

---

 Grzegorz Niziołek
 

---

## The Crisis of the Modern City: Counterculture in Wrocław

---

TEKSTY DRUGIE 2023, NR 1, S. 170–182

DOI: 10.18318/td.2023.en.1.13 | ORCID: 0000-0001-5082-8285

Counterculture impulses, practices, and influences not only shaped the cultural identity of Wrocław at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, but also had an effect on the topography of how it was imagined as an open city, joined by an unusual network, a playing field with changing rules. In no other Polish city did counterculture inspirations weave such a tight fabric of innovative and interconnected institutions, projects, and ideas. Wrocław's location played a part here – it was isolated from the national narratives and located in the sphere of transnational influence, with a potential to challenge prevailing views. This sudden, abrupt, and ephemeral bloom occurred in a city whose history is perhaps postwar Europe's most remarkable social laboratory.

As Ewa Rewers contests, the urban space “stimulates our cognitive activity, opens prospects of new streets leading in unfamiliar directions.”<sup>1</sup> The city creates a condensed space, in which multitudes of social, ideological,

---

**Grzegorz Niziołek**  
– prof. dr hab., heads the Department of Theatre and Drama at the Faculty of Polish Studies of the Jagiellonian University and conducts a drama seminar at the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow. He deals with the issues of cultural memory and the public sphere. He received the Jan Długosz Award for the monograph *Polish Theatre of the Holocaust* (2013); its translation into English was published by Bloomsbury in 2019. Email: grzegorz.niziolek@uj.edu.pl.

---

1 Ewa Rewers, “Gdańsk jako narracja: nawarstwianie czy modyfikacja” [Gdańsk as a narrative: Layering or modification], *Ars Educandi* 2 (2000): 109. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are translated by the author of this article.

and cultural conflicts are expressed, recorded, and resolved. The history of postwar Wrocław is an example of a fierce intensification of these kinds of cognitive processes to overcome the experience of disorientation: being and moving about in a city whose topographical logic was thoroughly disrupted by the ravages of the war, and where social memory found itself in a place of emptiness and ignorance. This city, whose wartime destruction was comparable to Warsaw's, whose population was entirely swapped over the course of two postwar years, and which turned from a German city to a Polish one at lightning speed, had a political status which, owing to the resolutions of the Potsdam Agreement, remained uncertain for decades to come,<sup>2</sup> preventing its new inhabitants from feeling entirely secure. This city, whose support for the Nazi Party was greater than in other German cities, was to become a world center of leftist politics. In this city, the network of connections, in both a literal and figurative sense, was utterly broken, and had to be reorganized, produced once more, in all due haste. Small wonder, then, that the reconstruction of the transportation network, readily mentioned in written reports and in oral family stories, was of special significance in the city's postwar history.<sup>3</sup> The launch of bus and tram lines was always a big social event – they were obstructed by the rubble littering the streets and the destruction to the transport infrastructure, as well as the lack of staff with knowledge of the transit layout. In the reports of the first inhabitants, there are also tales of letters that took weeks on end to find their way from the post office to their recipients, or of wandering through debris and labyrinths of alien streets in a lengthy effort to get home.

After the war, Wrocław was seen as a city that was foreign, hostile, inhospitable, and inflexible; its topography was indecipherable, and its buildings did not generate the popular enthusiasm of Warsaw's. Bricks were carried from here to Warsaw and Gdańsk, and the city was plundered and destroyed for many months after the war. We could continue to list the factors that made Wrocław a social laboratory with special conditions and parameters: bearing in mind, for instance, that its postwar population came here from very different parts of Poland, often culturally foreign to one another. It is little more than a myth that the city was mainly settled by exiles from the eastern parts of the country which were absorbed by the Soviet Union after the war (known as the "Recovered Territories," they were meant to serve as compensation for the lost lands in the east).

---

2 The course of Poland's western border, according to the Potsdam Agreement, was meant to be established during a future peace conference, which never came about.

3 B. Jankowski, "Śladami wrocławskich tramwajów i autobusów" [In the tracks of Wrocław trams and buses], *Kalendarz Wrocławski* (1971), 133–38.

The degree of destruction here, the total break in the continuity of its pre-1945 history, and the complete exchange of the population inspired and encouraged utopian dreams, projects for a new, model socialist city. These projects were created in response to the numerous competitions, most of which never came to fruition, and some only in part.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for this were meant to be the high investment costs, the city's uncertain status, and the poorly integrated social resources. Wrocław was the largest city that Poland acquired with the postwar border shift; in 1944 it numbered nearly a million inhabitants, but in the first years after the war it was more a complex of isolated semi-rural settlements than an integrated urban fabric. Many of its new residents were closer to a rural life than an urban one.

The clash between the utopian, propagandist reconstruction plans and the chaotic process of restoring Wrocław's urban life largely set the pace of the city's cultural development. As Padraic Kenney phrased it, "Wrocław grew without an organizing force. [...] The reach of the state and the parties was severely limited by the extensive damage to Wrocław's infrastructure by the war, the chaotic influx of people into Wrocław, and the city's distance from Warsaw."<sup>5</sup> Thus, Wrocław became an arena for a spectacular crisis of the modernist concepts of city-building and a stage for somewhat uncontrolled, improvised actions, which began increasingly to affect its identity. This state of crisis and failure was fittingly captured during a discussion held by artists invited to the Wrocław '70 Visual Arts Symposium, which made the city a "gigantic playing field"<sup>6</sup> and was planned as an attempt to mark out new points of reference in the city's topography. Antoni Dzieduszycki, a Wrocław critic with ties to the local avant-garde society, described the situation as follows: "We have to admit that, for the time being, Wrocław has practically no spatial or urbanistic structure. The old one has been destroyed, and no new one has been created, it is shattered and broken to pieces. [...] Wrocław looks awful with these chunks bitten out of it, with these places where nothing is happening, where the space is a mess."<sup>7</sup> As we can see, a sense of temporality,

4 The history of these competitions is described by Agata Gabiś in *Cafe morze budowania. Wrocławska architektura 1956–1970* [A whole sea of building: Wrocław's architecture 1956–1970] (Wrocław: Muzeum Architektury, 2018), 373–403.

5 Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Working and Communists 1945–1950* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 145.

6 Aleksander Wojciechowski, *Młode malarstwo polskie 1944–1974* [Young Polish Painting 1944–1974] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1975), 137.

7 *Symposium Plastyczne Wrocław '70* [Wrocław '70 Visual Arts Symposium], ed. Piotr Lisowski (Wrocław: 2020), 206.

instability, and disorientation haunted the city's inhabitants long after the war. And although Edward Stachura, on a visit in 1960, was delighted at the landscape of the city under reconstruction ("A sea of scaffolding. Or maybe less a sea than whole flotillas of scaffolding ships. This is construction. A sea of construction"),<sup>8</sup> two decades later, in 1978, Tadeusz Chrzanowski made this summary of the effort: "All these years after the war, this is a city that still needs rebuilding. It is a city of pits and scrub, notches and neglect, its planning on paper, and not in the space."<sup>9</sup>

Outlining her "introduction to the philosophy of the postmodern city," Rewers calls attention to a few characteristic phenomena. First, the postmodern city is primarily a fabric of events, not a stable architectural and social structure. Second, it is inhabited not by citizens, but by strangers arriving here from other cultural spheres. Third, the ontology of the city is determined, above all, by the sites of discontinuity: the transitions, bridges, the in-between spaces. It is the event, foreignness, and discontinuity – not permanence, familiarity, and continuity – that determined Wrocław's development after 1945. As such, we might take the first three decades of the city's postwar history as a series of initiatives, failures, and compensatory, reparative actions. Rewers makes the post-*polis* an intrinsic part of the city's philosophy: "the postindustrial cities of the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are increasingly breaking free from their root – the *polis* – and drifting in directions which many disciplines of study are at a loss to describe."<sup>10</sup> The postwar history of Wrocław is a warped, historico-materialist prefiguration of this phenomenon. The core of the city was destroyed in 1945, and the reconstruction processes drifted in many different directions. The specter of a non-existing Wrocław that haunted the everyday lives of its new inhabitants created a virtual space which, according to Rewers, typifies the postmodern post-*polis*.

The aforementioned Wrocław Symposium '70 was a hybrid undertaking, joining modernist intentions with postmodern impulses. The initiative was taken up by various local communities on the "25th anniversary of the return of the Western and Northern Territories to the Motherland" – and although it gained the support and patronage of the city government, it was not managed

8 Edward Stachura, *Moje wielkie świętowanie* [My big celebration] (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 2007), 40–43.

9 Tadeusz Chrzanowski, "Stary Wrocław – książki i rzeczywistość" [Old Wrocław – Books and Reality], *Odra* 3 (1978): 16.

10 Ewa Rewers, *Post-polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta* [Post-polis: Introduction to the philosophy of the postmodern city] (Kraków: Universitas, 2005), 5.

from above, with the key theoretical premises being formulated by representatives of the radical Wrocław avant-garde. Thirty-nine artists from around Poland were initially invited, and later the list was expanded. The first point of the regulations stated the chief mandate:

The aim of the Symposium is an attempt to contrast various contemporary ways of thinking in the visual arts, effectively leading to the creation of outstanding works of art in the city fabric. The organizers anticipate that the proposed solutions will create a new spatial-urbanistic structure for the city.<sup>11</sup>

It is not hard to see that this idea was, to a large degree, a response to the crisis of the modernist projects to reconstruct Wrocław. The artists were brought to the city to find locations for their future works. The impressions they took from this journey were generally dismal; everyone pointed out the empty squares left behind from the demolished houses, the sudden gaps in the lines of buildings, the jumble of different urbanistic structures. These negative emotions, I believe, were meant to drive creativity, but the artists felt at once that their task was beyond them: “The city is thoroughly destroyed and to salvage it, to truly begin to speak of a city, this would be a long and expensive undertaking.”<sup>12</sup> The mission to “salvage” the city, or, as Wiesław Borowski put it, “to cover up certain shortcomings,”<sup>13</sup> met with resistance, and the concept that new works would serve as new markers and create a coherent structure to organize the city space where this structure had been destroyed seemed quite unrealistic, even utopian. The Symposium idea did not come out of nowhere, however; it arose from a certain praxis visible to one and all. It was not by chance that Antoni Dzieduszycki mentioned Jerzy Grotowski and his theatre in Wrocław during one Symposium discussion as a presence creating the city’s new identity, connecting Wrocław with world culture and the main movements of counterculture theatre.

At a certain point, culture and art began serving to make quick bonds and links in postwar Wrocław, or, as Anna Markowska suggests, a network of ephemeral performances, “physical experiences and somatic rituals,”<sup>14</sup> as a response to historical trauma. An openness to counterculture movements in the mid-1960s gave new life to these processes, recalling Wrocław’s “western”

<sup>11</sup> *Symposium plastyczne Wrocław '70*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>14</sup> Anna Markowska, *Sztuka podręczna Wrocławia. Od rzeczy do wydarzenia* [Handy art of Wrocław: From objects to events] (Wrocław: Uniwersytet Wrocławski, 2018), 277.

location and modern profile. Here we might well recall Michel de Certeau's distinction between "the concept of the city" and "urban practices."<sup>15</sup> In the history of postwar Wrocław, the tension between "designing" and "producing" a city through concrete cultural practices acquired special expression, dynamics, and dramatism. My focus will be this "drifting" process of producing a social space and complex planes of cultural mediation through art, not cataloguing the organizational and artistic achievements of Wrocław's arts community or describing its broad horizons.

The second half of the 1960s brought a radical reimagining of Wrocław's artistic image and potential, wherein counterculture movements began to gain the upper hand. "In the late 1960s, Wrocław was a seething cauldron of often conflicting concepts, views, and standpoints."<sup>16</sup> The local institutions (The Theatre Laboratory, Pantomime Theatre, Festival of Student Theatres, swiftly renamed the Festival of Open Theatre, PERMAFO Gallery, the Recent Art Gallery and many others) bound the city with an international art movement, creating parallel, often semi-official ties with Western counterculture and avant-garde. In 1970, Józef Kelera wrote of the "delayed beginning of Wrocław's theatres": "Around 1965 several events of historical importance coincided: put together, they caused the radical acceleration of the long-term, persistent, transitionally delayed, and slow revival. The results exceeded the wildest imaginings."<sup>17</sup> The year 1965 is not a time that is singled out as a watershed moment or a time of creative upheaval in any narrative of Polish culture. On the contrary: it is more the dreary decline of the Gomułka era, a period of the defeat of hopes and illusions that came with the political breakthrough of 1956.

It was in 1965 that Grotowski came to Wrocław. His two Wrocław premieres (*Książę Niezłomny* [The constant prince] and *Apocalypsis cum figuris*) might be seen as an initial culture shock that opened the city's arts scene to new and radical world art. Tadeusz Różewicz, who moved to Wrocław in 1968, wrote on *Apocalypsis* a year later in Wrocław's *Odra* magazine: "The howls of the birth agonies spread through the theatre (or maybe operating) room."<sup>18</sup>

15 Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London–New York: 1993), 156–63.

16 Jerzy Ludwiński, "Strefa wolna od konwencji" [Convention free zone], in *Epoka błękitu* (Kraków: Otwarta Pracownia, 2009), 216.

17 Józef Kelera, "Teatry wrocławskie" [Wrocław theatres], in *Panorama kultury współczesnego Wrocławia*, ed. Bogdan Zakrzewski (Wrocław: Ossolińskich, 1970), 353.

18 Tadeusz Różewicz, "'Apocalypsis cum figuris' (W laboratorium Jerzego Grotowskiego)" ["Apocalypsis cum figuris" (in Jerzy Grotowski's laboratory)], *Odra* 7–8 (1969): 107.

The same magazine soon published a poem by Rafał Wojaczek titled "Apocalypsis cum figuris," whose connection to Grotowski's play was rather unclear, apart from its transgressive images of violence.<sup>19</sup> Zbigniew Kubikowski, soon to be editor-in-chief of *Odra*, talked the poet into giving the piece this title. We ought also to mention that, like Grotowski, Wojaczek appeared in Wrocław in 1965; we know that he saw the play and befriended the actors, and their late-night Wrocław escapades often crossed paths.

The rhythms and periods of the postwar transformations of Polish culture fail us when we speak of Wrocław's first decades after the war. For the first two decades, the arts community did not participate in the key breakthroughs in Polish art, connected to such political events as the thaw of 1955–56. On the other hand, in the following decade it provided a significant alternative to the other centers when it came to the very notion of a national culture. Wrocław's culture stood up to narratives that held onto a national perspective. The first postwar decades saw an intensive propaganda campaign to make Wrocław a Polish city. Street names were changed, signs linking Wrocław with German history too prominently were removed, monuments were torn down, and the Piast Dynasty history of Lower Silesia was foregrounded; the Gothic monuments were reconstructed, and permission was given to demolish the nineteenth-century buildings that were built when the city flourished under Prussian rule. The counterculture tropes, on the other hand, point to entirely different identification processes, ones that were unplanned and had their own diffuse and capricious dramaturgy. Without appreciating the city's historical catastrophe in 1945, it is difficult to understand its cultural blossoming two decades later, extraordinary in its character and profile, with a feel so unlike other centers of culture in Poland. The degree of the city's destruction in 1945 and the total resettlement of its inhabitants made Wrocław a "free-spirited city,"<sup>20</sup> a space open to various possibilities, unconstrained by tradition or fixed social identities. Writing on the activities of Wrocław's avant-garde Sztuka Najnowsza Gallery in the 1970s, Anna Markowska points out that these young artists' lack of local art traditions was a strength, not a weakness; they stressed the distinctiveness of the city, comparing it to New York, where "various views, traditions, and cultures blended together."<sup>21</sup> We might say, with a nod to Pierre Bourdieu's

19 Rafał Wojaczek, "Apocalypsis cum figuris," *Odra* 10 (1970): 26.

20 Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland*.

21 Anna Markowska, "Trzeba przetrzeć tę szybę. Powikłane dzieje wrocławskiej Galerii Sztuki Najnowszej (1975-1980) w Akademickim Centrum Kultury Pałacyk" [This glass must be wiped clean: The complicated history of the recent art gallery (1975–1980) at the Pałacyk

concept of the field of cultural production,<sup>22</sup> that here we have a weak field with an erased past and a shattered social structure, with fragile and contradictory habits of various social groups and strong artistic practices permeating the fabric of the city. The weakness of the field and fragility of the habits facilitated a surge in new practices.

According to research, in Wrocław's population in the 1940s a mere 18% came from large cities.<sup>23</sup> This means that the culture of inhabiting a large and modern city had to be produced out of nothing. In 1965, the city was largely inhabited by those born after 1945, however, and a higher-than-average natural growth rate was noted. This demographic structure and dynamic favored the absorption of countercultural impulses. The counterculture was chiefly based on the revolt of a young generation, who sought to break with the social modes of behavior that were passed down. The young people growing up in postwar Wrocław, with its weak and damaged identity, wanted to break free from their parents' generation, from their nostalgia and resentments, and often from the models of rural life the postwar settlers took with them. This phenomenon was captured by director Stanisław Lenartowicz in the film *Spotkajmy się w niedzielę* [Let's Meet on Sunday, 1959],<sup>24</sup> one of few whose action takes place in Wrocław, and where Wrocław appears as Wrocław, and does not merely provide a backdrop, as it does for war films meant to be set in Warsaw.

Wrocław became an exceptionally fertile scene for counterculture movements to express themselves. We can trace their presence on the microscale of the city, show points of openness and resistance, a network of links with local history, and also explore counterculture not in terms of isolated phenomena and movements, but in its concrete social situations, its ties with various institutions and social environments, grasping its hybrid, misshapen, "weaker" forms carried outside its "natural environment," and also track the intersecting paths of counterculture nomads.

Although the concept of counterculture has been variously defined and has often been critiqued as too wide, embracing too many and often contradictory

---

Academic Cultural Center], in *Galeria Sztuki Najnowszej*, ed. Anna Markowska (Wrocław: Muzeum Współczesne Wrocław, 2014), 88.

22 Cf. Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London–New York: Routledge, 2014), 40–64.

23 Irena Turnau, *Studia nad strukturą ludnościową polskiego Wrocławia* [Studies on the population structure of Polish Wrocław] (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1960), 74.

24 In one thread of Lenartowicz's film, we observe an intergenerational conflict in a family occupying a villa left by a wealthy German owner after the war. The daughter, who works in the cinema and lives by the rhythm of the reawakening city, forces her mother to get rid of the cow she is keeping in the garden.



phenomena, I would like to restore its use by rejecting overly rigid definitions and shifting my remarks from ideology to praxis. I am treating counterculture as a process that took shape in the 1960s, creating radically new forms of social communication (often based on identifying with a generation), practicing alternative interpersonal relations (as a protest against the lifestyles prevalent in a given society), and forming networks of interaction that engender utopian impulses. From this approach, a counterculture is not a group of abstract ideas; it is produced through practice. I appreciate Baz Kershaw's concept of counterculture with regard to British alternative theatre, stating that we ought to speak rather of countercultures in the plural, not in the singular. He focused less on ideology than on institutional practices interfering with spheres of hegemony, drawing from Theodor Roszak, who defined counterculture as a form of participatory democracy with a clearly localized scope: "On this principle the movement formed itself into a multiple series of 'communities', able to operate independently, but also overlapping to form a network of more or less loose associations whose boundaries are defined in broadly similar ideological terms."<sup>25</sup> The notions of the network and overlap are of key significance here.

We may of course ask if it is appropriate to speak of a "participatory democracy" in a communist context. It does seem that many informal art initiatives of an institutional nature attempted to enact this model, creating open alliances and places to exchange ideas. Formulating the concept of the Center for Artistic Research in 1971, Jerzy Ludwiński wrote:

The structure of the center should be as unlike formalized and hierarchical institutions as possible. It should be a flexible organism, replicating the constant changeability of the arts. The center will be an institution conceived not as a building with a complex of venues and a constantly expanding personnel, but as a process taking place in various environments.<sup>26</sup>

During this same time, Jerzy Grotowski suggested abandoning the idea of theatre as a disciplined and hierarchical structure in favor of an active culture, collapsing the division between artists and viewers, in favor of ephemeral utopian communities venting anxieties and shame in shared contacts with others. The body of theoretical works by Jerzy Ludwiński and Jerzy Grotowski from the turn of the 1960s and 1970s was perhaps the most

<sup>25</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London–New York: Routledge, 1992), 39.

<sup>26</sup> Jerzy Ludwiński, "Centrum Badań Artystycznych," in *Epoka błękitu*, 174.

radical postwar effort to change the paradigms of Polish culture, proposing new and revolutionary institutional solutions based on participation and ideas of post-art,<sup>27</sup> breaking down boundaries, tying art with everyday social life. Their utopian projects did not exist strictly on paper. Both Grotowski and Ludwiński tried to carry them out in practice, creating conducive environments, using existing institutions, and joining them in new constellations. The political nature of these activities did not have much in common with the mandates of the anti-communist political opposition created at the time. Much has already been written about the differing natures of the 1968 protests in the capitalist West and in the Eastern Bloc countries.<sup>28</sup> Western counterculture activists often accused the oppositionists behind the Iron Curtain of ideological and political conservatism. Anti-communist rebels, in turn, accused their Western peers of political naivety. The model of countercultural activities I am describing, on a micro and not a macro scale, represented another model of politics. These were politics more in the sense of Foucault than Marx or Mao: scattered and subversive operations, avoiding confrontation, yet non-conformist, radical, anti-bourgeois, physical, sensual, sexual, conceptual, transgressive, feminist, queer, irreverent.

The project that determined the integration of Wrocław's arts communities was the Open Theatre Festival, initiated in 1967, hosting many counterculture groups from around the world, including such legends as Bread and Puppet and the Performance Group, a South American political-artistic collective fighting their countries' military regimes, and the now-legendary Japanese avant-garde ensemble Tenjo Saiki, whose performances produced wild responses in shocked audiences. These groups' performances often provided a clear window onto political protests in the West, as with the Danish Den Danske Studenterscene collective:

Three girls and three boys play out and comment on the student riots in Denmark, Holland, and France. They use extracts from newspaper articles and reportage. The screen has slides showing demonstrators, barricades, street fighting, wounded victims. The actors recreate parts of events, conversations with university professors, clashes with the police.<sup>29</sup>

27 Cf. Jerzy Ludwiński, "Sztuka w epoce postartystycznej" [Art in the Postartistic Era], *Odra* 4 (1971); Jerzy Grotowski, "Święto" [Holiday], *Odra* 6 (1972).

28 A series of articles in *Slavic Review* 4 (77) (2019) was devoted to this issue.

29 M. Dzieduszycka, M. Budzyńska, "5 teatrów w kreacjach zbiorowych na 5-ciu festiwalach wrocławskich" [5 theatres in collective creations at 5 Wrocław festivals], in *Sztuka otwarta. Wspólnota, kreacja, teatr* (Wrocław: Kalambur, 1977), 57.

The medium of theatre became an effective tool for transmitting counterculture practices, political stances, behavior, fashions, and sexuality. The performers' physical freedom made a powerful impression, and journalists often wrote about shock and surprise, scrupulously noting the boldness and the nudity of the performers, especially the men. The plays were not translated: they often worked by their energy, vibrations, and rhythms alone. As Rebecca Schneider would have put it, the communication was "body to body."<sup>30</sup> Bogusław Litwiniec, the creator and director of the festival, got nearly the whole city involved in its organization: students, factory workers, bureaucrats, city transportation, and Wrocław artists. He always arranged the festival dates with Grotowski, as his talks and presentations of the Laboratory plays were a staple of the program. The visits from such diverse and numerous foreign guests mobilized the local hippies<sup>31</sup> and the highly emancipated Wrocław gay community. Plays were held in theatre, non-theatre halls, and in the open air. The festival and its guests were highly visible, they often stood out with their clothing and behavior. Charles Marowitz gave his in-depth *New York Times* report on the third edition of the festival in 1971 the heading: "From All Over the World They Came to Poland."<sup>32</sup>

The attempt to define the place of Wrocław in the counterculture history of art demands that we introduce decolonial apparatus. This perspective lets us go beyond the traditional distinctions between center and periphery. Restoring local knowledge and memory, it undermines the very concept of localness, if it is subject to colonial processes of evaluation and hierarchization. In the traditional narrative, Wrocław had to be treated as a peripheral place, compared to the American centers, for instance. Yet the very presence of Jerzy Grotowski and his ensemble in Wrocław compels us to see and tell this story differently. Grotowski's theatre exerted a well-documented influence on the world's counterculture theatre. The Laboratory Theatre's visits to New York not only generated hype; they had a real impact on the trajectory of the progressive art of the day:

Grotowski and his leading actor of that epoch, Ryszard Cieślak, gave their first workshop in New York in November 1967, an event that had an enormous influence on the emerging experimental theatre. [...] Americans understood Grotowski's technique as a means of discovery that could be used in the service of truth

30 Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6 (2001).

31 Cf. Kamil Sipowicz, *Hippisi w PRL-u* [Hippies in the People's Republic of Poland] (Warszawa: Cyklady, 2015), 453.

32 Charles Marowitz, "Only the Playwright Was Absent," *New York Times*, November 21, 1971.

about history, society, government, the law, and the self as a social and political agent.<sup>33</sup>

The presence of Grotowski's ensemble was a powerful magnet, drawing an international arts community to Wrocław (as well as groups invited to the Open Theatre Festival). Study of Wrocław's counterculture from a decolonial perspective allows us to take into account local knowledge about the experiments of the avant-garde and counterculture art without verifying it through reference to narratives considered dominant and normative, which seek to correct the local narratives. When it came to Wrocław, which could have been regarded a liminal phenomenon in a political, geographical, and cultural sense, such concepts as "center" and "periphery" lose much of their operative nature. The decolonial gaze lets us move beyond the necessity of subordinating local traditions and histories to stabilized narratives about the world counterculture. We ought also to note that this type of non-hierarchical gaze is close to the ideological premises of the counterculture itself.

This city is also special in that it stood as a scene of contact between the capitalist West and the communist East, or, less dualistically, between young artists from various parts of the world. It is especially important to explore the relationships between counterculture ideologies and their practical situation within the communist state, and also between the political protests of Polish students in 1968 (in which Wrocław took part) and the political resources of the Western counterculture. These relationships are fraught with many contradictions – in Wrocław, they seem to be of special importance. Thus, here the decolonial perspective allows us to move beyond the ideological contradictions between "Western" and "Eastern" countercultural phenomena. Using the distinction made by decolonial scholars between colonialism and coloniality, Madina Tlostanova demonstrates that it is the matrix of coloniality that allows us to suspend the ideological oppositions that divided the world into two hostile camps during the Cold War.<sup>34</sup> To her mind, there is much common ground between postcolonial, postcommunist, and postimperial discourses – and interestingly enough, the similarities are easier to grasp in works of art than in academic discourses.

We will hazard the hypothesis that countercultural actions took the place of an unrealized, though designed utopia of the modern socialist city, to make Wrocław a forum for meetings between the leftist communities of the West

---

33 Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (London: Palgrave, 2013), 30.

34 Madina Tlostanova, "Postsocialist = Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48 (2) (2012): 130–42.

and the communist East; it suffices to recall the founding events for the city's new identity, such as the Exhibition of the Recovered Territories and the Congress of Intellectuals in 1948. These were swiftly blocked by the state authorities, revived two decades later in a swath of countercultural activities. Countercultural Wrocław significantly expands our knowledge about the history and crisis of Polish modernity.

*Translated by Soren Gauger*

## Abstract

---

**Grzegorz Niziołek**

JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY

*The Crisis of the Modern City: Counterculture in Wrocław*

The text analyzes the relationship between the crisis of modernity and the counterculture movement, using the example of the history of post-war Wrocław. The city has become a scene of counterculture movements, unique in its dynamics. Their presence can be traced in the microscale of the city, in the system of connections with local history. The decolonial view allows us to go beyond the need to subordinate local traditions and histories to the already established narratives about the global counterculture. The medium of theatre in particular has become an effective tool for transmitting countercultural practices, political attitudes, behaviors, fashion and sexuality.

## Keywords

---

counterculture, modernity, urban studies, Wrocław