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Art of the 50s and the 60s in Polish caricature.

The purpose of this dissertation was to investigate visual representations of art and aesthetic phenomena of the 1950s and 1960s in Polish satirical drawing. Another aim was to demonstrate that a cartoonist can be seen as an art critic, and a press drawing – as kind of ‘art about art’ – may be regarded as a press review.

Such drawings were published not only in satirical magazines but mostly in cultural weeklies. The growing interest in the world of popular culture had an impact also on the character of the magazines in Communist Poland. On the one hand, the press gave a unique opportunity to inform about and thus popularize brand new artistic concepts. Additionally, it cannot be forgotten that it was in compliance with the decision-makers’ postulate to propagate culture countrywide using mass media – including cities (traditional centers of culture) and the countryside, educated circles as well as workers and peasants. On the other hand, the content of the press material was subject to strict censorship, which explains critical, satirical comments to the modern art. For example, abstract paintings (especially *art informel* popular in Poland in the second half of the 1950s) were mocked even after the Thaw (1956), although before this cultural change it had been politically unacceptable. This ambiguity of all published cartoons and the complexity of the role of the press in a totalitarian state make the interpretations difficult. In such a context, a cartoonist is the one who – usually with a sense of humour – says what is art, and what is not. Therefore, satirical and humorous drawings can be seen as a pictorial equivalent of written art criticism. Furthermore, it is uncertain who exactly is responsible for the whole message of the cartoon: a draughtsman or an editor. It should be noted that not every artist was capable of formulating captions accompanying the images. Even if one was, subjects of compositions were imposed by editors, who sometimes also defined the shape of the visual representation. Not to mention a collective way of working on the concepts – the method that was promoted by the regime’s clerks.

I based my analysis on the picture theory by William Mitchell. According to the author, visual culture comprises not only what is traditionally considered as art (high culture), but all the imagery produced by the press, television, advertisement, etc., often entwining verbal and visual representations. In presented study satirical drawings are treated as metapictures – ‘pictures about pictures’.

The first chapter is devoted to the question of humour in Polish art and literature in the 1950s and 1960s. I considered comedic genres and themes exploited by authors in this period. I presented two events of great significance: The Congress of Satirists (1948) and The Conference of Satirists (1953; both took place in Warsaw). These professional meetings were held under the domination of social realism, then debates (with the participation of artists, editors and officials) were dominated by the question of the right and acceptable kind of humour, the political role of laughter, the form and the matter of satirical production. Therefore, discussions were marked by controversies about the artistic ideas and creating methods – permitted or not permitted to follow (e.g. ‘individualism’ and ‘pessimism’ were rejected). Afterwards, I focused on changes caused by the political thaw. For instance, pure humour, absurd and black humour became allowed and practiced by Polish draughtsmen after 1956.

The second section is related to the ‘art about art’ issue. It is a typology of motifs and sorts of visual representations. There, I pointed the most popular ways of imagining contemporary art and music, and the aesthetics of everyday life (for instance, fashion and interior design). In this chapter, I accentuated the subversive nature of satirical images, used to ridicule and promote art (e.g. optical art) at the same time.

The third part is dedicated to the aesthetics of a press drawing, to its ‘morphology’. I studied the drawing itself and its elements: a line and a spot/blot. I stressed the problem of the definition of realism and ‘formalism’. In this section, there are discussed such phenomena as emancipation of drawing (from ‘academic’/‘realistic’ form to an ‘anarchic’ line and ‘doodles’), pastiche and parody (considered ‘formalisms’ during social realism). The latter refers to problems of imitation and plagiarism, the aspect of ‘originality’ of the Polish press drawing. Finally, I examined the relationship between an image and a word (occurrence of a lot of humorous drawings without captions after the Thaw).

The results of the study were that a satirical draughtsman can be seen as an art critic. This ‘figure’ points at an interpreter of current artistic events, as a participant and an observer in one person. He is not obliged to be a methodologically prepared scholar (art historian, philosopher, etc.) and to represent impartial and dispassionate opinions. He is involved in the art world and politics (as an artist and reviewer – both censored!). Additionally, the notion of mass medium implies that the press had a considerable impact and shaped the people’s sense of aesthetics. In the presented survey, I stressed the ambivalence of cartoon art, its excluding function with regard to

some artistic and aesthetic phenomena, and – at the same time – informing the readers about the modern culture and ‘modernity’. According to the Mitchell’s theory, the study proved that the caricature/press drawing was an important element of the realm of creation and the place of publication of cartoons does not make this art a second-rate one. The cross-sectional study of the presented satirical production leads to the conclusion that the press drawing in its formal aspect mirrored current artistic matters (e.g. self-reference of the representation, the investigation of the meaning of line, etc.).