

Definition of Post-Modernism through the Semiotics of Sculpture in Urbanistic Room

Igor Gräzin, Professor

Member of the Parliament of Estonia

„Tragedy is comedy plus time.“

Woody Allen

We assume that we still lack a positive understanding of post-modernism as such. Since Lyotard (3) it has been stated and said many times what „post-modernism is NOT.“ It is NOT classicism, it is NOT reclassification, it is NOT a school in science, it is NOT a style and first of all it is NOT – modernism. Thus the issue is to some extent what post-modernism – positively IS. I think that it is a paradigmatic state of affairs that, for instance, it was commonly accepted in the lobbies of the 1st International Conference on Semiotics and Visual Communication (Nov, 2011, Lemesos, Cyprus) and formulated to me in a personal chat with Miltos Frangopoulos that postmodernism is two things – (a) deconstruction; and (b) tolerance towards alternative truths.

If we take the notion of tolerance in a liberal way (because many of the forerunners in postmodernism are pretty ego-centric personalities), those two features indeed explain most of the case. But for me that is part, but not all of it.

My additional statement here is: postmodernism is the new primitivism. I came to that conclusion after the conference, and thus as I could not discuss it then and I shall try to formulate it now.

The statement “postmodernism from its positive side new primitivism” can be argued analytically, philosophically, and through the mass of clear empirical evidence in the spheres of art, education, engineering, psychopathology, the works of European Commission etc. But here I shall present as a proof to the argument (postmodernism is neoprimitivism) references to some political sculptures in an urbanistic room. It has to be kept in mind that political sculpture is a very expensive thing and an artefact that always needs to be socio-politically or communally accepted, and thus individual emotional, aesthetic, accidental elements are excluded – sculptures need significant amounts of budgeted money, support or at least some acceptance from the political community. Their creation combines at least some commissioning entity, then a sculptor, architect, designer, workmen, engineer, crane-driver in a joint effort. Their motives might be very different (from eternal fame for a sculptor to a „six-pack“ to the foreman

of the men on site, for example) but the result thus is to extent de-individualized. Thus political sculpture must represent a more stable trend in society than the verses of a teenager-poet in love. Political sculpture here is not an object of studies, but the visual proof of a process that seems to have been proved by many other, and perhaps even better and stronger evidence and analytical methods themselves as well.

There will be no artistic analyses of any sculptures and even the full attributions of them, although some of them are so stupid that one has a temptation to do just that. The point is still: if the post-modern sculpture is at the same time newly primitive, then it is highly probable that so is the post-modernism.

Modernism has been characterized as a system of classes and classifications (schools in art and literature, parties in politics and social interests, groups in arithmetic and societies etc). Examples of these classifications in politics are – political right and political left, in art – impressionism and expressionism, in architecture – funk and *art nouveau*, in philosophy – Hegel and Nietzsche. Those quite strict distinctions make it possible to find semiotic correspondences and semantic overlappings of meanings between these classifications. *Art deco* has corresponding meanings in cubism (Miami Beach seashore is visually cubistic, for instance), Beethoven corresponded to the political left in mid-XIX century etc. These correspondences between schools, parties and styles are possible because there are objective classifications in the thought processes of those societies, and there is general understanding of the frames of the classes in them. Even the fundamental deviations from the „accepted truth” are made collectively, i.e. they are understood in the semiotic situation in an unequivocal way. Like: in 19th century Vienna Strauss’ waltzes initially were “out-out”.

Another example of collective “deviation” is this. Most of us – „enlighted“ intellectuals – can agree that the English Revolution of 1648-1653 was a step towards political „progress“ but we tend to forget that our childhood heroes – D’Artagnan, Athos and their friends fought for the cause of the „other side“, i.e. of the political reaction.

The fundamental situation of connotation is never completely clear, of course, especially on the margins of the designating core, but the principal relations between the coordinated parties to the relation of designation are always there. „Whether you can make words mean so many different things“– asked Alice in Lewis Carroll’s „Through the Looking Glass“.

It is then natural that the clarity of the system of the modern world be able to make clear distinctions in politics, chemical elements, sexual orientations and academic degrees (everything is classified, and the hero of modernism is not Darwin, but Linne; not evolution, but taxonomy) will manifest itself in the most simple form in a political sculpture that did not exist before.

The different levels of being semantically burdened by and attached to the classically structured political world may be demonstrated by the fact of different sculptures being destroyed in times of sharp political changes – the dismantling of the statues of Saddam Hussein and Dzerzhinsky (visually footages of these episodes on TV are carbon-copies of each other) by cranes are staple

signs in our semiotic world of politics. the Sculptural history of Moscow is much more nuanced – here the destruction (and construction) of monuments was sometimes finely tuned even to the degree party-fractions?. Our conclusion here is – sculptures can be destroyed in the modern era and corresponds to partisan divisions in polity, but they stand (even the truly ugly and stupid ones!) in the Post-modern.

Even if there are no sculptural connotations to any individual political idea, specifically the clarity of the modern world as such is able to grasp the designation of a political space as such. The signs in this realm are referred to as political propaganda. Two sculptures, seemingly coming from different foundations of primary modelling systems, may actually be twins – statues of George Bush in Houston airport and most of the Lenin's around the USSR do not have a straight semiotic difference. (Picture 1.)



Picture 1: George Bush (USA) and Vladimir Lenin (Soviet Russia)

Our research question can now be reformulated: who will pay for the expensive political sculptures once the political parties disappear, according to the logic post-modern development of civil society. (To put it in another way, when a political pluralism has been replaced by a political mess). (1)

Ad hominem notice: professional and institutionalized sculptors need not be worried about the possible slip of all sculpture business into the hands of mass NGOs and movements. Not that the letters might not be able to produce a stable financing of such projects, but they definitely would never agree to a design, blueprint or an even a study of a future statue (or rather: installation, as they tend to say in our days). I am quite confident myself that „Occupy“ movement on Wall Street will never produce a meaningful form of art, it requiring some

concentrated collective intellectual and instrumental effort (street theatre, artistic happening etc are not among them.) The cases of funding through public donations is not the case – the hundreds of thousands of Russian people donating their kopecks to the erection of the Church of the Christ the Saviour in Moscow were not an any proto-NGO in any sense.

Sculptural art that is placed in urban environments is fundamentally political due to its monumental character – it requires significant material resources, time and labour and thus can be commissioned only by big money or big politics (or both). Thus all the sculptural art has been (in modernistic paradigm) political, whether explicitly (the Statue of Liberty, USA or „Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares“ at UN HQ) or implicitly (Michelangelo’s „David“ is not only a symbol of Florence but of the exiled Medici as well).

We can identify certain non-modernistic tendencies that can be titled as post-modernism. In politics they include the diffusion of political discourse (for instance – the rise of True Finns in Finnish elections, April 2011; the disappearance of political agenda in Russian presidential elections; the collapse of structural role of €-zone etc). It would be natural to assume that this process will be manifested in the sculptural public room as well. Or the case might be vice versa: the semiotic revolution that had occurred earlier elsewhere („Twitter“, Wikileaks, in architecture and by way of our very own „soul-searching“ in the academic semiotic community) and had been manifested most visibly in the political sculpture, preceded the events that are going on in the „real“ social „realities“. Fundamentally there are no differences between two democratic practices based upon the atomism of an individual civic being – those of Perikles and of „Facebook“. To quote Lyotard – the big narratives of history will disappear but they will be replaced by tales, stories and graffiti. Nobody really understands what they mean in their complexity. There is a perfect example of this in the history of the beatnik’s literature: there were three writers, each having his own decade – the 1950s for Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg in the 1960s and then the 1970s for William Burroughs, whose „Naked Lunch“ is definitely outside of any sort of narrative and consists of intentionally separated fragments of different styles, topics, genres and topics. The fact of its production in the 1950’s is without relevance here – the book was published in the 1960s and became a part of culture in the 1970s. To complete the case of the beatniks’ development I draw a dotted line from here to Tucker Max, as a post- modern beatnik *par excellence* although he was not yet born.

It would be analytically simple to assume that if there are no classes of classification, there are no rules and conditions of existence for a phenomenon to exist as a part of that structured semiotic space. Elsewhere I have tried to express that the fundamental idea of Kafka in his „The Trial“ was: being means being within a semiotic space and bearing at least some minimal system of connotations.

In other words: if there is no an institution like the Academy of Arts or its Salon de Paris, there is no need to follow their rules or there are even no rules themselves whatsoever (the rules of the secondary modelling system, I mean; the primary modelling system is a fact of reality that is part of any existence). Whatever the rules are, they are learned, performed, exercised and

adopted through what H. L. A. Hart calls the „rules of recognition“ in legal philosophy (2) or Thomas Kuhn – a paradigm for the case of the history of science.

As a side remark – part of the rules come through a system of official learning and education, thus in the post-modern era, the training is no longer fundamental. And those untrained, unconnected reactions to the realities and expressions of the human soul we call – primitive ones. I intend to look into the case of post-modernism as “educated” dilettantism in some later article.

Primitive things need not to be produced by primitive intellectuals (the naive art of Pirosmanni was discovered by impressionists) but they still may be (H. Rousseau was definitely primitivist within impressionistic tradition).

Russian radio-station Euro-FM has a capture-phrase – „time runs by but the times do not change“. For the realm of „sculpturalism“ this means that statues stand longer than their immediate urban surroundings and people. The statue, as a piece of monumental art, that by definition is monumental, gains its meaning from being anchored into some socio-political and ideological society. Political tensions rise once that anchor-site disappears. Estonian events in the case of the removal of „Bronze Soldier“/ Monument to Soviet War veterans (authors: Enn Roos and Arnold Alas) manifested themselves as a political event, but essentially it was one of the new acts of post-modern primitivism against neo-classicism (that in the Stalinistic version was primitive too, but not primitivistic). (Picture 2.)



Picture 2: “The Cross of Freedom” and the “Bronze Soldier”

To strengthen this point clear I also want to present another pair – the “The Cross” as opposed to another piece connoting to the same event, produced in 1927 (authors: Ferdi Sannamees, Anton Soans) – Picture 3. (“The Cross” was installed in 2009.) Spatially they stand some 500 hundred meters apart (but are not part of the same urban structure). Both - “The Cross” and “The Monument for Teachers and Students Perished during the War of Independence” - represent the same mythologema. But one of them – “The Cross”, being a part of the world of sculptural art in theory, is not in reality a piece of art itself. The design of „The Cross“ is visibly a copy-paste produced phenomenon and this indeed was almost exactly the case - the authors are virtually forever anonymous (although their names are known for the purposes of copyright, at least) engineers, who aimed at producing a technologically sophisticated artefact by primitivisation of the structure of semiotic links.



Picture 3: “The Cross” and “The Monument for Teachers and Students Perished during the War of Independence”

Thus here we have three stages of semiotic development – first a primitive post-modern sculpture destroys another for seemingly political reasons („Bronze Soldier’s“ removal from the town and installation of “The Cross” as symbolic opposition to the former Soviet regime) and then, secondly – the primitive art replaces (not physically, but semiotically) the modern one but actually has the same political content (the „The Cross“ *versus* „ The Monument for Teachers and Students Perished during the War of Independence”).

To avoid side-tracking, it needs to be specially mentioned that the removal of the “Bronze Soldier” from its original location was an extremely public event with over-European political consequences (which, by the way – provoked the first ever cyber attack in history and led to the foundation of NATO cyber-defence command, and its location in Estonia) and is extremely

powerful semiotic. Its complexity is the extrapolation of a semiotic event almost to perfection. The chain of information may easily be started from Google.) I simply have to point at the ground-setting catalogue:

Kristiina Norman, “After-War” for Center of Contemporary Arts for the 53rd International Art Exhibition La Biennale de Venezia, 2009.

It is not just a catalogue but the collection of the most basic texts, quotations and references referring to perhaps the most outstanding semiotic event of the 20th century. (Both World Wars are definitely incomparably bigger and larger than the “Bronze Soldier” “riots” in all other senses, but not in the semiotic one.)

Certain additional background facts about “The Cross“ as a visual sign have fundamental significance. The design of “The Cross“ and its erection was arranged and supervised by the Ministry of Defence. That “thing” (to avoid the word “sculpture”) cost a huge amount of money (estimated 3.5 million EUR, practically - more) for technical reasons – the structure is made of crystal glass, the light system of the sculpture was extremely complicated and consisted of 250 000 LEDs controlled by a computer. The lighting system collapsed in a matter of months. Constructive and material malfunctions started before the completion and still continue. Today “The Cross” is lighted on the same principles as a candle had lighted the desk of Shakespeare. What reveals the primitivism of the artistic idea is not shadowed (or better in this case – illuminated) by technological trickery or even the size. The comparison of the mere sizes of two artefacts with theoretically invariable semantic connotation seems to be of some implication as well. “The Cross” is huge, the “Monument for Teachers and Students Perished during the War of Independence” is soul-touchingly small. The new primitivism wants to be as wide and tall as possible.

As Kafka is the metaphysical background to this article it needs to be mentioned that “The Cross“ was commissioned by a foreign contractor (i.e. the monument supposedly intended to speak to the national-historic feelings of Estonians was contracted out to a foreign country). That contractor was a Czech company deeply embedded in its own national identity – “800 years of Bohemian crystal”, as it markets itself. Czechs are definitely among the emotionally and culturally closest nations to Estonia, but one of their symbols is the Brave Soldier Schvejk, which can definitely neighbour the classic art only in a post-modern world and under the strict condition that the latter bears its primitivistic appearance. Kafka, Vaclav Havel and Milan Kundera have repeatedly noted that Schvejk is not simple at all.

“The Cross“- erecting company bears the name of utmost semantic significance: „Sans Souci“, translated into French: “no problems!” (homepage - www.sanssouciint.com).

Here it is what Woody Allen has described in the formula: Comedy = Tragedy + Time. „The Cross“ = War + Postmodernism.

The fact that none of the officials of the Ministry of Defence resigned over the issue of “The Cross” mishap leads us to the conclusion: „The Cross“ is socio-politically accepted and truly represents the new being of minds in general – the one definitely primitivistic in opposition to the state of modernism. The technology of lights, which was technically post-modern, inevitably failed because it was artistically (neo-) primitive. Semiotically “The Cross” does not make sense in post-modern urbanistic room without its history of technical failure. Because the essence of meaning here is the conflict between two sets of semiotics – the set of technology and the set of primitive essences of post-modern art.

What brings us to another feature of post-modernism as primitivism is the idea of comic and grotesque modality.

First – let it be remembered that the equivalence of grotesque and primitivism (in the early era of modern jurisprudence) had been revealed by Jeremy Bentham. His idea of auto-icon (i.e. of the sculpture to be made of his own stuffed dead body) is an expression of a most sophisticated primitivism and of „black humour” at the same time.

When we refer back to the examples already presented we can notice that the Bush’s sculpture is, after all, unintentionally comic and even grotesque if we add just the 15 meter wider context of Houston Airport, being officially titled as „Winds of Freedom“, they blow over the airport security machinery and grim personnel working just next to the Bush’ statue, and within the same range of visibility. The surreal mood of the whole situation is sharpened by an additional twist – there is a sign next to Bush’s sculpture in Houston Airport and by the screening machine that says that jokes with security personnel are forbidden!

The most productive concept of „grotesque” has been produced outside analytical studies. Sherwood Anderson’s „Winesburg, Ohio’s” subtitle is the „Book of Grotesque“, and for us the essence of the concept is the stable solitude of the subject of semiotic process with an instantaneous and short-period exposition to something „else“; what we call the „semantic event.“ Under the current circumstance of a co-habitation of the modernistic environment with post-modern visual art, this has produced effects that aesthetically can be called ‘the comic’.

From the point of view of the semiotics of visual postmodernism, it is crucial to notice a sometimes thin but semantically fundamental line that separates intentional sculptural grotesque (like the warm humour of Viktor Hulik’s „Cumil“, the sculpture of a plumber in Bratislava) from the grotesque that is produced by the post-modern shift in context. This is the change that produces the somewhat unintentional comic effect, and is not even grasped on the surface from the beginning.

(I have stated elsewhere that postmodernism and eclecticism are worlds apart although they appear somewhat similar).

The intentional grotesque is very modernistic in its essence - most of its forms such as parody, art criticism, and other meta-textualizations are very sophisticated and assume the structures of the texts, classifications, parties, roles, systems of signs and languages etc. Post-modern

grotesque manifesting itself in its comical mode might be described in a human way by the word – „failure“. A Perfect example is George Bush N 2. The bloody consequences of his political exercises aside, the essence of „W“ as a sign in the post-modern world is – „failure“.

The most tragic semiotic event of the post-modern world was the attack on the WTC in New York, arranged by an evidently non-governmental non-for-profit civic institution – thus by a social entity of a clearly post-modern nature. Its semiotic essence is grasped by a set of semiotic signs like „terrorism“ and „war on terror“, „9/11“ etc. Even a modern technological word – „weapons of mass destruction“ - has become a purely semiotic label within an emotionally loaded discourse. The invention of a new word – „NUKELAR“ by Bush-jun (comic twist!) just demonstrates the existence of the grotesque in Sherwood Anderson’s sense. The miss-spelling of the word „tomato“ by Vice President Dan Quayle did not change the world, but the switch from „nuclear“ to „nuclear“ – did.

Inspired by the tragic events of 9/11, the monumental sculptor Zurab Tsereteli (Russia) designed a monument called „The Teardrop“ to be installed in New Jersey next to the place where the tragic event took place – Picture 4. Tsereteli, notably, is a successful, enterprising and mass-producing sculptor (search for „Tsereteli“ images in Google!) whose inability to notice the fine tunes of semiotic space has sometimes caused him inconveniences. His loyalist sculpture of Putin (search „Tsereteli Putin“ images from Google) was banned from an installation by Putin himself.

It was Tsereteli who had performed the intercultural? of sculptural meanings in the post-modern urban environment in the literal sense; by replacing the head of Columbus with the head of Peter the Great in what now stands as a monument to Peter the Great on the bank of the Volga in Moscow (but still dressed in Columbus’s’ clothes and on a Columbus-era ship) – the fast transformation of one statue into another by replacing the head is of semiotic value by itself.

Anyway, „The Teardrop“ stands in New Jersey, and according to the legend behind the installation mourns the victims of the tragic event. But purely artistically we have here a copy of another sculpture – located at the Institute of Microbiology at Tübingen University. The sculpture is properly titled in an accurate modernistic way – „Vulva“ (technicality says that it should rather be vagina, but from a semiotic point of view it does not matter). Being based on modernistic semiotic elements like „anatomical taxonomy“, „higher education“, „physiology“, all the mythologema that I would call „Tübingen academia“ or rather „ a Tübingen STYLE of academia“.



Picture 4: Tübingen “Vulva” and New Jersey/Tsereteli “Teardrop”

Visually it also has to be projected against the background of a fairy-tale mood, and visibility that Tübingen and its University present?.

„Vulva“ in Tübingen is definitely a piece from the world of modernistic semiotics; „The Teardrop“ is unquestionably a piece from the post-modern world of tabloids, where even pornography has lost its erotic tension. The introduction of piercing airport screening of the human body by security officers and the mass production of images of naked bodies of all people on their screens is just the manifestation of the eradication of any eroticism of the human body. (In regard of the semiotics of the situation of surveillance: (4)).

To quote a senior security officer in a major European airport (who asked not be identified): „Now people have to figure it out whom to f... with whom to do that. Other humans seem to be out.“

We are in the middle of a transfer from modernism into something else. We have to keep in mind that in monumental art the artefacts of previous semiotic spaces stand longer than in many other spheres of semiotic interest. The classical (or modern, in that sense) pieces of sculptural art may create new tensions in societies that go through their re-birth through structural (or de-structural) changes of the post-modern era. Thus there is a meeting point, and the joint life time of sculptures from the former semiotic ages and the new ones were technically created very fast – „The Teardrop“ by Tsereteli and „The Cross“ in Tallinn were erected in the blink of an eye and even then most of the time was spent on the legal issues (planning, zoning, contracting, reconstructing, litigating).

Let us hope that the semiotics of post-modern sculptures can at least implicitly contribute to the lowering of the costs of that transition into a debt-striven European Union. Every single euro

not wasted on stupid installations can be spent on something better, and it is it definitely the social responsibility of scholars in our field to be part of the ongoing processes of that transformation.

References

1. Gräzin. I. „Law Is Myth“, in International Journal for the Semiotics of Law, 2005, v 18, pp 23-51
2. Hart. H.L.A. The Concept of Law. Oxford, 1961
3. Lyotard, Jean Francois. The Post-modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (Minneapolis Univ Press, 1989)
4. Puurmeister. O. „The Construction of the Subject in Surveillance Systems“, in Acta Semiotica Estica, VIII, Tartu 2011, synopsis in English pp. 254-255.