ABSTRACT

In the 1980s, author Milan Kundera challenged the notion that 'Central Europe' equates to 'Eastern Europe', arguing that such labels stem from political constructs. Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe* supports this, describing how Western Europeans viewed the East as backward. In this visual essay, I argue that the idea of 'backward Eastern Europe' persists still. The notion of an 'inferior East' distorts our view of historical periods such as those associated with the Polish People's Republic. My research on Wrocław's post-war architecture brought unexpected revelations. For example, the modernist ZETO building revealed having advanced technology and high female employment, contradicting stereotypes of the 'inferior East'. Inspired by the speculative fiction work of Amitav Ghosh and Ursula Le Guin, in this visual essay I employ imagination to re-envision the past. This is achieved through an artistic exercise in which I merge photographs from my archival research on ZETO building with scenes from the popular TV series 'Sex and the City' to challenge ingrained perceptions and reveal hidden histories.

keywords

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Dare to imagine

an exercise in recapturing the Past of the East

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In his 1983 essay 'Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale' [The Kidnapped West, or the Tragedy of Central Europe], Milan Kundera, the well-known Czech writer, challenged the then prevailing conviction (both politically and in the minds of the people of the so-called 'West'[1], and in his case, especially in France) that 'Central Europe' is 'Eastern Europe'. In his interpretation, 'Central Europe' was part of the West 'captured' by the East, which the West supposedly did not even notice (Kundera 1983). Thus, he treated these concepts as mere constructs of the prevailing political discourse. As the British cultural researcher Stuart Hall later aptly observed, 'our ideas of "East" and "West" have never been free of myth and fantasy (...) Eastern Europe doesn't (doesn't yet? never did?) belong properly to "the West"' (Hall 1992). One can understand why Kundera, after migrating to France, did not want to be associated with the term 'Eastern European'; as Larry Wolff later described in *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Eastern Europeans were associated with many negative connotations, such as backwardness, enslavement, totalitarianism, and the imposed dependence on the Russian Empire (Wolff 1994), or later, the Soviet Union.[2] For artists particularly, this must have been quite difficult, as the art of this region was often regarded as provincial in relation to Western European art (Piotrowski 2005).

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. New countries emerged, such as Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Ukraine. Most of them adopted parliamentary democracy and a neo-liberal market economy. Collectively referred to in Poland as the *transformation*, these processes brought integration

[1] In Kundera's time, the collective 'West' was primarily considered to include the countries of Western and Northern Europe, such as France, Great Britain, and West Germany, but also the United States and Canada. As Stuart Hall wrote: 'We have to use shorthand generalizations like "West" and "Western" but we need to remember that they represent very complex ideas and have no simple or single meaning.' For more see: Hall Stuart, '*The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power*', 1992, [in:] *Essential Essays vol. 2. Identity and Diaspora*, ed. Morley David, 2019, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

[2] The Eastern Bloc, also referred to as the Communist or Soviet Bloc, was the term used to describe countries that found themselves dependent on the Soviet Union after the end of World War 2. In Europe, they were usually a member of the military Warsaw Pact, which included countries such as East Germany, Polish People's Republic, Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Hungarian People's Republic, People's Republic of Bulgaria, Socialist Republic of Romania, and Socialist Republic of Romania.

with the broader West, representing a 'return' to it, as it were. Bojana Pejić, curator of the Stockholm exhibition *After the Wall* (1999-2000), which initiated the study of post-communism in Central and Eastern European art, characterised the time of transformation in the catalogue as a rejection of 'unwanted communism' and an embrace of the awaited 'normality' (Pejić 1999). But more than 30 years after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the construct of 'Eastern Europe' still seems prevalent not only in the West but also among Central Europeans. Even in the academic field, many academics struggle to appreciate the history of Central and Eastern Europe. In the field of art history, mention should be made of the work of Piotr Piotrowski, who emphasises the distinctiveness and common experiences of the post-communist countries of Europe (Piotrowski 2010). I myself can see this struggle in the perception of the life history of my grandmothers' and parents' generations. I would argue that, in the general consciousness of Poles, the period of the Polish People's Republic was a time when Poland was the 'worst East', not only a colony of the USSR but also a backward, enslaved, totalitarian place. Indeed, the stereotype of Eastern Europe has captured our imagination about the past and, by extension, our idea of ourselves. Perhaps this can be compared to the period of the *Estado Novo* in Portugal or the *dictadura franquista* in Spain. Despite the extreme ideological, economic, and political differences underlying conservative dictatorships and communist totalitarianisms, in those society's mass memory they appear similarly as periods of violence, censorship and restrictions of freedom. A memory filled with shame, that we want to forget. Breaking free from this and imagining a different interpretation of history is no simple task.

For myself, the breakthrough of these perceptions took place in rather unexpected circumstances: during my academic research on the post-war modernist architecture of Wrocław (where I live now). Not only did the modernist ZETO (Computing Enterprises) building in Wrocław turn out to be the birthplace of Polish IT and the heart of new technologies (Was the People's Republic not supposed to be backward?), maintaining regular contacts with IT companies in the UK (Wasn't the People's Republic, as part of the East, supposed to be cut off from the enlightened West?), it was also a place where 70% of employees were women. Half had a university degree, and the average age was 27 (Pacholak 2019).

The information I discovered was so incompatible with the ideas functioning in my mind that it was hard for me to imagine it at all: young, educated women working on the cutting edge of technology in a shiny, modern setting. I asked myself whether I had not got something wrong, whether my sources were trustworthy, how I could record this in my research.

Recent years have brought new research and confirmation of my intuitions (see for example Wasilewska 2020), but I can now say with certainty that at the time

I was suffering from a crisis of imagination. Often deceitful, as it turns out, stereotypes about our history, equated with being an 'inferior' East to the West, were strong enough to interfere with my scholarly assumptions. Were it not for them, would I have been able to imagine a different vision of the past, to formulate other research questions and go further in my discoveries? I wondered: Are we even able to imagine a different past? And if not, how can we formulate new questions about it? How to 'recapture' our history?

Bengali Indian writer and anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh, says that fiction may be the best form through which we can overcome the crisis of imagination. Our inability to imagine a different state of the world ends up weakening the forces of reform or revolution and supporting the incumbent in power. And while Ghosh was writing in the context of the future and the climate crisis, I could use the same argument in the context of the past and the crisis in Eastern Europe (Ghosh 2017). Prevailing notions of a backward East work in favour of maintaining imperial dependencies in our part of the continent. It is perhaps symptomatic that it was after 1989, in the face of major geopolitical changes and a sense of instability, that alternative histories became increasingly popular. As Ewa Solska notes, so-called 'counterfactuality', a mix of science fiction, narrativism and the idea of the 'open work', can be a good method of explaining history, a method already used by historians such as Arnold Toynbee and Alexander Demandt (Solska 2017), and also occurring among contemporary artists.[3] I tried to imagine a better version of the past to counterbalance the stereotypical vision of the People's Republic of Poland weighing on me. Indeed, as renowned speculative fiction writer, Ursula K. Le Guin, wrote: 'It is above all by the imagination that we achieve perception, compassion, and hope' (Le Guin 1979). Let us picture and envision a past that can unlock our imagination and lead us to ask more daring questions.

I decided to expand the vision of young, capable female ZETO employees even further. Leslie Kern, in her book *Feminist City* evokes many cultural visions of female life in the big city. One of the more popular is 'Sex and the City', an American comedy-drama (bordering on fantasy) television series (1998-2004) depicting female friendship in a consumerist big-city shtick. As Kern writes, 'For far more ordinary women, friendships are also part of our urban survival toolkits' (Kern 2019). I decided that this series would be perfect for my imagination exercise as there was no comparable series on the Polish television. While the closest Polish alternative was perhaps 'Matki, żony i kochanki' (Mothers, wives and lovers) from 1996-1998[4], which also featured a group of female friends as the main protagonists, the fashion and reality of 1990s Poland, in the transformation era, couldn't match the aesthetic of New York and its highly fashionable, sexually liberated heroines. At the time, this rich Western reality that we wanted so desperately to belong

[3] The surreal and participatory art of Polish contemporary artist Paweł Althmaer would be a worthy example, including works such as *Common Task* (2009), in which he imagines a different end to communism through a happening of made-up 'Golden People' from a real communist housing estate in Warsaw's Bródno district flying to Brussels in golden overalls. See: Althamer, Paweł, 'Common Task', [in:] *Out of Time, Out of Place. Public Art Now*, ed. Claire Doherty, London 2015, p. 133.

[4] See: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0399992/ [access:15.07.2024]

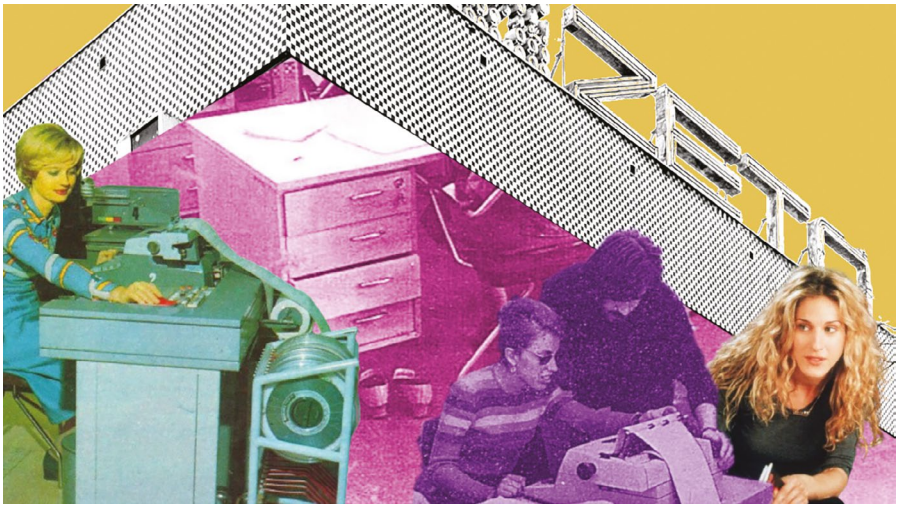

Fig. 1 IT girl

Fig. 2 Bar 'Barbara'

Fig. 3 Wrocław Market Square

Fig. 4 Kindergarten

to could be seen as exotic even. While 'Sex and the City' was popular, its perpetuation of unrealistic worldviews and problematic gender and economic stereotypes and assertions of US hegemony were widely acknowledged. But perhaps then it only reinforced this attractive, almost 'exotic' vision of the West for the post-communist countries? I would argue that the uncritical adoption of Western models was a big part of the Polish transformation mentality (or still is?), which fed on the shame of being an 'Eastern European'. Could we, paradoxically, take advantage of this psychic-cultural mechanism and use it perversely to heal hurtful stereotypes about the past?

The process of imagining an alternative vision of the past in which women had agency was simple. I pasted fashionably dressed heroines in social situations from the series onto archival photos of Wrocław from the communist period, adding bright colours to contest the collective stereotype that the period of communism was dominated by grey, unattractive, concrete city architecture (Chomątowska 2018, Basista 2001). This is how this creative essay was born.

So what would a typical day for ZETO female employees have looked like in an alternative past? Perhaps after working on new technologies they would go for lunch together on nearby Świdnicka Street, at the fashionable bar 'Barbara', famous for its so-called *Sultan's cream* dessert.[5] Later — time for shopping. Wrocław's Carrie Bradshaw would need a place to stock up on new shoes and would probably go to the 'Feniks' department store in Wrocław's Market Square, one of the few places where you could buy everything from food to clothes. What next? Let us not exclude mothers from the ranks of modern, metropolitan women — maybe one has to pick up her children from a nearby kindergarten. Why shouldn't her friends see her off? And so I ended up with a picture of Samantha Jones in a communist kindergarten. This triggered an avalanche of thoughts in my head. The figure of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a red outfit — of course, it had to be Carol as played by Cate Blanchett in the Todd Haynes film of the same name (2015). Another story began to open up in my mind — perhaps a similar character is here not just to escort her friend to kindergarten after work, maybe some young, single kindergarten teacher, Wrocław's Therese, caught her eye? At this point, another thought immediately appeared: Is this an exaggeration? A young, educated ZETO employee and a lesbian to boot? What is this, the West?

This time, however, armed with the courage to imagine unthinkable things about the past, a counter-thought quickly came: *Why not?* Educated female ZETO employees existed — this is a proven fact. There is no information that lesbians suddenly disappeared for a couple of decades during the communist period. So the assumption that such a story is unlikely is just that — mere assumption. Now that we have such a picture in mind, we can start asking other kinds of less obvi-

[5] Bar 'Barbara' was a famous and fashionable milk bar located in the centre of Wroclaw on Świdnicka Street, opened in the 1960s. It served both dinners (dumplings, tripe and beef scions with buckwheat groats), ice cream, beer, and desserts, including the famous 'Sultan cream' made of two layers of whipped cream, with cocoa. See: Łuczyński, Romuald, 2020, *Gastronomia wrocławska w czasach małej stabilizacji (1957-1970)*, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, p. 230-233.

Fig. 5 Wrocław Zoo

ous questions and perhaps discover completely unknown aspects of our history. Polish queer artist and researcher Karol Radziszewski, in his film *MON CHÉRI SOVIÉTIQUE* (2021), presented a story that many Poles couldn't even dream of — the romances between male Red Army soldiers stationed in Wrocław during the communist era and the local gay community. Witnesses to the story presented by Radziszewski recall their Soviet lovers with a sense of exuberance, even expressing regret that they had to leave them when the Red Army left Poland after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in the 1990s. I would argue that a story like this would not be possible to discover within the prevailing stereotype about 'Eastern Europe', of the backward and inferior communist Poland. It would not be possible to even ask a question that could lead to such a story and people. And yet, Radziszewski not only found the witnesses of this history but recorded their testimonies.

And while it may seem unlikely, who knows if in the past some ZETO employees, Karolina and Teresa, didn't have a fiery, secret romance in Wrocław during the communist period? Perhaps they moved in together and lived with each other for the rest of their lives — or still do. And their story is yet to be discovered.

Fig. 6 Neon signs on Piłsudski Street

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