scape’, industrial cities were narrated neither as black nor grey, but as intensely colourful – not unlike cities in the South today. But the meaning of colour was altogether different. We can speak of “grey cities” only after 1945 – when Poland underwent the momentous makeover from a rural to an urban country. With that transformation, greyness was also urbanized. It was grey, and not some other colour or concept, that became the “key symbol” for narrating that transition, precisely because it could capture its very contradictions: the blend of empowerment and exploitation, equality and hierarchy. On the one hand, vestiges of ‘bourgeois’ urbanism, including colour as the mark of excess and class privilege, were being systematically removed from the landscape, and this new ‘greyness’ of cities was often experienced as something liberating. On the other hand, post-feudal social relations, previously key in the production of the ‘grey’ rural landscape, were grafted onto the urban realm, and public space became increasingly ‘solemn’.¹⁹ This in turn triggered a ‘colour offensive’ from the grassroots, embraced eventually by the authorities too, earmarked to lend a distinct socialist meaning to both colour and greyness, wherein colour was perceived not as bourgeois decorum but as a ‘stimulant’ essential for fostering a non-capitalist urban experience.

To understand this we need to delve into the archeology of colour in the region. “The city”, as Steve Pile noted, “is the vampire’s ideal home” because of its capacity to “suck the life out of people”.²⁰ The work of Stanisław Reymont – the Nobel winning novelist – shows how capitalism’s vampiric quality and colour were closely intertwined in Poland. His major books titled the *Promised Land* (1898), *The Peasants* (1904–1908), and *Vampire* (1911) form a distinct social theory of colours. In the first novel devoted to the making of the city of Łódź – a textile hub – Reymont described colour as a filmy, flowing substance and a move-

¹⁸ R. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Faber and Faber, London 1993, p. 161.

¹⁹ K. Pobłocki, *Urban Solemnity and Warped Public Space in Poland*, [in:] M. Moskalewicz, W. Przybyłski (eds.), *Central European Companion to Political Ideas*, Central European University Press, Budapest 2014.

²⁰ S. Pile, *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life*, Sage, London 2005, p. 97.

ment, the very link between textile mills, exploited workers, and the industrial city. The factory refuse “came pouring down in dirty streamlets, reddish or bluish or yellowish; and the flow of offscourings from the houses and the factories behind them was so abundant that they brimmed over the kennels ... and deluged the foot-paths with a many-coloured flood”. Such waste mixed in open sewers with “mire-befouled and dingy recesses” from shops and houses, producing a “mingled stench of filth and putridity, and the strong odours of herrings, rotting vegetables, or spirits”. At the same time the factory sucked out colour, the élan, from workers: they seemed grey not because they wore black, but because exploitative labour made them sallow. The Sunday crowd in Łódź in fact tried to disguise their greyness by dressing up in gaudy clothes, parading on the city’s main thoroughfare “with dazed, staring eyes, dimmed by the splendor which shone down on them, and in whose blaze that multitude of faces – chalk-white, sallow, leaden-coloured, clay-coloured, wizened, and bereft of blood – [had the] blood sucked out of them by the factory”.²¹

While, unlike in the West, this Polish industrial city was colourful, the urban crowd was grey in both the East and the West – but for very different reasons. While Britain was by then a majority-urban country, Poland’s industrial cities were small islands in an ocean of fundamentally agricultural society. The ontology of Polish capitalism was anchored in rural class relations, and this is why we need to shift our focus to the countryside, the vampires’ true dominion. Reymont’s monumental *The Peasants*, divided into four volumes, each devoted to one season, offers a compelling picture of how capitalist class relations and commodification of the land produced an uncanny grey landscape. Just as in the textile town, here too colour was productive, and was associated with spring and summer. Everything – colour, life, money and movement – was “ebbing out of [the] land”. Autumn, however, was the interim stage, a season dominated by “chthonic voices”, when the true, ghastly and vampiric face of reality came forth to haunt the villagers. The autumn greyness (szarugi jesienne) arrived as if “all things have been drowned in a grey turbid shimmer, through which only the dim outlines of the forest or the hamlet loomed, embroidered, as it were, on a ground of wet canvas”. The rain “like scourges of ashen-gray hue, unceasingly beat upon the earth ... making every blade of grass quiver, as in dire pain”. This downpour took “all [the] colour out of [reality], quenched its tints, and plunged the world into twilight”.²² Greyness, unlike colonial colours, was not associated with sounds or movements,²³ but with stillness: “mute were the fields, dumb the hamlets, silent the woods. The houses dusky and colourless, seemed melting into and making one with the earth”.²⁴ Grey was thus not like in the West an interim stage between white and black, but rather it was anti-colour, the very absence of life, sound and movement, the anti-matter of Polish agrarian capitalism. Grey was the colour of the forlorn, the repressed, making its appearance, like a vampire, only in the interstices of the capitalist word, serving as the reminder of histories of the wretched and exploited. Greyness was like the ‘wet canvas’ on which capitalism painted its colourful world. It was the very ontological basis for reality, and at the same time the life substance that capitalism preyed upon.

²¹ W.S. Reymont, *The Promised Land*, Knopf, New York 1927, pp. 107, 112.

²² *Idem*, *The Peasants*, Knopf, New York 1924, p. 114.

²³ M.T. Taussig, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–57.

²⁴ W.S. Reymont, *The Peasants*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

Urbanization of greyness

Once Poland became a majority-urban country, this ontology of greyness, exploitation and disenchantment, was urbanized too. Soon after Poland's cities were 'opened' to the rank-and-file in 1945, the urban landscape was that of a do-it-yourself eclecticism dictated not by whim but by the situation. Because the garment industry produced hardly any ready-to-wear clothing during the war, people wore what they could get hold of – old, meticulously maintained and substantially altered clothes. Also, the war had shattered the erstwhile sharp cultural rural-urban divide. This confusion of styles and colours was visible in the cityscape: many privately-owned shops flourished after the wartime austerity, and their displays 'screamed' with clamorous shop ads and commodities. Yet, virtually nobody wanted the return of the pre-1939 capitalist order. As a response to the grassroots moral economy, denouncing 'speculators and profiteers', demanding 'fair prices' and wide accessibility of staple goods, the so-called Battle Over Trade was launched. By 1955 over 100 000 private retail shops were liquidated, and replaced by co-operative and state-controlled retail franchises.²⁵ Because the new stores did not compete with one another, advertisements – the hallmark of the 'obtrusive', 'dazzling' and 'tawdry' capitalist street – gradually disappeared. The new socialist commercial aesthetic was subdued: a well-designed shop, a pundit argued, "represented the high culture of service and aesthetics of socialist trade",²⁶ and replaced, as Bolesław Bierut the president put it, "the chaos of shops, warehouses, and entertainment parlors", where "greed and land speculation overshadowed not only the city aesthetic but also the deeper meaning of urban life".²⁷ The capitalist differentiation and colour were gradually eclipsed by the socialist uniformity, equality and greyness.

This development was generally welcome. As the garment industry took off and started producing monochromatic attire, the urban crowd became increasingly uniform. Polish women quickly forsook colourful peasant kerchiefs, but not for bourgeois hats, the hallmarks of pre-war fashion, but rather embraced berets as emblems of a new, egalitarian, and socialist urban style.²⁸ Some activists even started wearing uniforms. One of them described the sense of liberation derived from this: "sometimes I furtively looked at myself in the mirror", he recalled, "and I couldn't get over how different I now appeared" from the former tattered farm-hand. His enthusiasm was absolutely genuine: "I didn't count the hours for work. I built [the city] as though I was building my own house".²⁹ Such a uniform turned him into a member of a "society of equals, all striving for the common good, which would bring

²⁵ P. Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945–1950*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1997, pp. 194–196.

²⁶ D. Crowley, *Warsaw's Shops, Stalinism and the Thaw*, [in:] S.E. Reid, D. Crowley (eds.), *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, Berg, Oxford 2000, pp. 25–47.

²⁷ B. Brzostek, *Za progiem. Codziennosc w przestrzeni publicznej Warszawy lat 1955–1970*, Trio, Warszawa 2007, p. 167.

²⁸ R. Marszałek, *Kino rzeczy znalezionych*, Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2006, p. 148.

²⁹ K.A. Lebow, *Public Works, Private Lives: Youth Brigades in Nowa Huta in the 1950s*, "Contemporary European History" 2001, no. 10 (2), pp. 208, 211.

personal education and advancement, and it is no surprise he was taken with this vision”.³⁰ Egalitarian greyness became the new idiom of the socialist city. Yet it was not only imposed from above by the oppressive authorities, as this is often maintained, but rather emerged through the co-operation between the communists and the working class, whose moral economy sought to exclude and even punish those who were perceived as enriching themselves at the expense of others and distinguishing themselves by conspicuous consumption.³¹

As a result of the struggles to wipe clean the remnants of bourgeois excess, the Polish urban space became increasingly opaque. Foreign visitors complained that it was impossible to ‘read’ these cities: the old sign-boards on shops, for example, were replaced by tiny, nondescript placards behind often steamed-up windows: “one literally had to stick one’s head inside in order to make out if it was a grocery or a barber shop”.³² It was also increasingly difficult to ‘read’ the crowd and one’s social standing from clothes – as it used to be before the war. As in Victorian Britain, in such a monochromatic landscape often minute details became highly pertinent for marking social distinction. In post-war Poland it was not fashion but individual behaviour in a uniform crowd that came to the centre stage. As the ‘rotten’ capitalist commerce was replaced by high-brow ‘culture’, soon masses of the new urbanites found themselves being tutored by the elite into ‘proper’ urban demeanour. Polish cities became increasingly ‘solemn’, as the historian Błażej Brzostek put it. He quoted an impression of antebellum Warsaw jotted down by a South European visitor: “is not good form here to whistle or sing in the street. People do not talk on the tram. Nobody laughs, nobody is joyful and nobody smiles. Even whores strut the streets puffed-up as if they were matrons”.³³ Although somehow exaggerated, this captures the direction of post-war urban change. Soon greyness-as-liberation was challenged by the idea of greyness-as-solemnity, and the new urbanites, described by high-brow critics as ‘hooligans’, ‘rabble’, or even ‘prostitutes’ realized the emergent post-bourgeois urban space was hierarchically ordered and increasingly shaped by the tastes and sense of civility of the intelligentsia, that is, the former gentry. Thus the old social relations, and the greyness as exploitation as analyzed by Reymont, were translated to the newly urbanized society.

Fingerprints of post-capitalism

The new subdued urban aesthetic invited the “subconscious longing for strangeness which is channeled toward controlled amusements like theater, film and folk festivals, but also into various forms of escapism”.³⁴ A grassroots embrace of colour was part and parcel of this. Its very first instance was the International Festival of Socialist Youth that took place in Warsaw in 1955 and in which 26 000 foreigners from 141 countries and all continents and some 140 000 Poles participated. For a fortnight, Warsaw turned, as one worker recalled,

³⁰ D. Priestland, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

³¹ P. Kenney, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

³² B. Brzostek, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

³⁴ Cz. Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, Knopf, New York 1953, p. 63.

from a solemn and grey place into a “colorful and exotic city”.³⁵ The atmosphere was so festive that a strange custom was formed in which foreigners met accidentally on the street were asked for autographs. On grey buildings artists put up colourful posters with slogans such as ‘Let’s dance!’, ‘We are merry!’. The authorities were absolutely taken aback by the way the youth actually acted upon these calls. “Where did our youngsters learn these horrid dances from?” – a party official pondered in a secret report. “Our activists kindly ask the youth not to dance in such a way, and sometimes this helps”. In some cases it did not, and the ‘recalcitrants’ would be driven 20 to 30 kilometers out of the city, and walking back home was their punishment. In one of Warsaw’s most central buildings a slogan in French, reading *baise-moi*, was displayed, and it literally enticed the youth to kiss one another. But many participants took it a step further. “Foreigners”, wrote Brzostek, “visited Poles’ private apartments in droves, and often contacts between the two groups proved to be very close indeed”. “The number of Polish girls”, wrote a French diplomat in a secret cable, “who had slept with young foreigners, especially of the black race, and got pregnant, was so large, that allegedly a separate clinic was open where they could get an abortion free of charge”.³⁶ The festival that took place on the tenth anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing had a very strong anti-war and anti-imperialist message to convey. This was no ‘escapism’ but a cultural practice that was later on well captured in the slogan: ‘make love not war’.

The festival articulated a strong grassroots desire for socialism to foster creativity and this was captured by the new ‘colourfulness’ and ‘exoticism’ of the city. But it also showed the emergent social cleavage between workers and intellectuals, and the two competing interpretations of ‘colour’ and ‘greyness’. The festival came as the biggest shock for the young high-brow activists: “suddenly it turned out that it was possible to be progressive and at the same time enjoy life, wear colourful clothes and listen to jazz”, recalled one of them. Many of them realized they had been overly solemn before: “we had been convinced that we were the happiest and the most cheerful youth in the world, but when confronted with foreigners and their demeanor, it turned out we were sulky and gloomy, extraordinarily stiff and tense ... It had been totally unimaginable for us that one could kiss on the street ... be relaxed, and wear colourful clothes”. So far colourful attire had been the thing of the ‘teddy-boys’ (binikarze), a subculture of unruly ‘hooligan’ working-class metropolitan youth, whose trademark had been colourful and striped socks and gaudy ties. These, unsurprisingly, were to the festival like fish to water: unlike the activists, a journalist noted in a typically wry register, “the strangely dancing offshoots of the teddy-boys, decked up garishly like parrots, shook their buttocks like exhausted nags”.³⁷

The ‘teddy-boys’, with their extravagant clothes and pompadour hairdos, articulated what James Ferguson described as ‘low’, or working-class cosmopolitanism – an urban style committed to “celebrating the different and distant for its own sake”.³⁸ Such grassroots cosmopolitanism, articulating the desire to live in a more exciting, equitable and free

³⁵ B. Brzostek, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

³⁷ A. Krzywicki, *Poststalinowski karnawał radości*, Trio, Warszawa 2009, pp. 231, 283.

³⁸ J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1999, p. 225.

world has been generally overlooked in the analyses of the Polish working class that typically focus on the well-rehearsed themes of nationalism, Catholicism, anti-Semitism and the like. Yet, for decades such an ethos dominated east of the Iron Curtain. The teddy-boys were a minority, and most people distanced themselves from them, especially in that they were being constantly mocked by the official media. This, as Alexei Yurchak pointed out, paradoxically ‘normalized’ the infusion of Western cultural goods into the socialist reality: “by focusing its attacks on an isolated phenomenon, the state made the more common and less extreme manifestations of Western symbols and tastes appear even more natural and congruent with the identity of a good Soviet person”.³⁹

The vivid interest in all things Western was not, as it is often claimed, a form of cargo cult. Instead, it was essential for articulating an ‘elsewhere’ of socialism. Throughout the post-war period, Western music was increasingly popular, but very few understood or even cared about the lyrics. Many people decorated their rooms with photos of artists, foreign places, Western ads, or even collected empty beer cans or cigarette boxes on their bookshelves. The role of these colourful artefacts “was to link the here and now to an ‘elsewhere’”. This link “was simultaneously real (the objects were right here) and abstract (the ‘elsewhere’ to which they linked was imaginary)”. They served as ‘fingerprints’ of this contingent reality and as a “promise of personal creativity and the possibility of creating a vibrant and shared world that was neither Soviet nor foreign”, yet entirely congruent with communist ideology and its attempts to transcend capitalism.⁴⁰ Colour served exactly that role: it was a fingerprint from that “elsewhere”, or, put differently, a stimulant that ‘spiced up’ the solemn ‘grey’ reality. Since 1989, greyness-as-liberation has practically vanished from urban life in Poland – but greyness-as-solemnity remains deeply entrenched. And these are the origins of the often noted (and often denounced as kitschy) grassroots urban practices that seek to revitalize “dead” urban space by painting it in gaudy colours. The recent revival of interest in modernist architecture and urban planning has been accompanied by a rediscovery of communist urban heritage and its egalitarian ethos. The throbbing oscillation between colour and greyness (and the radical shifts of meaning jump-started by it) that I described in this article represent the very taproot of the East European urban experience. This zigzag through historical possibilities is by no means over. It was Boris Groys who once noted that Western “post-modern taste is by no means as tolerant as it seems ... [it] rejects everything universal, uniform, repetitive, geometrical, minimalist, ascetic, monotonous, boring ... And of course, the post-modern sensibility strongly dislikes – and *must* dislike – the gray, monotonous, uninspiring look of communism”. So, argued Groys, “what is the origin of this dominating post-modern taste for colorful diversity? ... It is the taste *formed* by the contemporary market, and it is the taste *for* the market”.⁴¹

By the same token, is not the penchant in urban studies for the colourful diversity of the Southern city informed by this secret homogeneity masked as ostensible pluralism?

³⁹ A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006, p. 175.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 195, 197.

⁴¹ B. Groys, *Art Power*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2008, pp. 150–151.

Maybe *real* diversity can only be achieved under the auspices of greyness. It is time to pick up socialist urbanism from the rubbish heap of history. It could be full of surprises – and possibilities for the future.

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