

On the future between vision and engagement

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Tomorrow never dies... Perhaps it is the certainty of tomorrow that is one of the manifestations of the detranscendentalising of the contemporary image of the world most fraught with consequences, and, at the same time, the reason why the future in culture is not often tackled by the humanities today. The future which does not appear to us as a breakthrough in comparison with the present seems to be much less attractive, it loses its dimension of mystery, which earlier was a challenge to imagination. After all, it was mysteriousness, uncertainty of predictions, the future which “is like a constantly moving horizon”¹, that was a source of utopian visions. Their lack today – for can we find them anywhere outside the aestheticised sphere of fantasy? – does not seem to be only a result of the rejection of the modernist self-righteousness and the positivist replacement of prophets by planners. Indeed, the Plan itself often turned out to be a utopian premise in the age of totalitarianisms, which explained Jan Strzelecki’s description of socialism as “project fandom”² or Mircea Eliade’s pointing to the religious nature of socialist mythology³. But the turn of the 21st century is more a time of certainty of tomorrow – from the above mentioned formula from the Bond series – than an equivalent of the medieval millennialist anxieties. Forecasts formulated at the end of the 20th century by thinkers and scientists, which in their versions popularised by the media replaced prophetic visions, seem to be extremely cautious by comparison, subordinated to the principle of verification that imposes discipline on them, closer to strategies

¹ D. Czaja, Lekcja ciemności. Dwa spojrzenia na Apokalipsę, *Konteksty* 1999, no. 4, p. 80.

² J. Strzelecki, Projektofania: historia jako wcielenie wartości, *Odra* 1982, no. 11.

³ M. Eliade, Mity współczesnego świata, [in:] idem, *Mity, sny i misteria*, transl. K. Kocjan, Warszawa 1994.

of future actions than to cosmological images⁴. Perhaps this was also the intuition of Kraków ethnologists, who quoted Czesław Miłosz in the title of a conference devoted to eschatology at the turn of the millennia: “No other end of the world will there be”⁵. There has been no apocalypse or we have failed to notice it, but announcing the end of eschatology seems to well reflect the state of imagination and spirit of the period.

Tomorrow never dies, this *never ending story*, this eternal present of today is as much linked to the time of fairy-tale or political *fantasy*, virtuality of computer games or other possibilities of modern technology, as to a blurring of boundaries, liquid mixing of the past, the present and the future. What seems more important here than a change of the way of understanding time, a departure from a regular “eternal return” and historical linearity – which are replaced by a stream or course of events without a beginning and an end, and far removed from a sequential order – is the treatment of time as one of the internal factors constituting reality that happens and is experienced. In this sense, the future is a dimension of the human world and not an external framework determining this world; at the same time it still remains unfinished, uncertain, open, like the perception of reality itself⁶.

The way of understanding the openness of the human world is reflected in the transformation of terms used to describe it – tolerance and dialogue dominating in the 1970s and the 1980s are being replaced today by transculturality or inter-culture, which in itself makes us realise that we need to reformulate our current repertoire of questions and come up with a new conceptualisation of the problem. In the postmodern world, in which blurring concerns not only the differences between national or local cultures, but also differences between previously separate branches of knowledge or spheres of cognition, calls for tolerance or dialogue not so much sound less revolutionary as are followed on the level of participation in a complex, multidimensional reality. Openness and curiosity about otherness, a new kind of universalism constituted by the cult of diversity are regarded as inherent qualities of the contemporary world. In its description dualist categories have been replaced by metaphors; a search for regularities has been replaced by case studies; the question about the specificity of phenomena has been abandoned in favour of the liquidity of their boundaries. Examples of this include aesthetics, with its departure from the modernist understanding of art in terms of the Kantian disinterestedness or autonomy towards a pluralistic and open approach to it that can be applied in the context of various cultures⁷. This also means replacing the

⁴ Such conclusions can be drawn from reading books like S. Griffiths, *Predictions: Thirty Great Minds on the Future*, Oxford University Press 1999.

⁵ The conference proceedings have been published in *Konteksty* 1999, no. 4.

⁶ This perspective is presented in a collection of papers given to Prof. Sław Krzemień-Ojak, who for years studied this topic, *Kultura i przyszłość*, ed. A. Kisielewska, N. Szydłowska, Białystok 2006.

⁷ K. Wilkoszewska, *Estetyka transkulturowa*, Kraków 2004.

modernist variety, which is a result of breaking up the whole, with the notion of multiplicity as a primordial and basic state of things, i.e. replacing it with a hybridity or heterogeneity of the world, and, consequently, talking not so much about dialogue or tolerance, but about transformation as a way of its existence.

The problem of openness in the context of culture was until recently marked by the borderline category, serving as a bridge between philosophical reflection and culture studies. The borderline “with its liquidity, mobility, changeability begins to signify any culture”⁸ – was the conclusion, as it was seen as an equivalent of transculturality and one of the most important notions of contemporary humanistic reflection⁹. This reflection, even when it reaches for categories functioning earlier, stresses first of all their dynamic dimension. Event-based, process-based way of understanding culture is what makes the category of performativity popular, a category that has long crossed the boundary of theatrical phenomena. In looking for analogies used to understand the postmodern reality, scholars point primarily to the new media and the way of experiencing the world that is open to change and determined by them. Like in the case of performativity, openness thus defined is associated with human activity and involvement; however, this time it is not owing to the nature of culture as an event, but owing to the synchronic, interactive form of experience in the virtual space.

Thus, the open, process-like nature of reality seems to be replacing the indeterminacy of the future and pushes aside its prophetic visions, the teleology of which, regarded as naive, has ceased to arouse hopes. Today we can see even more clearly that the future and its predicting, in the face of multidimensionality, liquidity, merging and change of the world, carry with them a bigger risk than the modernist “scientific” social and cultural predictions. They were based on models that often contradicted each other (like evolutionism and inevolutionism, concepts of development and decline, utopian and restorative image of the world accompanying them), which justified considerable caution, regardless of their future verification. This was revealed especially by historiosophical visions concerning – significantly – civilisation more often than culture. After all, civilisation, as a way of adapting to the demands of the environment connected with the development of technology, was described usually in terms of its characteristic cumulative, gradual development. This made it possible to present predictions referring to a cause-and-effect model of the future, according to which “novelty [...] is the occurrence of the expected”¹⁰. Today, this way of understanding continuity and ways of predicting based on it are not used even with regard to the process

⁸ S. Bednarek, O pojęciu pogranicza w refleksji kulturoznawczej, [in:] *Kultura i przyszłość...*, p. 77.

⁹ The problem of boundaries and experiencing, blurring and crossing them was the central theme at the 1st Congress of the Polish Culture Studies Society in 2008 — see *Granice kultury*, ed. A. Gwóźdź, Katowice 2010.

¹⁰ J. Lotman, *Kultura i eksplozja*, transl. B. Żyłko, Warszawa 1999, p. 36.

of evolution, which was a perfect example of this model¹¹. Juri Lotman pointed out that what mattered in culture as much as gradual changes were processes that were explosions (this is how the Russian word *vzryv* was translated). The future, especially when we are talking about a scientific discovery or novelty in art, arises “out of the unexpected” and is not determined by the laws of causality or probability¹². A similar intuition guided Stanisław Pietraszko in his interest in the notion of emergence, which was to describe specifically cultural process of the origins and dynamics as “self-emerging”¹³.

Failed predictions teach us to be sceptical about expectations that the humanities may predict the future; indeed, they tell us to be circumspect even about the ability of formulating its vision. However, hopes associated with the prophetic power of not only reflection but, above all, broadly defined art, also found their confirmation¹⁴. “Art is the domain of the unpredictable”¹⁵, which was revealed particularly by avant-garde tendencies; its nature is that of a constant search for new solutions and abolition of limitations. Hence the international and universalist nature of the avant-garde, though the form of its programmes as well as the art itself have their own local and historical determinants. However, today the old notion of the avant-garde, based on a dichotomous division into the old and the new, seems to be outdated, for example in the face of cultural globalisation. Like the earlier ways of approaching art from the perspective of its autotelic nature, which were strengthened by the image of the independent creator, transgressing the existing boundaries, ahead of his or her time, they belong to the past. The Romantic elevation of the artist, giving him the status of a visionary, acknowledging his prophetic role were an alternative to the positivist models, in which the future was the culmination of the evolutionist project. As Claude Lévi-Strauss put it, in the face of a threat, crisis or chaos, the artistic genius and the shaman revealed their power, this special ability to go beyond the well-known trajectories of conventional images of the world, discovering new dimensions of building sense¹⁶. Today’s blurring of the boundary between

¹¹ “The image of evolution as a tree climbing up has ceased to be adequate. It is replaced by the image of rhizome or mycelium. The underground sprout of herbaceous plants – the rhizome – grows without a break, horizontally, until the stem (species) sprouts from it, budding and developing in favourable conditions”; A. Szczeklik, *Nieśmiertelność*, Kraków 2012, p. 56. It is worth pointing out that the rhizome metaphor often appears in the postmodernist humanities (see K. Wilkoszewska, *Wariacje na postmodernizm*, Kraków 1997).

¹² J. Lotman, *Kultura...*, pp. 36, 43. Just as significant is the title of Lotman’s earlier article, devoted to the role of regularity and chance in the historical process: *Wola boska czy gra hazardowa* [God’s will or a game of chance], *Konteksty* 1997, no. 1-2, pp. 32-36.

¹³ S. Pietraszko, *Studia o kulturze*, Wrocław 2012.

¹⁴ In his lectures Stanisław Pietraszko pointed to the kind of epistemic initiating power of art.

¹⁵ Im więcej wiem, tym więcej nie wiem (interview with J. Lotman, ed. I. Lewandowska), *Gazeta Wyborcza* 19-20 March 1994, p. 18.

¹⁶ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologia strukturalna*, transl. K. Pomian, Warszawa 1970.

the artist and the audience deprives the artist of the Romantic status of genius, which has significant consequences. When everyone can be a prophet, no one becomes one.

What we get in lieu of visions of the future, the crisis of which can also be associated with the age of ideology and its dramatic consequences¹⁷, is uncertainty, concern for the world, and involvement. In this context, art, treated already before as an “experimental sphere of our consciousness [...] in which a complex game takes place, a game in which the accidental mixes with the inevitable”¹⁸, is less interesting as an illustration of the complex mechanisms of the dynamics of culture, which raises the hopes of emancipation in the face of the social-political determination of our behaviour, acquiring a pragmatic value. There is a perspective outlined by Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska, sympathising with the demands to link reflection to imagination, research practice in social sciences and the humanities to artistic practice. The role of art in this collaboration is to use the freedom of imagination not to create visions of the future, but to free it from the obvious, which limits our freedom, the obvious, which is ascribed to the perception of the present. In this sense art can become a “kind of laboratory, accessible to all, of forms of ‘practising freedom’”¹⁹, while the combination of the emancipating possibilities of artistic practice and research practices, based on the independence of the mind, paves the way for the contemporary engaged humanities.

Until recently, the dominant understanding of culture as a legacy of many centuries was more conducive to pointing to the sources of the present rather than the “emerging future”. Today, the changeability and process-like nature of culture is seen mainly from the perspective of the present, of its description and of attempts at understanding. The future, predictions and plans concerning it appear not only in scientific or visionary concepts, and the path from visions to engagement is one of the many possible ways of putting them in order. Worthy of note in particular is the presence of the future in everyday practice. Sometimes the future is the object of concern, fear, anxiety, expectation, desire, fascination or hope; it is an important part of our image of the world, and, above all, of experiencing it. That is why today’s interest in the future in the reflection on culture should be focused on recognising the place occupied today by the future among the values that determine our lifestyles. What is the past and to whom is it important today – these may be some of the key questions in contemporary reflection on culture.

¹⁷ K. Pomian, *Kryzys przyszłości*, [in:] *O kryzysie*, ed. K. Michalski, Warszawa 1990, pp. 95-113.

¹⁸ *Im więcej wiem...*, p. 18.

¹⁹ A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, O pożytkach ze współpracy refleksji z wyobraźnią słów kilka, [in:] *Kultura wiedzy*, ed. J. Hudzik, P. Celiński, Kraków 2012.