

Rafał Czekaj

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3214-5602>

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

rafal.czekaj@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

WRITING POETRY AFTER BUCHA OR ON THE EXPRESSION OF THE INEXPRESSIBLE

Abstract: The paper considers some selected artistic practices in the current context of war in Ukraine. It is confronted with the famous quote of Th. W. Adorno "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" as a ban on aesthetic representations of the face of war. Referring to Kant's category of the sublime, the author tries to justify artistic responses as an effort to "express the inexpressible".

Keywords: Adorno, sublime, critical theory, Ukraine, art

The context in which any human, especially creative, activity is performed is decisive for its significance and for understanding the activity. No creative activity takes place in a vacuum – it is often a direct, although not always visible, response to external social, political, or economic circumstances. It was therefore natural to expect that artists would also respond to the armed invasion of Ukraine, and that all consequences of the war would be reflected in artistic practices, especially because artistic taste is, after all, "the truest seismograph of historical experience" – as Th. W. Adorno wrote in *Minima moralia*.¹

¹ Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections on a Damaged Life*, transl. E. F. N. Jephcott, Verso, London – New York 2005, p. 145.

Artistic practice driven by the sensitivity of artists, and even science as a purely theoretical description of reality, are not free from contextual determinants. This recognition was expressed most distinctly by the representatives of the Frankfurt School and became the core of the critical theory that they developed. Critical theory itself depended on the external context, whose dynamic resulted in a revision of the effects that the Frankfurt scholars expected from their theory. In the 1930s they still insisted that the replacement of traditional theory by critical theory would bring about imminent emancipation from harmful mechanisms that overwhelmed science and social organization. Criticism of the model of rationality that dominated traditional theory was expected to make truly rational shaping of social relations possible, while critical theory would become "an instrument of reason" which, if properly placed in history, would bring about social change.² This optimism was dispelled by the emigration experiences of the Frankfurt scholars. World War II, with all its barbarity manifested by, among others, organized mass genocide, and symbolized by smoking crematorium chimneys, drastically contrasted with what they witnessed in America – jazz, musicals on Broadway, and Hollywood films – an incessant festival of the then emerging pop culture. The power of the culture industry, whose advanced form they observed there, convinced them that the enslavement mechanism had taken root far deeper than they had thought. "Faith in the possibility of radical social change – as Ian Craib put it – had been smashed between the twin cudgels of concentration camps and television for the masses".³ The direct effect of these experiences was the well-known *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written jointly by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Its significance compels us to believe that the omnipotence of instrumental rationality described in it inevitably brought disaster upon humanity. However, Nazism and the Holocaust are only the most spectacular manifestations of the mechanism, which, the Frankfurt scholars believe, remains active in postwar social configurations, and neither science, morality, nor art are free from it.⁴

The figure of Theodor Adorno is probably the most glaring example of a thinker influenced by experiences brought by history upon people living at that time. Those experiences clearly affected all his philosophy as well as defined the motivations that determined the content and final shape of his aesthetic theory. It was this context that provoked him into saying the famous

² D. M. Rasmussen, *Critical Theory and Philosophy*, in: *The Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. D. M. Rasmussen, Blackwell, Cambridge 1996, p. 11.

³ I. Craib, *Modern Social Theory: From Parsons to Habermas*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1992, p. 209.

⁴ L. Kołakowski, *Główne nurty marksizmu*, t. III, Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2001, p. 437.

words about the impossibility of writing poetry after the Holocaust: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. (...) it has become impossible to write poetry today".⁵ These words were first used in 1949 in the conclusion of the essay *Kulturkritik und Gessellschaft* and appeared in different variants in his later texts. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno admitted that every victim had the right to articulate their suffering and art could be a proper, or perhaps even the only tool for that.⁶ However, strictly speaking, he never retracted his words about "poetry after Auschwitz".⁷

The quoted words of the Frankfurt philosopher might seem exaggerated to someone living in peacetime, even if only because the tragedy of World War II is not their direct experience. However, acceptance of these words in their whole literalism would erase all artistic creativity – both that constituting a direct response to the sufferings experienced, and that which wants to be independent of extraartistic reality. Regrettably, however, history has updated this context. The armed invasion of Ukraine has made us witnesses to crimes that are difficult to disregard. Under such circumstances, the pursuit of poetry, art or, in broader terms, aesthetics, might verge on cynicism. "What times are these, in which / A talk about trees is all but a crime / For it implies we say nothing about so many others!" – Bertolt Brecht wrote in 1939 in his, *nomen est omen*, poem *An die Nachgeborenen*.⁸

Taras Shevchenko was born on March 9th. In Lublin, in Taras Shevchenko Square, symbolic jubilee celebrations are held every year, during which selected excerpts from the poetry of the Ukrainian bard are read out. In 2022 that day fell two weeks after the invasion of Ukraine began. The event, which had so far been held in a small circle of participants, was attended by a crowd this time. The causes of the substantial increase in attendance seem obvious, but probably none of those gathered there thought that the public reading of the works by the Ukrainian poet was an offence against the horror of the war waged in a country whose frontier is less than 100 kilometers away from Lublin. Obviously, Shevchenko's significance for Ukrainian culture as well as the fact that the academic community, whose sizeable part are Ukrainians studying in Lublin, participated in the celebration, made it totally different from Brecht's mere "talk about trees".

⁵ Th. W. Adorno, *Prism*, transl. S. & S. Weber, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1983, p. 34.

⁶ See: Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Routledge, London-New York 2004, pp. 362-363.

⁷ See: G. Didi-Huberman, *Obraz krytyczny. Obraz krytyki*, transl. A. Leśniak, „Teksty Drugie”, 2016, no. 5, p. 371.

⁸ B. Brecht, *Andie Nachgeborenen*, <https://www.lyrikline.org/de/gedichte/die-nachgeborenen-740> [accessed: 10.01.2023]

In Ukraine, however, there has been a rapid avalanche of aesthetic responses to the armed aggression. One example is a shelled wall in Kyiv, whose surface was painted with the colors of the Ukrainian flag where there was still plaster. Holes in the wall are simulated by torn cloth. Two hands in military gloves are placed on the wall. One of the hands is holding a needle threaded with twine in its fingers, with which it is trying to sew up the flag. Similar things have occurred in cities in almost all Europe, where war events have been systematically commented on in street art forms. For example, a travesty of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* appeared on the façade of a building in Paris, the difference being that the tricolor flag was replaced by the yellowblue one. Such examples are aplenty: numerous happenings or graffiti actions will certainly see a solid and thorough study of the phenomenon in the future.

Ferment also overwhelmed more traditional forms of artistic expression contained in the mainstream legitimized by the social institution of art. It is too early to make conclusions because artistic expressions that are part of "art at the time of war" formula continually appear. It could be said, however, that the world is just now discovering Ukrainian culture. The place of theatrical, musical and literary festivals devoted to Russian authors and artists, cancelled due to boycott, has been taken by Ukrainian creators. During the last Venice Biennale, a work by a Ukrainian artist was exhibited in the Arsenal – the second such case in the history of the Biennale. Pavlo Makov presented his *Fountain of Exhaustion. Acqua alta* there. The work is part of a project the artist had been working on since the 1990s. It consists of seventytwo funnels arranged as a pyramid in such a way that a liquid poured into the topmost funnel flows down but never reaches the lowest layer. Although the original meaning of the work was entirely prosaic: "rapid changes in the infrastructure of Kyiv modernized in the 1990s have resulted in water shortages", it is difficult today to refrain from interpreting it as having a totally new aesthetic meaning.

We may, however, fear whether this whole cultural bustle could obscure the horror of war. After all, murals and street art set pictures of war into formatted mass media, thereby making something ordinary of it. Pictorial images that portray Ukrainian soldiers, like those painted by Olha Sharafanenko, although avoiding pathos and affection, may objectify tragedy that should remain inexpressible. Even if we do not talk about Brecht's trees but about events that require a response, we will not avoid some risk, since everything that is expressed in the common language of communication, whether pictorial or verbal, is set in the grammar of the reality against which it intends to act. Each judgment expressed within a system can be taken over to affirm it. This is certainly anxiety derived from reading *Negative Dialectic*, where Adorno tried to prove that expressing a protest in set forms of communicative language

reifies it and makes it part of what it protests against. These were the reasons why the Frankfurt philosopher refused to recognize the counterculture movements of the 1960s. This was somewhat paradoxical as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* became a kind of a "bible" for the rebellious young people of that time.⁹

From the same positions, Adorno also engaged in polemics with authors who advocated the cultivation of socially engaged art, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, or Bertolt Brecht. The latter wrote that "the aesthetic point of view is ill-suited to the plays being written at present", and that the goal of theater is to present cases of social conflicts and provide political instructions, which he actually tried to accomplish as part of his concept of the so-called epic theater.¹⁰ Adorno did not accept this position and generally rejected the possibility of engaging people by taking up specific problems, issues, or subjects. In his *Aesthetic Theory* he even derided Brecht's stance, when he seemed to ask what we could learn from this kind of plays (namely, that the rich are doing better than the poor; that injustice prevails in the world; that despite all people being formally equal, some are exploited and oppressed by others; that armed aggression results in many victims among innocent civilians). We all know very well that it is so, even without plays being written about it.¹¹ One might say, to paraphrase Brecht, that these are truths like those that chairs have four legs, or that rain falls from top down.¹² To Adorno, the theme of oppression in art degrades it to the status of tumbledown machinery for demonstrating one's worldview.¹³ He wrote the following in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

"The acute reason today for the social inefficacy of artworks – those that do not surrender to crude propaganda – is that in order to resist the allpowerful system of communication they must rid themselves of any communicative means that would perhaps make them accessible to the public. Artworks exercise a practical effect, if they do so at all, not by haranguing but by the scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness (...) art itself is objectively praxis as the cultivation of consciousness; but it only becomes this by renouncing persuasion".¹⁴

⁹ M. Siemek, *Posłowie do polskiego wydania*, in: Th. W. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialektyka oświecenia*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, Wyd. IFiS PAN, Warszawa 1994, p. 284.

¹⁰ B. Brecht, *Shouldn't We Abolish Aesthetic?* in: *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and transl. J. Willett, Hill & Wang, London 1964, p. 21.

¹¹ Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. R. Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London-New York 2002, p. 247.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹³ Th. W. Adorno, *Próba zrozumienia „Końcówki” Becketta*, in: *Sztuka i sztuki. Wybór esejów*, ed. K. Sauerland, transl. K. Krzemień-Ojak, PIW, Warszawa 1990, p. 252.

¹⁴ Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 243.

That is why, among others, Adorno highly appreciated Arnold Schönberg's, or Samuel Beckett's works. The Frankfurt philosopher saw a breakoff with the communicative language of music in atonality of Schönberg's compositions, and a breakoff with communicative forms of narrative prose in Beckett's texts. Such art is certainly deprived of the possibility of having dialogue on specific subjects. This protects it against the sin of didacticism, but at the same time makes it impossible to express any positive program. Nevertheless, it was in the works by Schönberg and Beckett that Adorno saw more social sense than in those by politically engaged writers.

To return to current and relevant examples, I wish to refer to some film material which broke viewing records on social media in March 2022. This concerns the so-called "pianist" from Bila Tserkva – a town situated 84 km south of Kyiv. The scene shows a woman seating herself at a white piano, who, after a moment, starts playing a piece by Chopin. After the first bars, the camera, probably a smartphone one, turns slowly, showing the viewer a ruined flat: overturned wrecked furniture and empty window frames. The sound of broken glass is heard under the feet of the camera person and finally there is an entirely torn apart wall, and the chaos of devastation in a bombed town is seen through a breach – streets full of rubble, tornaway walls of buildings, crushed cars and disoriented people, with Chopin's music reverberating all the time. There is no more or less distinct break with any communicative language here. However, the material appears to go beyond what can be seen and heard in its significance. The combination of a musical piece of Romanticism and the prose of war evokes something that is inexpressible and unrepresentable – Kant's category of the sublime. Although the author does not intend to call the Bila Tserkva "pianist" sublime, an analysis of this category from *Critique of the Power of Judgment* may prove helpful here.

According to Kant, the source of the feeling of the sublime is a disproportion between intellect and imagination, between the conceptual equipment of intellect and the ability of imagination to make visual representations – certain phenomena appear to contradict the goal of judgment.¹⁵ We experience them, but we are paralyzed by the feeling that what appears in front of our eyes is only a façade, because we clearly feel and understand that beyond the evident there is some unrepresented remainder. Kant presents phenomena of the enormity of nature in its power and dimension as examples. He also writes, however, about the sublimity of war, but this could be understood in the sense that war shatters all human norms, going beyond the accepted order and horizon of

¹⁵ I. Kant, *Krytyka władzy sądzienia*, transl. J. Gałęcki, PWN, Warszawa 1964, p. 132.

human understanding of the possible. Faced with such phenomena, we experience crossing the border of all conceptual structures that link us with the world, while at the same time we lack discursive tools to express this. It can be observed that Adorno characterized aesthetic experience in a similar way, as "the capacity to perceive more in things than they are."¹⁶ To elude the trap of "absolute reification" and break out of the "charmed circle of reification", the language of art must remain unspoken (*sprachlos*).

Aesthetic acts and paraartistic activities can avoid discursiveness, and this does not at all mean that they are misleading in that case. The media widely echoed a protest action carried out by Jana Shostak in May 2021. The activist wanted to draw the attention of EU Member States to the situation in Belarus and brutal repressions, including political murders, committed by Belarusian secret services against opposition leaders and participants in antigovernment demonstrations. The immediate reason for her action was the arrest of the oppositionist Raman Pratasevich, abducted from an airliner traveling from Athens to Vilnius. The plane was forced to land in Minsk in Belarusian airspace and Pratasevich was arrested on the apron. The day after this happened, Jana Shostak said in front of the Belarusian Embassy in Warsaw: "The only thing we can do is a minute of shouting" and she did that. This was obviously an expression of powerlessness and helplessness, but at the same time a pure act of the non-discursive. It stemmed from the awareness that no words were able to properly represent the actual drama. Confronted with terror and aggression, the horror and tragedy of war, and especially of its victims, discourse lacks sufficient nuance: "Nuance – the word alone is a disgrace compared to what one would like to say and for which language truly lacks words", Adorno wrote in *Metaphysics*.¹⁷

These words recommend abandoning discursive representation and pictorial mediations to avoid replicating the found reality. Art has such a competence and can go beyond the façade of reality, expressing what is not contained in any discourse or picture. This does, however, have to mean the necessity of giving up discursive tools. Such escape from the representable was most literally realized in abstract painting, theater of the absurd and atonal music. These are by no means the only, though already largely historical, ways of breaking out of the "charmed circle of reification". The artist's material is the surrounding world, and this world is not only the source of inspiration but also of resources that constitute the building blocks of the creative process. The artist uses elements "taken out" from reality but arranges them into new

¹⁶ Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 330.

¹⁷ Th. W. Adorno, *Metaphysik. Begriff und Probleme*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1998, p. 202.

constellations and, owing to this, he or she shows what is not visible in direct manifestations of reality. "There is nothing in art, not even in the most sublime, that does not derive from the world; nothing that remains untransformed" – Adorno wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*.¹⁸

In April 2023, Lublin's Galeria Labirynt presented the work *My Broken Bones* by a young Ukrainian artist from Kyiv, Yehor Antsyhin. The main exhibition room was filled with a resized clay rib, whose surface was marked with cracks and grooves. This was a reference to an accident the artist had years ago, when he broke one of his rib bones. The bone knit together but the tissue around it keratinized and generated physical pain, which is a natural process that subsides with time. The installation was accompanied by film material presenting the panorama of Kyiv, seen from one of the city's hills. Before Russia's armed invasion of Ukraine, the hill was a meeting place for the artist and his friends, who would go there for walks to contemplate the view of the city. After the siege of Kyiv, even after repulsing the aggressor's troops, and although war damage is not visible from the hill, the view is no longer the same. Visually, it is the same space, but it cannot now be looked at in the same way. What used to provide soothing contemplation has now become a source of sorrow and anxiety, in the same way as the rib was a source of pain resulting from keratinization of tissue around it. As for the city panorama, the context has diametrically changed its meaning. It is no longer possible for the artist to look at Kyiv outside the framework set by the armed aggression. In his work, however, he did not escape into nondiscursiveness and used almost mirror images of reality. Yet, he managed to express something more than these images represent.

Another strategy was applied by Daniil Revkovskiy and Andriy Rachinskiy in their work *Mickey Mouse's Steppe*, which was also exhibited in Lublin's Galeria Labirynt in spring. This work is part of a larger project entitled *Museum of Human Civilization*, in which the two artists combine document with mystification. The term "steppe" refers to the territory of Ukraine where the most tank battles were fought in the world's history. The exhibition presented an archive of tank wreck photos – from World War II to the presentday war with Russia. The destroyed armored vehicles with open hatches on their turrets resemble the Disney cartoon character – Mickey Mouse. The photos were juxtaposed with anthropomorphic drawings of tanks emphasizing this resemblance. Part of the exhibition is also film material showing fictitious metal scrappers dismantling destroyed armored machines abandoned by Russians, as if the Ukrainian soil was to be cleaned by the hands of its inhabitants of armed

¹⁸ Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 138.

aggression traces. This work contains distinct elements of the grotesque, which do not, however, remove the solemnity of war.

However, an accusation that the abovementioned two works affirm the depicted reality, repeat its grammar, and thereby offend the seriousness of the war and pacify opposition to it, cannot be brought forward. The artists borrowed elements of the world but used them to build images that do not have equivalents in reality. They arranged these elements into new constellations, thus generating meanings available only through their artworks. This is how art goes beyond the façade of reality and presents the world free from its grammar.

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PISANIE POEZJI PO BUCZY, CZYLI O WYRAZIE NIEWYRAŻALNEGO (streszczenie)

Słynne słowa Th. W. Adorna o pisaniu poezji po Auschwitz są interpretowane jako zakaz estetycznej reprezentacji. W artykule konfrontuję ten Adornowski cytat za współczesną praktyką artystyczną będącą odpowiedzią na wojnę w Ukrainie. Sięgając po Kantowską kategorię wzniosłości bronię prawomocności estetycznej reprezentacji, jako artystycznego wysiłku "wyrażenia niewyraźnego".

Słowa kluczowe: Adorno, wzniosłość, teoria krytyczna, Ukraina, sztuka

Rafał Czekaj – Doctor of Humanities (philosophy). Since September 2011, assistant professor at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS) in Lublin, Department of Esthetics and Philosophy of Culture, Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology. Author of the book: *Krytyczna teoria sztuki Theodora W. Adorna* [*Critical theory of art of Theodor W. Adorno*] (2013). Areas of research: philosophical esthetics and social contexts of art.