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Castlings in the Margins – a Change of Perspective

(Ewa Wróblewska-Trochimiuk, *Sztuka marginesów. Chorwacki plakat polityczny (The Art of Margins. The Croatian Political Poster)*, Warszawa–Kraków: Instytut Sławistyki Polskiej Akademii Nauk – Libron, 2018, 324 pages)

Where are the margins of European culture? Where is the center of European culture located? Who sets the margins? Or perhaps the margins set themselves and then consolidate themselves? Finally – and this seems to be the most important – how to read the content written in the margins? The monograph *Sztuka marginesów. Chorwacki plakat polityczny (The Art of Margins. The Croatian Political Poster)* written by Ewa Wróblewska-Trochimiuk, a cultural studies expert, a Slavist and a Croatist, is an attempt to answer all these questions.

The title of this book is undoubtedly a scientific provocation. Reading this work develops the semantics of the title keyword by means of its double reference: to the category of artifact and to the country of its origin. While we can agree that a poster is a kind of margin of classically understood fine arts, the suggestion that

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Croatian culture is located outside the mainstream of Europe at some negatively judged distance from the center arouses astonishment. It turns out, however, that this is an intentional and conscious move by the author. In the course of the argument, she debunks a popular and persisting belief that the cultural area studied by her is peripheral and that the cultures that are developing in this territory are marginalized. Instead, she proposes a change in the research perspective and a restoration of the category of margins. According to the author of this review, Croatian culture has been developing in a unique system of ideologies that create a specific semiotic space, thus becoming part of the concept of “new artistic geography” proposed and developed by Piotr Piotrowski.

In this exceptional arrangement and change of perspective, Ewa Wróblewska-Trochimiuk finds a remedy for the maladies and pains which appear in Croatian culture (the main topic of her deliberations) and accompany the aspiration to enhance Croats’ own culture in relation to the “Western idiom”. The author clearly shows that there are no universal categories of the perception and research of cultures. Moreover, she proves that a search for such standardized keys of understanding would be to the detriment of cultures on the so-called peripheries. In the course of her argument, this researcher emphasizes that centers and peripheries are relative spaces and values – they are dynamic and moving, subject to fluctuations.

Therefore, thanks to the proposed point of view the category of margins and the situation of peripherality that arises from these margins become values in themselves. The author suggests perceiving this area as an area that draws from different, often distant, centers, as a zone that is open to influences and flows, a zone that compares various ideas and destabilizes common senses and thus questions the hegemony of the dominant and colonizing Western-centric discourse. The author highlights at almost every turn that cultures that are stretched between East and West do not use different visual idioms. They only choose and compose such idioms differently in their own way and adjust these idioms to their own needs because the final shape of these codes must correspond to local conditions. Therefore, as this researcher shows, it is difficult to talk about an exotic transfusion of Western esthetic currents, but we can notice a parallel development that is perhaps even more interesting because it is less obvious. Although the author does not formulate it directly, I can see a clear research demand in this attitude which seems to say that Croatian visual culture should not aspire to translatability or compatibility with other visual idioms. My recognition is confirmed by an anecdote quoted

in the book that says that in the first half of the 1990s during a foreign presentation of Croatian contemporary art, one Western-affiliated critic noted with disappointment that this art did in fact not differ from what he already knew. In Croatian culture, therefore, there are attempts to prove that it is an equal part of Europe; however, this finally turns out not to be an advantage but a disadvantage to this culture. The discourse of Western Europe has been looking for an opportunity to listen to the language of its “peripheries” for a long time, and as a result the Croatian visual idiom could successfully respond to this demand for an “otherness” of the margins.

“The Art of Margins”, however, first of all tells us the story of Croatian visuality through the prism of political posters. Although it might seem that the starting point is research on visuality from a national point of view, reading of the book shows that the author studies the Croatian visual sphere primarily in social categories and at the same time casts light on various political and economic aspects of Croats’ lives. The monograph is devoted to the problem of the relationship between Croatian visual culture and ideology. This is not a one-sided relationship in which ideology determines a visual sphere: on the contrary, visuality initiates disputes and debates about values; it polarizes opinions and becomes a factor that dynamizes the political sphere.

Actually, this is another shift of emphasis which I consider to be an undeniable value of this work, and the author builds a narrative about the history of the Croatian state and nation, and a visual message becomes the axis of the author’s argument; this visual message is often treated marginally in historical research, or at best only as a supplement. In Ewa Wróblewska-Trochimiuk’s story, images become not only witnesses of various socio-political and cultural transformations but also mark the trajectories of these transformations, to some extent becoming building blocks of Croatian modernity.

The book’s structure also deserves attention. The author superbly recognizes turning points in the history of the researched area, but it is not the chronology (although it is preserved in particular chapters) that becomes the key that arranges the argument. The categories that organize the narrative are issues from different levels: socio-political, historical, esthetic and cultural ones.

The first chapter is the story of the origins and directions of Croatian political poster development in the context of the history of the nation and the state. The author presents the process of artistic transformations correlated with the course of historical events. The second chapter is devoted to montage as the basic composition technique that is applied to posters. In turn, in the third

part the author analyzes the iconoclastic influence of posters. In the next chapter, she discusses the role of this form of artistic expression in propaganda and warfare in the 1990s. Finally, the fifth part, which focuses on the category of exhibition space, presents the phenomenon of the “musealization” of political posters, namely episodes from their second life in museums and galleries.

Choosing such categories to organize the book, and thus choosing a different theoretical background each time, is another declaration of the researcher. In this way she shows that the universal perspective, which is understood here as a set of methodological tools, is impossible. Moreover, attempts to apply one rigorous approach to the exploration of Croatian material would make it impossible to reach the specific meanings of the studied culture and to define its regional and local identity. It is obvious that this material forced the author to apply such a broad perspective and, to a certain extent, to use many research tools. Thanks to this, in her work Ewa Wróblewska-Trochimiuk, step by step, chapter by chapter, opens before the reader's eyes successive levels of the Croatian visual code, which is entangled in social, political and historical contexts. Each of these levels is a coat for the previous one. The author removes these visual layers, showing the process of their interpenetration, during which semantic shifts and semiotic recapitulations and revisions take place. In this way, the reader has the opportunity to observe the processes of erasing the meanings of images, as well as the processes of replacing these meanings with completely new but often not obvious ones.

In her analysis, Ewa Wróblewska-Trochimiuk does not limit herself to reading only visual signs, she also scientifically examines the many different modalities in which posters function. She works on words, but also goes beyond the frame of an image and looks at the historical circumstances of its creation as well as the social contexts of its functioning. Thanks to this, the author reveals to the reader a complex network that determines the influence of images and various possible manners of interpreting them. One such important reference which became the background for these considerations is the war in the countries of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The reader who is less familiar with the history of this area will try in vain to find a summary of these events or an accessible historical synthesis in “The Art of Margins”. The reason is that the author describes the events of the early 1990s (and their consequences) not only as a turbulent moment in history but also as a social process in which significant systemic changes and transformations of Croatian consciousness and identity take place. And all this is done through the prism of political posters which perfectly illustrate these processes. It should be added

that the reader will not find any judgments of the Croatian–Serbian–Bosnian conflict in the book. Thanks to her balanced language and well-chosen narrative strategy, the author perfectly hides herself behind scientific argumentation and does not present her judgments or political affiliations.

I have an impression that the author, at the stage of preparing the book, imagined herself as a potential or perhaps an ideal reader. The researcher tries to break out of the narrow Croatian discourse and tailors her work in such a way as to reach not only the wider Slavic circle, but also cultural studies experts, especially those involved in studies on visual culture or historians of ideas. I think that this attempt is crowned by success. Furthermore, due to the lucidity of the language and a good rhythm that is not burdened with overly hermetic scientific jargon, the work has a chance to become popular among non-specialists. Properly read, it could even become a kind of textbook for all those who create visual codes for political use. Only Serbian studies experts or researchers of Croatian–Serbian relations can finish reading this book feeling unsatisfied. Due to the fact that the book focuses on Croatian visual culture, there are few references or comparisons to Serbian posters. This is desirable especially with regard to the manner in which the same political issues were depicted not only during Tito’s Yugoslavia but also during the war in the 1990s. This task is still waiting to be fulfilled.

Undoubtedly, however, this monograph by Ewa Wróblewska-Trochimiuk is a very important step in the so-called process of changing the “frames”. In the case of “The Art of Margins”, this process consists not so much in building a new narrative on art, but rather in setting reference points which are different than the previous ones, in building a new “frame” that sheds light on the unknown aspects of Croatian culture and at the same time moves away from demonstrating the influences, calques and inspirations that come from the centers and are present in this culture.

Roszczy na marginesach – zmiana perspektywy

Recenzja monografii naukowej „Sztuka marginesów. Chorwacki plakat polityczny” autorstwa Ewy Wróblewskiej-Trochimiuk (Warszawa–Kraków: Instytut Sławistyki Polskiej Akademii Nauk – Libron, 2018, 324 ss.).

Słowa kluczowe: marginesy, Chorwacja, plakat, zmiana ram, kultura wizualna

Castlings in the margins – the change of perspective

Review of the scientific monograph “Sztuka marginesów. Chorwacki plakat polityczny” (*The Art of Margins. The Croatian Political Poster*) by Ewa Wróblewska-Trochimiuk (Warszawa–Kraków: Instytut Slawistyki Polskiej Akademii Nauk – Libron, 2018, 324 pages).

Keywords: margins, Croatia, poster, changing the frames, visual culture

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