

Karolina Koczynska

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh College of Art

The Myths of Surrealism in Poland: the story of ‘artes’, 1929-1935

My project focuses on ‘artes’, a group of Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish artists working and living in Lwów during the interwar period. It aims to recontextualize ‘artes’ in Polish art history and the wider surrealist movement, challenging current understandings of centre-periphery relations by demonstrating how ‘artes’ used the ‘local’ in order to represent the ‘universal’, simultaneously dissolving the opposition between the two. To that end, I am tracing instances of Polish, Galician, and Jewish folklore and myth in the works by ‘artes’.

The liminal, heterogeneous space of Lwów and wider Galicia is crucial to understanding the myths explored by the artists. Alongside Galician writer Bruno Schulz and the local critic, poet, and philosopher Debora Vogel, ‘artes’ experimented with notions of ‘the primitive’, the occult, and the metaphysical in the context of ‘provincial’ Galicia. The group struggled to gain recognition among a wider Polish audience, as their creative interests - and particularly their interpretations of local folklore – conflicted with the interpretations of their peers working in Kraków or Warsaw. There, folk culture was adopted as part of a nationalist movement to introduce a distinctive Polish culture onto the world stage, something that ran counter to ‘artes’ interest in more universal themes. The story of ‘artes’ reveals deep tensions between the avant-garde, modernism, and the rise of nationalism during the 20th century that continue to reverberate today.

In order to better understand these tensions my project adapts Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of a universal narrative structure. According to Shklovsky, plots are never ‘borrowed’ or copied because they never actually belong to anyone or anyplace; rather they are ‘homeless’.¹ Across his work, Shklovsky suggests a universal structure of stories that transcends particular times and places and yet remains inextricably bound to them in practice. The most basic form of a plot has its origin (or ‘home’) nowhere, but rather can emerge anywhere, albeit as a localized variation. When ‘artes’ adapted local folklore and myth, they embodied precisely this

¹ See: Viktor Shklovsky, *Knight’s Move*, trans. Richard Sheldon, (Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), [Khod Konia, (Russia, Helikon, 1923)]; *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher, (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990).

relationship, incorporating local iconography into their experiments with a more universal surrealism.

The Lwowian group has gone almost entirely unremarked in art history, save for a single Polish-language text published in 1975 by Piotr Łukaszewicz. The lack of such histories beyond Łukaszewicz's book can be partially explained by popular attitudes regarding the possibility of Polish surrealism. Speaking of the Polish pre-war avant-garde, artist Tadeusz Kantor remarked that 'there was no surrealism, because Poland was ruled by Catholicism.'² Art historian Piotr Piotrowski reproduced this assumption in his assessment of the 'Surrealist Interregnum' – the period in East-Central Europe between the end of World War II and the fall of the Iron Curtain – when he suggested that the 'prudish Polish public' would have been outraged by the erotic imagery associated with some surrealist works.³ However, both Kantor and Piotrowski miss the mark, because their pronouncements depend on a limited idea of what might constitute both 'Polish' and 'surrealist.'

² Tadeusz Kantor in Piotr Piotrowski's 'Surrealist Interregnum', *In the Shadow of Yalta*, trans. Anna Brzyski, (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), p.46.

³ *Ibid.*