Art as Emblem and Message: Polish Modernism – The Aesthetic Soft Power of Cultural Memory and Diplomacy

Julia Mielczarek, University of Warsaw, Poland

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Abstract

In my article, I will present the functioning of modernism as an emblem of cultural memory after World War II in the Republic of Poland. I will discuss the narratives about modernism that are used today in the international presentation of Polish art. Modernism in Poland in the 20th century served as a universal aesthetic language to build a progressive, modern image of the country. I will focus on the aesthetic and political strategies of Polish cultural institutions that promote art and heritage outside Poland. I will discuss the "Poland 100" programme, which was implemented under the slogan "Inspired by the past, we create the future" as part of the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of Poland regaining independence. My intention is to present art as a vehicle for collective memory and social identity, which influences the soft power of the state and makes cultural policy increasingly visible on the international stage. Therefore, I will present my comparative analysis of two artworks entitled "Semiotic Reading of State-Sponsored Memory Aesthetics," which will discuss visual form, narrative message, and type of founder. My research method is a combination of visual semiotics + art policy analysis + research in situ. At the same time, I will show the perspective of understanding art through the lens of memory coding and cultural policy.

Keywords: cultural memory, soft power, modernism, cultural diplomacy, post-war Poland

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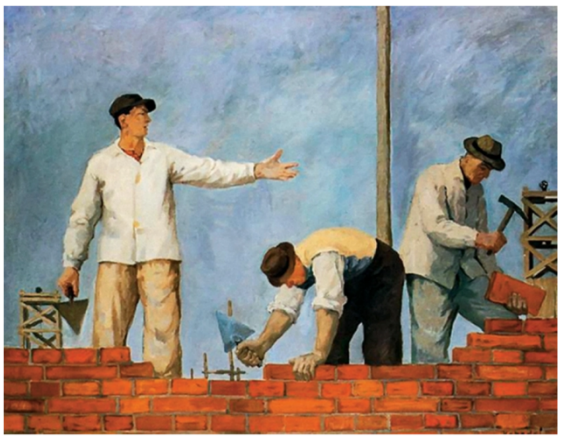
Introduction

In my article I will attempt to answer the question how modernism functions as a tool of cultural memory and cultural diplomacy in Poland after II World War. I will show you why modernism is a universal language in Poland and at the same time we will answer the question why it is so closely connected with the local identity of Poles. The topic of my words must begin with the larger political and historical context of Poland at the time and an understanding of what the Polish People's Republic and the Third Republic of Poland were, and how these periods shaped national identity and the institutional conditions for the circulation of art. We should also look at how Central and Eastern Europe was treated as the periphery of Europe in the dominant narratives of art history and in the "global canon" of modernism, while the shared experience of modernism in this region was often a side issue. And in a global context, we should try to discuss whether art can be responsible for the language of modernity and whether it can act as an aesthetic resource of soft power in cultural diplomacy.

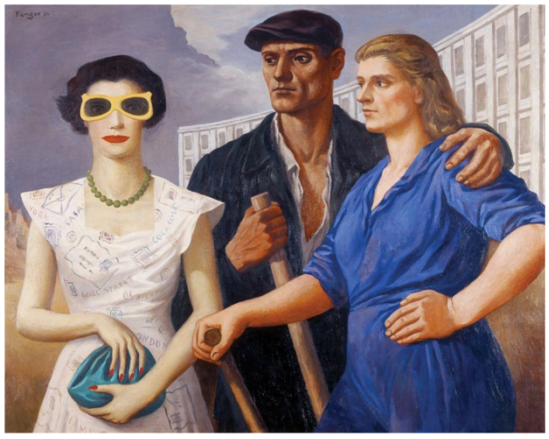
However, before we move on to discussing cultural policy and artistic practices, let us refer to the historical background. After the Second World War, which ended in Europe in 1945, artists in Poland confronted trauma, loss and destruction in their works. However, in 1949, socialist realism was introduced from above, in which art was supposed to monumentalise the worker, idealise the working class and present a positive cult of work, the collective and the state for example Aleksander Kobzdej Pass and the brick and Wojciech Fangor – Figures.

Figure 1

Aleksander Kobzdej's Pass and the brick and Wojciech Fangor's Figures



Aleksander Kobzdej - *Pass the brick*, 1950



Wojciech Fangor - *Figures*, 1950

Source: https://mnwr.pl/podaj-cegle/, https://fangorfoundation.org/catalogue-raisonne/P.109/

Until 1953, until the death of Joseph Stalin, and in practice in Poland especially between 1955 and 1956, modernist art was severely restricted in official circulation because it was considered too Western and "formal."

However, a year later, in 1956, artists and institutions experienced a liberalisation and abstraction, informel and modernism began to be accepted as expressions of cultural progress. This process places Poland in a bigger trend, as modernism is used across Central Europe in the context of artistic freedom after periods of ideological control. Therefore, I believe that modernism in this historical context is not only an aesthetic and an art movement, but also a tool that allows us to distance ourselves from the socialist realist past, to break with unwanted art, and is a symbol of a turn towards modernity. With this knowledge, can we consider

modernism to be symbolic compensation for the past? I leave this question open, but the aesthetics of modernism have certainly been used repeatedly to construct a narrative about modern Poland, which is capable of creating art on a comparable level to European artistic centres. Between the 1960s and 1970s, the Polish authorities recognised modernist design and architecture as successful evidence of a civilisational project and as a language of aspiration, especially where modern form was exportable and prestigious. Modernism was, in a sense, ahead of the economic conditions in Poland and became a sign of modernity.

Therefore, we can postulate that modernism became a tool for neutralising geopolitical remoteness. Despite political isolation, modernism allowed countries behind the Iron Curtain to position their statehood within transnational culture. This enabled Poland to build its aesthetic soft power. At that time, modernist exhibitions were organised abroad, showcasing the dynamism of Polish art. Among the most important Western presentations of this type, I would include the exhibition Fifteen Polish Painters at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1 August–1 October 1961), curated by Peter Selz. The museum highlighted that this was the first such extensive presentation of new Polish painting in the United States, including 75 works from the late 1950s to 1961, which served as institutional legitimisation of Poland's presence in the transnational language of modernity. At the same time, Polish commercial art, especially the Polish School of Posters, developed by Henryk Tomaszewski, Jan Lenica, Waldemar Świerzy and Roman Cieślewicz the aesthetics of abbreviation, metaphor and modern typography became an "export language" that could be communicated across language barriers. It is also worth mentioning here that the works of these artists constituted a distinct and recognisable aesthetic that gained international renown. The modernist style was also a communication strategy in Poland, for example through modernist architecture, which functioned and continues to function today as a legacy of modernity, and at the same time as a field of dispute over the protection and reinterpretation of the memory of the Polish People's Republic. I am referring here to the "Spodek" as a futuristic symbol of Katowice or the Central Station in Warsaw. Piotr Piotrowski's concept, described in his book In the Shadow of Yalta, argues that Polish modernism is equal, not secondary. Piotrowski develops the perspective of "horizontal art history," in which Central and Eastern Europe is not an addendum to the West, but an equal field for the creation of modernity and its own idioms of modernism. As you might guess, the goal of modernism was simplicity, rationalism and functionality, but what about aesthetics? These values do indeed reappear in many varieties of modernism, but modernism is not uniform, so it is worth recognising specific visual codes and asking how they are framed by institutions and used in narratives about modern Poland.

Modernism can also be treated as cultural memory and as a narrative tool. We should take a closer look at the concept of safe memory, a form of collective memory that is relatively consensual and "canonical," less conflictual, because it organises the past through the selection and stabilisation of common meanings in the public space. Until now, I and art historians in general have written about this trend as professional design, modernity or form. And this is where the tension comes in: form can be a "safe" language of memory, because it allows us to talk about modernity without getting into disputes about ideology and the conditions of its emergence. Have I mentioned propaganda yet? Not yet, but it is worth having it in mind, not only in the sense of literal political content, but also as propaganda of modernity and image, the way in which the state communicates itself through aesthetics.

Although modernism in Polish culture is also an ephemeral nostalgia, a regaining of identity after the war, it often served the regime, as it functioned within specific institutional conditions that regulated the visibility of art (what entered the public sphere and what remained outside

it). In this context, it is worth remembering that there were institutions and procedures that decided what could be shown in public and what could not, what art deserved subsidies, and there was censorship, including the refusal to grant permission to travel abroad to exhibitions. Art in the People's Republic of Poland did not operate in a free market. For about 40 years, the Polish economy was centrally planned and modelled on Soviet models, characterised by nationalisation and state control over production and distribution, which also had consequences for culture, as the state was the key disposer of resources, institutions and the mobility of artists. Although modernism did not promote political slogans, it was an element of the state's presentation, i.e. soft power, even though the term did not exist at the time.

Joseph S. Nye from Harvard defines soft power in his 1990 book Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power as the ability to achieve desired results through attraction and appeal rather than coercion or payment. He also points out that the sources of soft power are primarily culture, political values and the perceived legitimacy of state policies. Importantly for the analysis of cultural diplomacy, Nye emphasises that soft power usually works indirectly: many of its resources remain beyond the direct control of the government and depend on the acceptance of the audience, which is why it particularly well describes situations in which modernist aesthetics function as a transnationally legible “code of attractiveness” in the promotion of heritage.

In the concept of propaganda I mentioned earlier, he refers to the fact that contemporary museum narratives define modernism as outstanding design or the fresh language of modern form, which encourages modernism to function as a “safe memory” told through aesthetics. In fact, modernism was often shaped by state mechanisms of selection, as it was the state that financed, allowed circulation and represented it to the outside world. In this sense, I understand “propaganda” here rather as image policy and visibility management, and not exclusively as literal ideological messages. Aleida Assmann (a researcher of cultural memory, associated with the University of Konstanz) points out that the canon is a selection of what we consider to be representative heritage, and that selection is always political. Hence, modernism is not simply a neutral aesthetic legacy, but an element of history and memory politics in Poland. Whether this legacy is positive, negative or neutral is something I leave you to judge for yourselves. It is worth remembering the words of Sharon Macdonald (heritage anthropologist, associated with Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): heritage is a process of negotiation; “difficult heritage” can be tamed through aesthetics and narrative selection.

Poland 100 is a format for conducting a commemorative policy instrument for Poland by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, prepared on the occasion of the centenary of Poland regaining its independence. Its aim was to present Polish culture abroad in such a way as to awaken interest in Polish history and modernity among the audience and to show what is alive and current in Polish culture. Taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the 100th anniversary of regaining independence, the programme reinforced the international message about the strength and originality of Polish culture, which has been developing for over a thousand years, as well as its heritage. The programme was implemented almost worldwide under the slogan “Inspired by the past, we create the future.” As part of the programme, 240 cultural events were organised in 65 cities from the USA through Europe, with particular emphasis on Central Europe, to Asia. It is also worth mentioning that Poland 100 was part of the Long-Term Government Programme “Niepodległa” (Independent), entrusted by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage to the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. It was the largest project promoting Polish culture after 1989.

I would include five goals in the policy goals, including: Communication goal: to awaken interest in history and modernity, to show what is "alive and current." Cultural diplomacy goal: promotion of culture and exchange between artists and institutions around the world (the language of "cultural exchange"). Image goal: to "promote the Polish brand" and create an image of Poland (strictly state language). Memory goal in the "branding" version: the programme's slogan ("Inspired by the past, we create the future") as a synthetic formula combining memory and the future in the category of memory branding. European/regional goal: explicitly stated in the IAM communication – strengthening the image of Poland as part of a common European identity + special consideration for Central Europe. The programme had seven strategies: Music of Freedom (classical music strategy), Polish Jazz (contemporary music strategy), Constructors of a New Reality (visual arts strategy), Polish Design in the Perspective of 100 Years (design strategy), A New Vision of Theatre (theatre strategy), Polish Film Art (film strategy) and New Technologies, which included a guide to N18 on Culture.pl Where is Poland? A Foreigner's Guide to Polish Culture under the Partitions. Modernism within the framework of Poland 100 fell into the strategy: design (the history of Polish design; design in the context of Central and Eastern Europe) and visual arts/avant-garde (e.g. "Avant-garde: from the interwar period to today," "the search for a national style").

Let's focus now on memory branding, the emblem of memory. For the purposes of this article, let's assume that memory branding is a strategy in which the state and its institutions select elements of the past and package them into a coherent narrative and aesthetic in order to build a recognisable image of the country. We could distinguish three components here that highlight this definition: selection of memory (what enters the canon and what is lost forever), aestheticization (how the form "carries" the message), distribution (where and to whom it goes: exhibitions, campaigns, partnerships).

In this context, the Poland 100 programme covers a wide range of strategies and topics from music and film to design, visual arts and avant-garde which is why the slogan acts as a discursive meta-frame that organises this diversity into a single narrative. The programme's slogan, "Inspired by the past, we create the future," establishes a temporal vector of past vs. future, inscribing the programme's message in cultural progress and heritage protection. At the same time, the past is encoded here as a creative and legitimate resource ("inspiration") rather than as a field of conflict of memory, settlements or interpretative disputes. Thanks to this, the slogan enables the selective integration of various heritage themes into a coherent message in which historicity is subordinated to the logic of designing the future. Let us also look at the (in my opinion) key role of the pronoun "we," which creates a collective agent, spanning the national community, cultural institutions and the state as an actor in public policy. As a result, the slogan not only organises the programme's communication, but also stabilises the interpretative framework in which culture becomes a tool for a visible, transnationally understandable narrative about Poland as a country of "modern tradition."

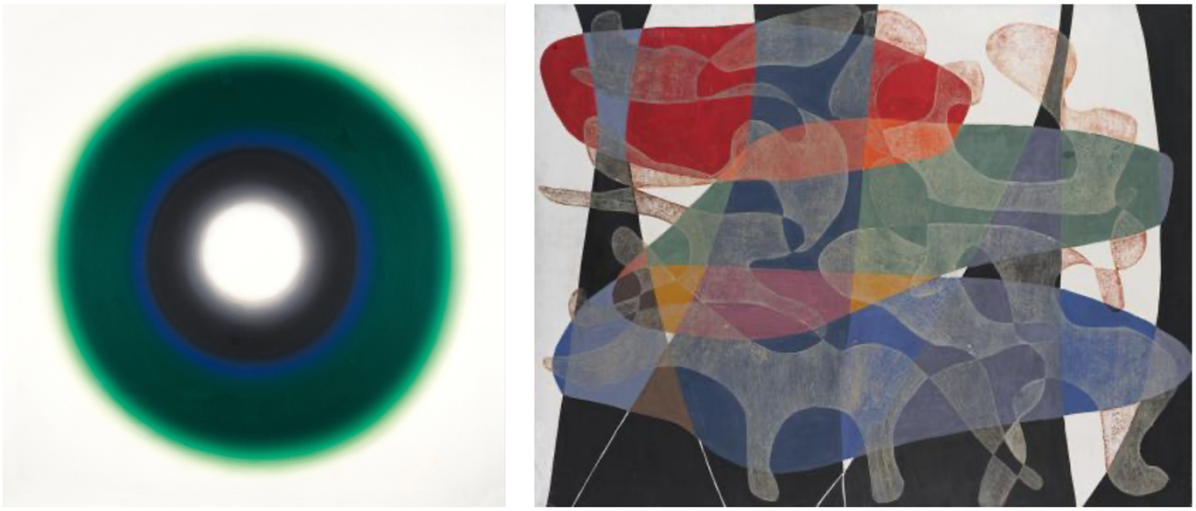
In Aleida Assmann's perspective, the selection of the past takes place through institutional canonisation, in which certain phenomena are privileged as "representative" of the community's cultural memory, while others remain in the realm of the archive. In the "Poland 100" programme, modernism particularly "falls" into the areas of design and visual/avant-garde arts, which helps to build a narrative of Poland as a country rooted in modernity and at the same time capable of creatively translating its heritage. In this logic, the question of which eras and media achieve canonical status (e.g. modernism and design) and which elements of history are considered internationally "mobile," i.e. communicable through form and visual language without an extensive local context, becomes essential. At the same time, the process

of canonisation is supported by the aestheticisation of memory: modernist visual language – abstraction, functionalism, modernist typography and rational composition acts as a "universal code" translatable in international circulation and as an "aesthetic of competence" legitimising culture through professionalism and design quality. In this way, form facilitates the creation of a "safe memory" because it allows us to talk about modernity and heritage in terms of aesthetic appeal, without having to enter into conflictual and polarised fields of historical interpretation.

If modernist form can act as a "vehicle" for cultural memory, its effectiveness is most fully manifested in specific visual realisations and their institutional frameworks of circulation. In this section, we will compare the semiotic reading of two works: Wojciech Fangor's B 103 (1966) and Maria Jarema's Penetrations I (1957).

Figure 2

Wojciech Fangor's B 103 and Maria Jarema's Penetrations I



Wojciech Fangor - *B 103*, 1966 Maria Jarema - *Penetrations I*, 1957

Source: https://fangorfoundation.org/pl/catalogue-raisonne/P.531/, https://zasoby.msl.org.pl/arts/view/493

I understand "semiotic reading" as an analysis of how an image produces meaning through the organisation of visual signs (colour, figure-ground relations, rhythm, edge modulation, spatial effect). I treat the concept of state-sponsored memory aesthetics operationally here: as a situation in which the aesthetics of modernism are incorporated into the practice of memory politics through public institutions or state-funded programmes, thus becoming a tool for building the image and legitimising a specific narrative of "modern Poland."

In Fangor's case, the status of "B 103" as a work with high communicative "mobility" is crucial. The image creates the effect of a positive illusory space through the concentric organisation of the field and soft tonal transitions that generate the impression of radiation and pulsation; in this sense, it is both "legible" in the local canon of post-war abstraction and compatible with the international idiom of 1960s abstraction. (including, in terms of reception, with the op-art regime of vision). At the level of denotation, we obtain an almost "pure" perceptual situation (colour, halo, centre, expansion towards the edges), and at the level of connotation, a code of modernity understood as the rationalisation of vision, experimentation and professional craftsmanship. This is what makes "B 103" a convenient emblem in promotional narratives: the institution can "express modernity" through its form alone, without the need for extensive historical commentary. It is worth clearly naming the "type of founder" in the sense of the

current regime of visibility: B 103 appears in Abstraction.PL (Olomouc, 2018), co-organised by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute as part of POLSKA 100, financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in the NIEPODLEGŁA 2017–2021 programme.

In contrast, Maria Jarema's Penetrations I activates a different but complementary model of encoding modernity. The technique combining monotype and tempera painting (paper/canvas) reinforces the impression of interpenetrating planes: rich, organically modelled forms remain in dynamic relation with a translucent, "foggy" top layer. It emphasises the category of pulsating movement spreading in multiple directions and a consistent pursuit of abstraction through the elimination of mimetic references, which allows this work to be read as a semiotic "encoding" of relationality, tensions and dynamics (and not just a formal programme). Equally important here is the "type of founder" in the historical sense: Penetrations I belongs to a series shown at the 1958 Venice Biennale in the Polish Pavilion. This context shifts the image from the level of autonomy to the field of representation: modernism functions not only as an artistic language, but also as a resource of the "official visibility" of culture in international circulation.

Here, modernism as an emblem and communication of memory has two modes of operation:

1. the contemporary mode, in which institutions select and medially format modernism as the canon of "modern tradition" in cultural diplomacy (here: POLSKA 100 and Abstraction.PL),
2. historical mode, in which abstraction functions as a language of representation in conditions of geopolitical competition for visibility (here: Venice 1958).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that the story of Polish modernism as an emblem of memory is also the history of the region and the history of the global circulation of art. In Central Europe, modernism often served as a language of modernisation and aspiration, and today it is sometimes used as a reputational resource: it allows a country to talk about itself through the canon of modernity, and not only through trauma or geopolitical divisions. The Poland 100 programme is a good example here, as it shows how the state organises memory in the form of communication formats and institutional partnerships, activating soft power mechanisms. My methodological proposal is to study these processes simultaneously at the level of visual form and at the level of policy instruments because only then can we see how modernism "works" as diplomacy. And this is also an invitation to make comparisons: with other countries in the region and with other nation branding strategies based on modern art.

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