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Roman Cieslewicz: Double Player. The Case of the *Ty i Ja* Magazine

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Somewhat older Polish readers – those that can remember the 1960s – feel a surge of spontaneous sentiment when thinking about the *Ty i Ja* (*You and Me*) monthly journal, which was published from 1960 to 1973. Younger readers consider it a valuable collectible. The magazine was never associated with official propaganda, and is remembered as an elegant and graphically sophisticated journal, perhaps the most neatly and nicely edited of the decade. It was the first genuine Polish lifestyle periodical devoted to fashion, interior design, cooking, psychology, literature and art. It can also be read as the first post-war manifesto of Polish consumerism. Its political dimension is truly discreet, but noticeable: the history of *Ty i Ja* presents interesting evidence that private can also be political.

The story that I would like to recount was just an episode in both the artistic career of Roman Cieslewicz, and in the history of the Polish illustrated press and popular culture. Symptomatically enough, the first art director of the *Ty i Ja* monthly was one of Poland's most prominent artists, a star of the *Polish poster school*. He was a member of the editorial board for three years only, from May 1960 until June 1963, but his graphic vision shaped the character and style of the magazine right up to its very last issues. After leaving for France, Cieslewicz collaborated with the monthly for an entire decade, until its suppression in 1973. This past spring, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of his death, the National Museum in Poznań organised a large ret-

rospective exhibition and catalogue of Cieslewicz's works.¹ Only a few pages of the catalogue were, however, devoted to the *Ty i Ja* magazine. Active as an artist for nearly half a century, Cieslewicz is presently primarily associated with film, exhibition and theatre posters, and experimental engravings and photos. All the same, the old issues of the magazine clearly indicate that something important was happening at the time.



Fig. 1. Roman Cieslewicz, Cover of the magazine *Ty i Ja*, no. 4, 1960

Cieslewicz designed 46 of the *Ty i Ja* covers. Relative to his previous and subsequent work, this was a time of withdrawal from more serious topics – a time for fun, and away from propaganda. In the end he did not create a great many propaganda designs. He had the good fortune to graduate from the graphic department in Kraków in 1955, during a turning point in Poland's history – i.e. after the settling of accounts with the Stalin period. Only one of Cieslewicz's three diploma works was produced in a socialist realist style. A new epoch, which started in October 1956, brought revolutionary and seemingly sustained political changes to Poland – the hope of freedom, including in the realm of art. The term *Polish poster school* was coined during this time of a political Thaw. Together with the older Henryk Tomaszewski, and his peers Jan Lenica, Waldemar Świeży, and Jan Młodożeniec, the young Cieslewicz developed a new artistic language. The *Polish poster school* was known for its use of compact graphic form and sharp intelligent metaphor, its colour and contour expressions, and lack of constraints, its lyricism, humour, and modernity. Five years later, Cieslewicz transferred all these features to the magazine covers.

It was obviously a controlled kind of revolution. In the case of this group of artists, one can hardly talk about a political rebellion – it was rather an artistic breakthrough. Paradoxically, the *Polish poster school* – though innovative and highly appreciated in Western Europe – did not actually fight the system. On the contrary, it was enthusiastically accepted, and even appropriated as a kind of artistic showcase in the People's Republic of Poland. A biographical element should be added here: Cieslewicz belonged to the Party and had leftist views – but according to him his leftist tendencies were not very deep: “Political considerations were of no interest to us”.² Cieslewicz was fascinated with the Soviet constructivism inspired by Alexander Rodchenko, and greatly admired the master of photomontage, Mieczysław Berman – a graphic artist with the socialist press in the period between the two World Wars. As an emigrant, in 1967 Cieslewicz became known for his poster of Che Guevara [fig. 4]. Earlier, in Poland, he had been awarded for his poster com-

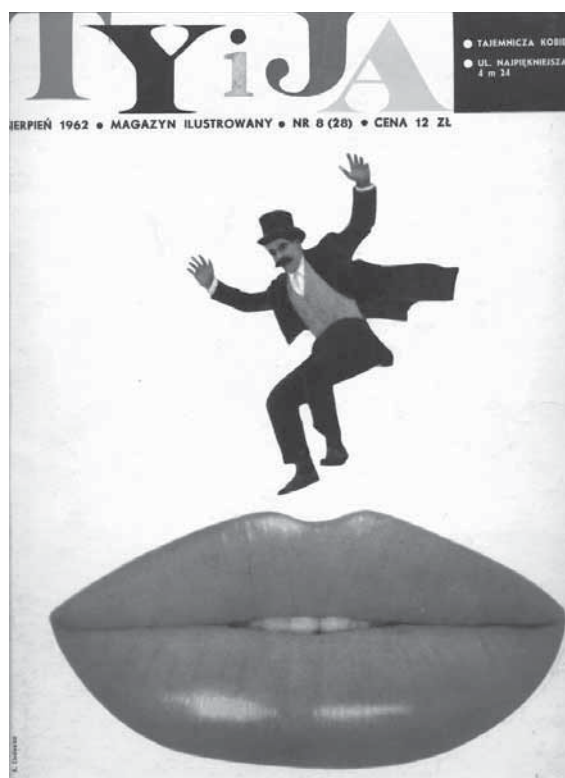


Fig. 2. Roman Cieslewicz, Cover of the magazine *Ty i Ja*, no. 8, 1962

petition entries entitled *Fight for Freedom* (1958) and *Third Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party* (1959). His safe political position facilitated his double game: on the one hand, he appeared to be above political suspicion, did not have to struggle with the censors, and probably acquired his post on the editorial board of the newly founded magazine because of his political affiliation. On the other hand, his fame as an esteemed graphic artist in the People's Republic of Poland gave him a free hand, and relative artistic liberty. By patterning the *Ty i Ja* magazine along the style of the western European press, Cieslewicz managed to smuggle a new and fresh style into Poland. And above all, he did it in the language of private life.

The fairly monothematic *Ty i Ja* covers present variations on the male and female figures. Cieslewicz used collage and photomontage liberally. He initially composed his characters out of torn paper pieces, then used motifs from old illustrations, and in the end turned to works of art. Cieslewicz combined his fascination with surrealism and dadaism with a form clearly taken from the constructivists. The

first magazine cover (May 1960) shows a figure of a man and a woman sitting in modern armchairs, facing each other. In the air above them, a dadaistic hand holds a sphere with a heart mounted in the centre. A rose replaces one of the woman's eyes. The symbols are sentimental and the message is ironic: a solid couple in a relaxed atmosphere. The June cover shows an airborne couple in a balloon – in a basket made of flowers, and once again the dadaistic hand, with a finger pointing at the balloon. The July issue pictures an angler being hugged by a mermaid. The August cover uses a self-quotation: a woman on the beach, wearing an elegant hat and reading the May issue (with its cover visible in miniature); one eventually notices a man swimming in the sea – his torn-paper head drifting on the waves like a reflection of the setting sun.

The next year, the message on the cover changes slightly: the female figure begins to dominate the male figure. An elegant woman wearing a turban gracefully blows a man off her gloved hand. A cat-woman in the foreground catches a man wearing a bowler-hat (male figures often resemble René Magritte's gentlemen, or Charlie Chaplin – the Everyman) with her lasso-like tail. The large face of a woman in a framed mirror, with a man climbing up to her like an insect on a flower stem. A man in bathing trunks, with an umbrella, jumping onto the wave of a woman's hair. Finally, in 1962, a series of covers in which the man is barely visible. On one his small face is a clasp-like decoration in the hair of a beautiful but cold-looking woman with a Nefertiti-like profile. On another a minute man appears in the pupil of a woman's eye. Sometimes the figure is just a symbol, as in the photomontage of a woman's legs carelessly playing with a black bowler-hat on a beach. The next month the symbolic relation is somewhat reversed – a man wearing a bowler-hat jumps onto the pillow of a pair of sensual female lips.

Sometimes the relationship becomes alarmingly concretised: the October cover shows a big stone tied with a pink ribbon to a woman's foot; underneath the stone, in a frog position, a miserable crawling little man. The last cover before the artist leaves for Paris in May 1963 is a deciduous reinter-

pretation of a previously used concept: this time it is a large profile of a man's face, with a woman's face mounted in his eye.

At the time, Cieslewicz was married to the well-known Polish sculptor Alina Szapocznikow. Perhaps her strong artistic personality gave rise to the ironic metaphors of feminine domination on the magazine covers. In 1963 they both left for France, where she continued to sculpt, and he became a graphic designer for *Elle* magazine (later also for *Vogue*). The covers that he sent to *Ty i Ja* at a later time reveal his further interests and experiments, including citations and an increasing fascination with pop-art. A good example is two lovers taken directly from a painting by Roy Lichtenstein, with a cartoon-like bubble issuing from the lips of the crying woman, inscribed with the title of the magazine in reverse: "No! Me and You" (1967). Another, with a stretched-out hand from the Sistine Chapel painted in a flat electric yellow colour and reflected along the axis of symmetry, comes from the early 1970s, when Cieslewicz was working on a series of symmetrical figures. In the latter case the relation-



Fig. 3. Roman Cieslewicz, Cover of the magazine *Ty i Ja*, no. 2, 1968

ship between the man and the woman is no longer obvious. Similarly, the words “you and me” can be interpreted metaphysically, i.e. in the context of the biblical meaning of Michelangelo’s mural.

Not every cover from that period can be interpreted equally: some were clearly metaphoric, others revolved around quotations, still others were simply ornamental. All of them share an elegant, even sophisticated atmosphere, and a tone that is never serious. A characteristic feature of the covers, probably indicative of the magazine’s programme, is that they invariably depict private life, romantic affairs, flirtation and seduction. It should be remembered that such themes were practically non-existent in Poland during Stalin’s era. Artists began to tackle them only in the latter half of the 1950s. Lyrical pictures, e.g., a portrait of a couple looking into each other’s eyes, first appeared at the famous *Arsenal* exhibition held in Warsaw in 1955. The explosion of lyricism – and individualism – was a clear cultural symptom of a political Thaw. Relieved of their role as tributes to propaganda, works of poetry, theatre, cinema, and painting could examine private life issues. Romantic advice columns started to appear in periodicals. The launch of the *Ty i Ja* magazine, which published love stories by famous foreign writers, offered psychological and even (a truly pioneer endeavour) sexual advice, and showed cosy home interiors, opened the decade of the 1960s in a totally new spirit.

The triumph of privacy was associated with an ideology of modernity and comfort. And would have been impossible in a communist country, were it not for a crucial political event. In July 1959, Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev had their famous conversation, later referred to as “the kitchen debate”, at a Moscow exhibition of American technological achievements. Khrushchev was very impressed by the household appliances, and declared that the Soviet bloc countries must catch up with, and even outdistance the West, in that sphere as well. Thus began the new “domiciliary” stage of the Cold War. In the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia embarked on the production of washing machines and refrigerators, opened their first *supersam* (a type of supermarket) stores, and trumpeted the slogan “modernity on a daily basis”. The economic revolu-



Fig. 4. Roman Cieslewicz, *Portrait of Che Guevara*, 1967

tion was accompanied by propaganda encouraging citizens to improve their standard of living, and to save their money to buy things on hire purchase. Pokey, poor quality – but cheap – flats were built for young married couples. Consumerism, which had until recently been stigmatised by socialist ideology as being bourgeois, was now considered proof of the success of a socialist economy.

As one can imagine, the new *Ty i Ja* magazine was expected to provide lifestyle models for the contemporary consumer. The periodical advertised detergents, washing machines, cosmetics – all obviously “Made in Poland”. The simple and straightforward slogans (“Sew it yourself! It’s cheap” for a sewing machine) were a kind of reference to the naïve language of political persuasion that the readers were so accustomed to. However, one cannot really say that the large scale mission of *Ty i Ja* was to democratise the tastes of Polish society. Its circulation was limited to ten thousand copies, and it was expensive to buy. The magazine was available only in the big towns, and one often had to be “on friendly terms” with the

shop attendant in order to purchase one. It was an elite publication targeted at intellectuals, and in fact promoted consumerism rather than consumption.

As an editor for such a specialty magazine, Cieslewicz could afford to display lightness and irony in his work. In what sense did he play a double game? – on several levels. As already mentioned, he did not oppose optimistic socialist propaganda. And he made designs (often on the back cover) incorporating Polish goods. At the same time, he tried to communicate something between the lines. His collages often included parts of illustrations, or artistic paintings. His advertisements simply used photos from Western magazines. The collages rendered a double message: they suggested an atmosphere of luxury – but were stripped of credibility and seriousness. The difference between Paris dreams and grey Polish reality created a tension which was utilised in the artwork. The magazine's model addressee could discover an encrypted message to the effect that the “small Polish stabilisation” was just a poor substitute for life in the West. By way of explanation: the term, which was adopted for the 1960s, came from a drama with an ironic message, *Świadkowie, albo nasza mała stabilizacja* (*Witnesses, or Our Small Stabilisation*), which was written by Tadeusz Różewicz, and staged in 1964³ (the story takes place in a bourgeois parlour and shows a family that suppresses boredom and the destruction of family ties by drawing satisfaction from its moderate prosperity).

The strategy of “resistance, transgression, appropriation” had not only an aesthetic, but also a political dimension. Cieslewicz resisted the explicit and “heavy” aesthetics of socialist propaganda, sought for transgression towards the avant-garde, and with that in mind appropriated the techniques of advertising used in the West – thereby utilising the aesthetics of consumerism. Now let's try putting it in reverse: perhaps Cieslewicz resisted the empty aesthetics of consumerism, sought for transgression towards the avant-garde, and with that in mind appropriated such artistic techniques as collage and photomontage, including with their leftist and critical traditions. It is not unlikely that there would have been some double-dealing at work in the process.

It is also not unlikely that the themes appearing on the covers themselves included hidden allusions. Seemingly playful images of married couples or lovers often depicted alarming relationships by ruling powers. The idyllic picture of the couple exudes a deceitful tone. Cieslewicz was playing with male and female stereotypes long before gender studies made their way to Poland – or was he using these figures in an attempt to say something about political oppression?

Above all else, Cieslewicz had a sense of humour and a sense of form. His task (according to a description by Zbigniew Florczak in *Ty i Ja*) consisted of “unflagging efforts to renew the sign and the picture”⁴. At the same time, he performed yet another transgression: he introduced art onto the cover of an illustrated magazine. This ironic gesture, somewhere in the middle between high and popular culture, was the gesture of a professional and a visionary who was trying to transform a socialist imagination. Unfortunately, *Ty i Ja* was suppressed in December 1973 – as a result of the increasing interventions of censorship.

Notes

¹ Anna Grabowska-Konwent (ed.), *Roman Cieslewicz 1930-1996*, ex. cat., Poznań: National Museum, 2006.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³ First published Tadeusz Różewicz, ‘Świadkowie, albo nasza mała stabilizacja’, in: *Dialog*, no. 5, 1962, pp. 5-26.

⁴ Zbigniew Florczak, ‘Człowiek w jednym okularze’ (‘A Man with Half-glasses’), in: *Ty i Ja*, no. 1, 1972, pp. 13-19.

Romanas Cieslewiczius: dvigubas žaidėjas. Žurnalo *Ty i Ja* atvejis

Reikšminiai žodžiai: konsumerizmas, žurnalas, modernybė, Lenkija, plakatas.

Santrauka

Romano Cieslewicziaus, žymaus lenkų grafiko ir tapytojo, kūrybą galima pateikti kaip įdomų dvigubo žaidimo su oficialia sistema ir visuomene XX a. 7-ojo dešimtmečio Lenkijoje pavyzdį. Geriausiai žinomas kaip vienas iš Lenkijos plakato mokyklos įkūrėjų, Cieslewiczius trejus metus (1960-1963) dirbo iliustruoto žurnalo *Ty i Ja* (*Tu ir aš*) grafinio dizaino redaktoriumi, o paskui, persikėlęs į Prancūziją, bendradarbiavo su žurnalu iš užsienio. Šis menininko karjeros tarpsnis gali būti laikomas geru „rezistencijos, transgresijos ir apropiacijos“ strategijos pavyzdžiu: pritardamas 7-ojo dešimtmečio demokratinio konsumerizmo estetikai ar vadinamajai „mažajai stabilizacijai“, Cieslewiczius mėgino į grafinį dizainą slapta įterpti avangardines tendencijas ir vakarietiškus standartus. Šis eksperimentas, nors ir pasmerktas nesėkmei (*Ty i Ja* buvo uždarytas 1973 m.), paliko mums vieną įdomiausių visų laikų iliustruotų žurnalų. Skirtas madai, menui, literatūrai, gyvenimo būdui ir dizainui, *Ty i Ja* mėgino pakeisti liaudies skonį, kartais priešindamas oficialiai socialistinės kultūros politikai.

Svarbiausia Cieslewicziaus taikyta technika buvo koliažas. Ši iš esmės avangardinė technika, susipynusi su komercijos ir reklamos bruožais, menininko kūryboje reiškė tam tikrą dvigubą pranešimą. Straipsnyje mėginama koliažą interpretuoti kaip ironijos ir net provokacijos kalbą. Vyriški ir moteriški personažai (mėgstama *Ty i Ja* viršelių tema) įdomūs ir lyčių santykių požiūriu, nes per juos žaidžiama su tradiciniais vaizdavimo kodais, ir tai (galbūt) suvoktina kaip politinės metaforos. Nors žurnalas *Ty i Ja* neužsiėmė politika tiesiogine to žodžio prasme, jis paveikė socialinę vaizduotę, suformuodamas naujus troškimus ir kurdamas naują išskirtinę įtampos erdvę tarp meno, propagandos ir vartotojų interesų.

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