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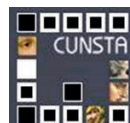
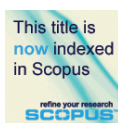
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Is Polish Burqa Possible? Image of Woman in Poland between Politics and Contemporaneous Art

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Abstract

Analysing the current political scenario, it is good to mind the ‘distribution of the sensible’ as phrased by Jacques Rancière, which refers to a regime and delimitates spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise; and to think about possible re-distribution, which has emancipating character that can contribute to more democratic politics and aesthetics. In contemporary times of visual culture, it is important to mind especially strong, symbolic images constructed for political stakes and distributed in the public sphere to understand what they do and how, in order to disarm and transform them. Focusing on two faces of backlash observed in contemporary Europe, one anti-Muslim and the other anti-women, we propose the interdisciplinary analysis of two artworks by Polish female

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artists: *The Polish Burqa* by Karolina Melnicka (2013) and *Mokosh* by Katarzyna Górewicz (phot. Jacek Gajak, 2017), which imply discourses on women in tradition in different ways that might be considered as dialectic and symbolic in Rancière's terms. One is decomposing the politically oppressive use of traditional symbols, and the other is proposing a reference to tradition in an empowering way.

Analizzando l'attuale scenario politico, è bene ricordare la 'distribuzione del sensibile' così come è stata formulata da Jacques Rancière, che fa riferimento a un regime e delimita spazi e tempi, del visibile e dell'invisibile, della parola e del rumore, e allo stesso tempo fa pensare a una possibile redistribuzione, che ha un carattere emancipativo, il quale può contribuire a politiche ed estetiche più democratiche. Nell'epoca contemporanea, dominata dalla 'visual culture', è importante pensare a immagini simboliche particolarmente forti, costruite per la posta in gioco politica e distribuite nella sfera pubblica, allo scopo di capire cosa esse fanno e come, al fine di disarmarle e trasformarle. Concentrandomi sulle due facce del contraccolpo osservate nell'Europa contemporanea, una anti-musulmana e l'altra anti-donne, propongo l'analisi interdisciplinare di due opere di artiste polacche: *The Polish Burqa* di Karolina Melnicka (2013) e *Mokosh* di Katarzyna Górewicz (foto Jacek Gajak, 2017), che implicano discorsi sulla donna nella tradizione in modi diversi che potrebbero essere considerati dialettici e simbolici nei termini di Rancière. Una sta decomponendo l'uso politicamente oppressivo dei simboli tradizionali e l'altra propone un riferimento alla tradizione in maniera emancipante.

1. Introduction

Analysing the current political scenario, it is good to start with a view proposed by Jacques Rancière, who combines aesthetics and politics because both have a sensible character and are based on who is perceived, felt, viewed, and heard in the public sphere (and how) – forming the distinctions of social and political structures¹. This is the 'distribution of the sensible', which refers to a regime and delimitates spaces and times of the visible and the invisible, of speech, noise, and aesthetics. This can be considered 'as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience'². In changing the existing form of 'distribution of the sensible', the re-distribution has emancipating character which can contribute to more democratic politics and aesthetics. Therefore, it is important to mind strong, symbolic images constructed for political stakes and distributed in the public sphere, to understand what they do and how, and to disarm and transform them. This possibility is seen by Jacques Rancière – pupil of Louis Althusser – in art. Although Althusser did not write much on art, the *Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre* written in 1968 points out art as the sphere in which it is possible to create an «internal

¹ Rancière 2004.

² Rancière 2004, p. 13.

‘distance’ which gives us a critical ‘view’» of the ideology³. This is so because «[w]hat art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘*seeing*’, ‘*perceiving*’ and ‘*feeling*’ (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*»⁴.

The importance of analysing what is perceived and how is relevant to any time, but contemporaneously there is a stronger necessity to focus on images, because we live in times following the ‘pictorial turn’ according to analysis proposed by William J. Thomas Mitchell⁵ or ‘iconic turn’, according to Gottfried Boehm⁶ (for a discussion on these two proposals, see the exchange of letters between Mitchell and Boehm from 2009 published in *Culture, Theory and Critique* and its recent development by Krešimir Purgar in *Images. Journal for Visual Studies*⁷). For Mitchell, visual culture or visual studies is a kind of reflection that encourages a critical consideration of what is sensory – within this the visual element – or semiotic⁸. For others, e.g. Stuart Hall and Jessica Evans, visual culture is understood not only as a kind of methodology, but also as an empirical field⁹. Of course, analysed images should be at stake in reference to all times, as is stressed by Hans Belting with anthropology of image¹⁰, but contemporaneously this necessity is much stronger, because the culture is to a large extent based on images.

Visual culture is the interdisciplinary field¹¹ in which analysis of image reincorporates anthropological, historical, political, philosophical, and aesthetic input. In the following text, we follow this perspective and turn to history, politics, aesthetics, social studies, and philosophy of art in the process of analysis of artworks by Polish female artists Karolina Mełnicka and Katarzyna Górewicz, both presenting women, one (“The Polish Burqa” [2013] by Karolina Mełnicka) dressed in a burqa sewn from the Polish flag, the other (“Mokosh” [2017] by Katarzyna Górewicz) as embodiment of an important Slavic goddess. We propose to analyse them within the perspective of visual culture to better understand the nuances of our current socio-political situation regarding women and tradition, because both images employ strong symbolism related to tradition, though with different takes on such. These considerations are important in the context of an observable backlash

³ Althusser 2001, p. 225.

⁴ Althusser 2001, p. 222.

⁵ Mitchell 1994.

⁶ Boehm 1995.

⁷ Boehm, Mitchell 2009.

⁸ Mitchell 1994, p. 170.

⁹ Hall, Evans 1999, pp. 1-7.

¹⁰ Belting 2011.

¹¹ Mitchell 1995.

in Europe, found across different forms – one dimension opposing Muslim immigration and another stepping on women’s rights, especially reproductive rights. Close reading of these images will allow one to deconstruct oppressive stereotypes employing anti-Muslim and anti-women discourses, decoding cultural oppression, and opening the door to new solutions; as Jacques Derrida importantly emphasized, deconstruction should be always done with two hands, one erasing, the other writing the new dictionary of concepts¹², for our cultural world does not stand in a symbolic void. However, before we pass to the analysis of images, we must provide brief information on the forms of the backlash in question.

2. Two faces of political backlash in Europe

2.1. Antimuslim political trends

Observing our contemporary political situation, we cannot fail to notice that since the beginning of the European migrant crisis in 2014¹³ opposition against immigrants has become more pronounced in liberal European politics and societies. In various national contexts, this backlash takes a somewhat different form: in France and Germany for instance, after attacks occurred in 2015¹⁴ public resentment towards immigrants began to stir¹⁵. This resentment turned against not only refugees themselves, but also generally against Muslims, who are often perceived as connected directly with terrorism and violence (and to a large extent, sexual violence against women as well.) The movement in France against liberal politics stands out especially in the National Rally with Marine Le Pen at its front, which supported the idea to maintain a net legal immigration rate of 10,000 in France per year and attributed Islamic terrorism to immigration¹⁶. In 2013, the populist Alternative

¹² Derrida 1980, p. 100.

¹³ Evans 2020. According to Eurostat, European Union member states received 1.2 million asylum applications in 2015, more than twice the previous year – “Asylum in the EU Member States. Record number of over 1.2 million first time asylum seekers registered in 2015 – Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis: top citizenship”. Eurostat Newsrelease 44/2016 – 4 March 2016: <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STAT_16_581>, 15.1.2022).

¹⁴ On 14 July 2016, a 19-tonne cargo truck deliberately ran into crowds celebrating Bastille Day on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, France, which resulted in the deaths of 86 persons and the injury of 458 others. During the 2015-2016 New Year’s Eve, as the Bundeskriminalamt (German Federal Criminal Police) confirmed, there were 1,200 women sexually assaulted in Cologne, Germany.

¹⁵ *Managing the refugee and migrant crisis* 2017.

¹⁶ Nossiter 2015.

für Deutschland (AfD) was established in Germany, which has since the beginning of the migrant crisis changed its focus from economics to immigration, purporting the latter as a threat to ways of life in Germany in attitudes towards women, work, society, and social customs¹⁷. The observable backlash in context is not wholly unfounded, but some dimensions of this reaction wear nationalist and racist faces. On one hand, it is humanitarian to help others in need, and we may interpret the situation of this migrant crisis as time coming due for Western Europe to pay the bill for colonialism; on the other hand, social changes and instability have brought along with an influx of immigrants some legitimate public concerns.

The symbol of women's oppression in the prism of this culture clash and opposition has become the *burqa* or *niqab*, the wearing of which has been banned in public spaces throughout France, Belgium, Austria, Holland, and Switzerland; and the banning of this garment in public spaces in Europe is sometimes presented as a symbol of the fight for women's visibility. This is because the burqa has grown into a symbol for the oppression of women foremost in Arabian countries, also within highly visible immigrant Muslim communities coming to Western Europe from Asia Minor. However, some immigrants who wish to live in Europe according to their native cultural and religious laws and traditions may radicalize themselves in opposition to liberal European commodification of their community for pragmatic means. Commonly in the wearing of a burqa by Muslim women we may notice the revival of certain traditions, more radically held, preached, and practiced, in relation to the resentment, as a contradictory identification against oppressive commodification on various levels. Resentment was described by Friedrich Nietzsche as the reaction of people who have suffered from oppression at the hand of the noble, which allows them to develop the moral concept of "evil" to morally condemn their past oppressors as enemies. This causes them to identify themselves on the basis of contradiction and denial of values held by past oppressors¹⁸. It brings to mind the analysis by Samuel Huntington, who argued that modernization – understood as industrialization, urbanization, development in education, increase in wealth and social diversity – is neither submission, nor does it mean automatic westernization, in the sense of taking western cultural values. Huntington was of the opinion that West was West, before it modernized itself due to the heritage of the 18th century¹⁹, and modernization means sometimes returning to familiarity. For others from different cultures can be felt as oppressive (hence the leaders of Islamic revolution studied in the West and radicalized themselves in opposition to it).

¹⁷ Gedmin 2019.

¹⁸ Nietzsche 1969.

¹⁹ Huntington 1998, pp. 67-103.

In that sense, common wearing of a burqa in this confrontational attitude with Western Europe is the effect of a step back in perception of the tradition, distorting it. However, the ban from wearing a burqa is also considered to be oppressive, opposing certain traditional religious practices²⁰. Here we may observe different types of discourses involved: one relating to the Muslim tradition as it is played now often in oppressive form and related to prohibiting women from participating in public spaces, the other to tradition as it is claimed that should be respected, but without applying critical historical analysis to it. To understand the dynamic in which the burqa is involved, this ‘war of images’ (Mitchell 2011), of symbols of oppression and of the fight against it, it should be minded also the history of this dynamic as well as the history of the burqa, niqab, or other types of scarfs. In place of imposing modern categories, we should follow the historical methodology proposed by Michael Foucault, that is “archaeological”, searching for dispersed and overlooked sources²¹, or “genealogical” as proposed by Nietzsche in reference to the history of morals²².

A variant of a burqa called the niqab is the clothing imposed now on Arab women in Saudi Arabia, and the burqa was forced also under Taliban rule of Afghanistan, although after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 many Afghan women continued to wear a burqa. Burqas are also worn by women in countries such as Yemen and southern Pakistan²³. The enforcement for all women in certain countries to wear a burqa is experienced by many as oppressive and discriminatory and should be understood in such a way. The reasons put forth by those referring to tradition and traditional Muslim identity, may however seem if not false, then at least far reaching. The burqa mandate in some countries is the effect of a backflash opposing neoliberal economics and liberal politics of Europe, and it must be differentiated from the practice of veiling which is widespread in cultures in the Near and Middle East, since long before Islam was born, as in the Byzantines or Sassanids.

There is even some evidence that indicates that two clans in southwestern Arabia practiced veiling in pre-Islamic times, the Banu Ismail and Banu Qahtan. Veiling was a sign of a woman’s social status within those societies. In Mesopotamia, the veil was a sign of a woman’s high status and respectability. Women wore the veil to distinguish themselves from slaves and unchaste women. In some ancient legal traditions, such as in Assyrian law, unchaste or unclean women, such as harlots and slaves, were prohibited from veiling themselves²⁴.

²⁰ Hass 2020.

²¹ Foucault 1972.

²² Nietzsche 1969.

²³ Slininger 2014, p. 73.

²⁴ Slininger 2014, pp. 68-69.

The fact that in Arabic countries of ancient times only women of high castes were allowed to cover with scarfs is completely understandable, when we think about a beautiful princess, with healthy face, all her teeth, in jewellery, bathed, covering herself with a scarf from the sight of the crowd while walking through for example a square, so that not everybody stares at her. Whereas women without caste, or slaves, were forbidden to cover or they risked harsh punishments. They were obliged to be publicly exposed, visible. Here appears the dynamic of the visible and the invisible, of «bodily positions and movements, functions of speech: visible, audible in the public sphere»²⁵.

The strong attitude of Muslim communities not assimilating themselves with the societies which welcomed them in Europe, provokes a fear that Sharia law will be implemented not only in Muslim societies in their countries, or in their societies living in Europe, but that in time it will dominate European culture. In popular imagery this appears in the form of fear that European women will be also covered with burqa or niqab. Is this a well-founded fear? Maybe. But the guilty party here is neither a burqa itself, nor niqab or scarf as such, but the use made from it in politics and the explanation of its meaning by historical policy.

2.2. *Anti-women political trends*

In other countries, such as Hungary and Poland, which lack history of colonizing non-European countries, the backlash is not primarily against Arab Muslim immigrants, because neither Hungary nor Poland are accepting of them²⁶. The backlash is against the liberal worldview, within it against liberal, tolerant education and women's rights. The prism focusing these issues refers to reproductive health and social gender roles, as both Poland and Hungary are restricting laws concerning the right to abortion, banning sexual education in schools, and underlining the procreative function of women while disregarding their education and career²⁷. Polish society has a mostly different approach, though it is not univocal. The strongest response to this situation took form in protests by women in Poland which started in 2016, with Black

²⁵ Rancière 2004, p. 19.

²⁶ In 2015, Poland decided to accept only Christian Syrian refugees.

²⁷ For example, Przemysław Czarnek, since October 19, 2020 Minister of Education and Science in the Republic of Poland, expressed such opinions during the 10th International Conference "Życiu-TAK". "Czy rodzina kocha życie? (Yes to Life. Does the Family Love Life?)" at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, March 20, 2019. This is also the statement of facts in the study: *Backlash in Gender Equity* 2018. The study indicates six European countries: Austria, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, as countries experiencing decreasing levels of protection for women and girls, and the reduction of access to their rights.

Monday on 23rd October, as the reaction to the trial to pass in the Polish Parliament a bill banning abortion in cases of foetal abnormality, though abortion was nearly completely banned in Poland previously (resulting in a large number of illegal abortions, risking women's health and lives²⁸). The Black Protest involved a large portion of society and was widely covered in international newspapers, e.g. BBC, New York Times, and The Guardian, among others. In the year 2020, the Black Protest regained its strength following the judgement of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal stating that abortion in case of irreversible and/or lethal injuries of the foetus is in disagreement with the Constitution of the Republic of Poland²⁹.

For this reason, to strengthen the protest visually, not just with words, various activists have since 2017 employed the costume of "handmaids", created in the imagination of Margaret Atwood and presented in her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* from 1985, as convincingly represented in the Hulu series from 2017 directed by Bruce Miller. The iconic costume of a long red dress and white coifs symbolizing subordinating women and reducing them to the role of birthing machine is strong enough to popularize it in the form of this socially used symbol³⁰. The costume shows what women active in protest think about political moves concerning their reproductive rights, without needing to explain it in words and with strong emotional impact, reinforced by the striking and well-known book and TV series³¹. It gives the women's protest an interpretative frame³² which refers to narration but is expressed through image, and allows for presenting interpretation of the contemporary political actions in Poland by social movement³³ with visual and emotional impact. Interpretative frames tend to be treated by researchers as constructed in a rational manner as a strategy and analysed as if they are static, not dynamic, which Kubik criticized³⁴. Korolczuk following criticism of Kubik applies dynamic perception of interpretative framework to women's protest

²⁸ Szczuka 2004.

²⁹ <https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzu-dziennik-ustaw/wyrok-trybunalu-konstytucyjnego-sygn-akt-k-1-20-19075113?_ga=2.117676489.1399541696.1634936911-615467407.1634936911>, 4.9.2022.

³⁰ This is a similar situation to the one described by Mitchell (2011), where he analyzes the photograph of 'a hooded man' tortured in Abu Ghraib, an American prison in Iraq. This image has undergone massive multiplications and transformations, appearing in various forms and serving as critical references to bloody American interventions in the Middle East, as in the case of pictures by Emad Hajjaj, analyzed by Najjar 2011.

³¹ The first use of the handmaid's costume in Poland was in Warsaw on 6th of July 2017 during the visit by President of the United States of America Donald Trump (Korolczuk 2019, p. 11), and later many others followed, especially after the decision on 21st of October 2020 of the Constitutional Tribunal in Poland to restrict the law on abortion, like in Łódź or Katowice, and in front of European Parliament during the session of the Constitutional Tribunal.

³² Mooney, Hunt 2008, p. 137.

³³ Korolczuk 2019, p. 123.

³⁴ Kubik 2008, pp. 63-64.

in Poland and stresses not only their cognitive but also emotional and moral dimension³⁵. This dimension is felt due to symbolism involved, especially coat hangers (internationally recognized symbol of dangerous methods of illegal abortion) and the handmaid's costume (symbol of reducing women to their reproductive function).

It is interesting to notice that similar dress is used in both contexts of backlash mentioned: Muslim burqa or niqab, and handmaid's costume. The burqa and niqab are being banned in opposition to women's oppression in line with antimuslim trends in Western Europe, though various scholars argue that it is discriminating for religious reasons³⁶; the handmaid's costume is used to manifest understanding of the current political situation in Poland as subjugating women. However, arguments for freedom of choice and liberty to express one's identity in an unrestricted manner tends to allow the burqa in Europe for Muslims. Similar arguments are used by feminist activists fighting for more liberal law on abortion³⁷ who employ a costume fully covering women as a symbol of oppression.

Recently there appeared also another symbol in reference to oppression of women, especially of Polish women, which is a 'Polish burqa' used by a group of political happeners, Flying Brigade of the Opposition and Shadow of the Fog [Lotna Brygada Opozycji i Cienia Mgły], in their anti-governmental performance on 22nd of August 2021 in Warsaw, to signify the subordination of women in Poland. The group employs symbolic image created in the artwork by Karolina Mełnicka in 2013, which combines symbols of burqa, handmaid's costume, and the Polish flag. We analyse it in the following paragraphs, asking if a Polish Burqa is possible – and what does such an image want?

3. The Polish Burqa by *Karolina Mełnicka*

Objection to Polish politics and/or tradition regarding women is expressed in the video-art piece created by Karolina Mełnicka³⁸, called *The Polish Burqa* (1'15), though it is from the year 2013, before the Women's Strike in Poland began. Due to its strong symbolism, it was presented at the exhibition *Polki, Patriotki, Rebeliantki* [Polish, Patriotic, and Rebellious Women] in Arsenal

³⁵ Korolczuk 2019, p. 124.

³⁶ Heider 2012, pp. 93-129; Hass 2020.

³⁷ Kowalska, Nawojski 2019, p. 53.

³⁸ Karolina Mełnicka is a graduate of Cultural Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and a graduate of New Media at The Academy of Art in Szczecin working with video art, photography, objects, and performance.

Gallery in Poznań 08.09-08.10.2017, curated by Izabela Kowalczyk³⁹ a year after Black Monday. In the 1'15 long video, we see a Polish woman (the artist herself) dressed in a long dress in the form of a burqa, sewn from two pieces of white and red material, creating a vertical flag over the woman's body. The accompanying audio track is composed of cheering stadium fans. The woman enters the empty stadium, stands and sits on one chair. She is presented in a few perspectives, with close ups on her face, with only eyes visible. At the end she stands up and leaves the stands. At the beginning of the video there is a statement included by the artist: «The Polish burqa, closed in the hostile, intolerant space – is the surreal presentation of fears related to assimilation in a new homeland»⁴⁰. The work cannot refer to incoming Arab immigrants because there are hardly any in Poland. It refers to the oppression of women in Poland, symbolized by the Polish national flag in the form of a burqa.

The image created by Mełnicka (fig. 1) has a strong symbolic impact because it is created with the re-use and recontextualization of other symbols: a burqa, the Polish flag, and shouts in a stadium. Her video presents the bond of symbols embodied by the author dressed in burqa made from the Polish flag in the stadium: the white and red flag as a material for sewing a burqa, the shouting of Polish fans are iconic symbols, places, and sounds. This configuration is an example of a dialectic model in Jacques Rancière's categories, which creates a power of heterogeneity by meeting what is incompatible⁴¹. It is an example of the most widespread order of images, which stages the relationship between the pronounced and the visible, the relationship playing their analogy, and their dissimilarity.

The piece by Karolina Mełnicka undoubtedly stimulates reflection by playing on stereotypes, juxtaposing them, and contradicting. The meaning of the juxtaposition of the symbols she creates is either banal and iconic, which causes its popularity, or it is not true, because either it reduces the meaning of the flag to current Polish politics and takes it as referring rather to the Polish tradition. The first direct political meaning, that current Polish politics are oppressive for women, could not be intended by the author; the artwork was created before the Women's Strike and recent political events, though it was used with this meaning by the curator of the exhibition *Polki, Patriotki, Rebeliantki* in 2017 and by happens Lotna Brygada Opozycji in political performances in 2021, due to its strong visual impact causing its dissemination within cultural practices. Such narrowing down the meaning is favourable for this image,

³⁹ It was also awarded at the FAMA Festival in Świnoujście in 2015. You can watch it here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5Qo8t6T7qY>>, 4.9.2022.

⁴⁰ Originally in Polish: «Polska burka, zamknięta we wrogiej, atolerancyjnej przestrzeni – stanowi surrealistyczne przedstawienie lęków związanych z asymilacją w nowej ojczyźnie».

⁴¹ Rancière's categories, which creates a power of heterogeneity by meeting what is incompatible (Rancière 2007, p. 56).

making it not only more explicit, but also removing controversies that may appear while interpreting it more generally. The second meaning, that the Polish tradition is oppressive for women and/or that subordinating women is Polish tradition, can be reasonably questioned, by turning back to the Polish tradition and asking what Polish tradition is, how we date it – since deciding on the contemporary form of the flag (1919 or 1990), since writing or accepting the national anthem (1927), since the baptism of Mieszko I in the year 966, or maybe earlier – and what is the role and function of women in Polish tradition from before Christianization that is in Slavic culture⁴².

The picture by Mełnicka shows invisible women, invisible crowd, and inverted flag, which transformed into a burqa obscures Polish tradition. The inverted flag that is neither intended by the author to relate to current Polish politics, nor meaning Slavic Polish tradition, rends apart⁴³. However, the woman under the flag is invisible, so we do not see any suggestion of an image of a woman in culture and tradition. There is only the power of the negative, the contradiction, which is a valuable artistic input, disassembling the presented, smashing the box of representation. The lack, the void emerging through the rips in Mełnicka's work is what the woman, her dress, and setting are lacking. This picture is deprived of what it wants, in the phrase from William J. Thomas Mitchell, and desire is the characteristic that allows us to treat pictures as quasi-agents⁴⁴; it is not only power to communicate something or to exercise

⁴² It is impossible to sum up the long debate about the ethnogenesis of the Slavs here, which has been ongoing between the supporters of two main theories: autochthonous (the formation of a Slav ethnos in the Oder and Vistula basins) and allochthonous (arrival of Slavs to Poland in the fifth century AD from the forests of Eastern Europe, the Pripjat region). Suffice it to say that the rapid expansion of Slavic culture across the vast territories of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe cannot be explained solely by conquest and even record rates of reproduction. With the modesty of its material culture, the secret lay in the attractiveness of their social structure, and the spiritual culture that is elusive today. Perhaps the egalitarian structure allowed for easy assimilation of various groups, but the matter is so far from being resolved that there is even an assumption that the generator of Slavism was a religious idea. Being a Slav then, in that era, would imply a religion, and the rising of an ethnos would be the result (Gąsowski 2000, pp. 257-262). An important element of the Slavs' culture was its visible conservatism, manifested in their adherence to a traditional belief system and archaic social structure that resisted attempts to centralize power. Let us ask a broader question: with their archaic culture, which contained all the trappings of egalitarianism, a long-held aversion to the creation of a supreme power, and was judged by outside observers (whether from Byzantium, the West, or the Arab world) as barbaric (Boroń 2013, pp. 162-182), anarchic, and dangerous – were the Slavs bearers of relics of a matriarchal culture? This is perhaps an oversimplification, but certainly according to authors from the Western civilization in its Christian version (Modzelewski 2004, p. 43; Musiał 2001) they were seen as barbarians – just like the Germanic peoples (Piekarczyk 1968) and, in an earlier era, all peoples outside the circle of classical Mediterranean culture – with all the consequences, i.e. as leading an “animalistic”, lawless, and promiscuous life, sometimes subject to the authority of women. Bear in mind that we are talking about the medieval narrative, and not the actual Slavic culture.

⁴³ Didi-Huberman 2005, pp. 139-155.

⁴⁴ Mitchell 1996.

some impact (to be performative). The power of pictures is less in modernity than it used to be: this is the power of the powerless, of the deprived, so that their desires are strong enough to reward their powerlessness. In the picture by Melnicka we notice the dialects of power and desire. Power induces desires by oppressing the body, the visibility, the identity. This is what the woman, the dress, the stadium in the video are missing – the picture wants visibility and established meaning. This desire is not necessarily the desire of the author, nor of the woman presented in the video, but the desire of the picture.

Visual representations want from us what we did not give them, that is to say they want visibility compatible with their ontology. The woman represented in Melnicka's video juxtaposed with the Polish flag wants to be visible in the way she is, to express her emotions, thoughts, and desires. It is not just the Polish tradition that is oppressing her. It is rather the use of this tradition by historical policy that distorts the meaning of symbols and of the tradition itself. We will argue next that the status and role of women implemented into Slavic myths (due to scarcity of historical sources) is not an oppressive one and undermined, and we will focus on the image of women that emerges from these myths.

4. *Status and role of women in Slavic myths*

Early medieval literature produces an ambiguous picture of the role of women in the traditional society, and one must consider different historical circumstances to understand the position of women in the past. As Karol Modzelewski writes: «[w]e will understand nothing from traditional cultures of barbarian Europe, if we close our eyes on the collective character of their moral norms then»⁴⁵. On one hand, women's fate was closely tied to the fate of their fathers, husbands, and in the absence of both, e.g., brothers, manifesting itself in the need for a legal guardian⁴⁶, and – in extreme situations (though according to sources, that was a common practice) – in acts of suicide in the face of widowhood⁴⁷. These practices cannot be judged from the point of view of contemporary society but should be considered in their cultural, historical, and social setting (as for example in traditional polygamist communities in Kenya, where inheritance of a wife reflects protection by the community of women, so that a widow does not fall out of the community)⁴⁸. On the other

⁴⁵ Modzelewski 2004, p. 155.

⁴⁶ Modzelewski 2004, pp. 82-84, 159.

⁴⁷ Pseudo-Maurice 1999, p. 76.

⁴⁸ I am developing this research on culture and cultural heritage in Kenya, especially focusing on Mijikenda people on the Kenyan coast within the TPAEE project (Transcultural Per-

hand, women's special role was played out in the very act of creating a community not only in a biological sense, but also in a cultural one.

4.1. *Slavic heroines or dynastic myths*

To outline the role of the female element in early medieval culture, it is impossible to ignore Slavic dynastic myths. This is a very interesting case, because it lies at the intersection of traditional cultures and newly implanted Christianity. We know this from the oldest chronicles of Slavic countries (Poland, Bohemia, Ruthenia), which were written down in the 12th century, approximately two centuries after the Christianization of dynasts and elites, in an attempt to legitimize their power by emphasizing the lineages' antiquity. These works refer to the pagan times of the beginning, and in this case, they do not characterize them negatively. The female characters play a special role in them, as Luboša (Libuše), «younger by birth but the older by wisdom», one of the three daughters of the legendary Czech ruler Krok, who became a very important symbolic figure, temporarily pushing out her husband Přemysl from the common consciousness⁴⁹. According to Cosmas of Prague, Luboša «was truly a woman among women: cautious in counsel, quick to speak, chaste in body, upright in character, second to no one in resolving the lawsuits of the people. Affable, even lovable, in all things, she adorned and glorified the feminine sex while handling masculine with foresight»⁵⁰.

In the case of Poland, from the first mention of a legendary progenitor Piast by his name, he is accompanied by «his wife named Rzepka»⁵¹. Together, the couple invites and treats the mysterious wanderers who were earlier driven away by the stingy Prince Popiel. The guests reward them by multiplying their stock and giving their son the name of Siemowit. Both parents sensed them as having a major role for their son⁵² and in the following years, Popiel lost his power, and the people elected Siemowit to be their king⁵³. Jacek Banaszkiwicz pointed out that Gallus Anonymus emphasizes the equal merits of both spouses, while Rzepka appears in the author's kind comments. This is a rather unique situation, since in similar story patterns, in other countries, the wives of the hosts are not mentioned by name, and their presence is forced by the need to develop the plot. Not only does Rzepka go by her first name, but the couple

spectives in Art and Art Education) which has received funding from the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 872718.

⁴⁹ Strzelczyk 1998, pp. 120-124; Pleszczyński 2001, pp. 153-159.

⁵⁰ Cosmas of Prague 2012, p. 40.

⁵¹ Anonim Gall 1982, p. 12.

⁵² Anonim Gall 1982, p. 13.

⁵³ Anonim Gall 1982, pp. 11-15.

of protoplasts «acts as a two-person subject of the sentence, a two-person protagonist of the story»⁵⁴ establishing the cultural order. Let us keep in mind that Piast was a ploughman, in cultural terms, a hero of the third function, ensuring material prosperity for the community, which was one of the most important tasks of a ruler. His wife is named after one of the edible plants, the turnip, crucial to feeding the community. She thus personifies the food for the whole community. Thus, at the beginning of the Piast dynasty, a relationship was established to ensure renewal of the life-giving forces of nature⁵⁵.

The mythical foundation of Krakow, medieval capital of Poland, would not be complete without legends of Krak's daughter, Wanda, who, after the death of her father and brother, took over the rule due to her exceptional qualities. Not accepting a German leader as a husband and to save the city, Wanda committed suicide, choosing death in the river Vistula over accepting the attack on Krakow. Wanda then also represents a chthonic goddess, associated with magic. Defeated, and in fact struck by her very magic, the German leader expresses in awe before her suicide: «The sea, the earth, the clouds let Wanda command, to the immortal gods let her give herself out as a sacrifice, and I for you, O my dignitaries, in a solemn sacrifice to the gods of the underworld I lay myself, so that both you and your successors may grow old in uninterrupted continuance under the woman's rule!»⁵⁶.

Heroines also appear outside dynastic myths, for example in those with a martial bent. Saxo Grammaticus wrote in his *Gesta Danorum* about a legendary battle in which Slavs, who were providing support to the king of Denmark, formed a separate unit led by a woman. In martial myths apart from women warriors there also appear women magicians, whose magic was practiced not in the private sphere but in the public one during a war, like in the story cited by Cosmas about the war between the Bohemians and the Lučans, when each side had their women ritual specialists or witches who undertook divination and recommended specific rituals to ensure their side's victory⁵⁷. As one witch recommended magical treatments, another worked in favour of the opponents⁵⁸.

A certain connection to transcendence is considered to be a feminine gift

⁵⁴ Banaszkiwicz 1986, pp. 60-62.

⁵⁵ Banaszkiwicz 1986, pp. 72-74.

⁵⁶ Kadłubek 2010, p. 17.

⁵⁷ The Lučan tribe asked, «a certain woman, one from the number of Eumenides» [term used by Cosmas for witches or priestesses—trans.] «... [who] said: ... 'Know that the Czechs' witches and ghosts have prevailed over our Eumenides in their prayers, whence victory will be granted to the Czechs, our men having been killed down to the last one' ...» (Cosmas of Prague 2012, p. 56).

⁵⁸ «These people, devoted to empty rites ... approached a certain fortune-teller, consulted her, and insisted she proclaim what act should be performed in such a crisis and what results a future war would achieve» (Cosmas of Prague 2012, p. 56).

due to experience and knowledge in life and death, and on the maintenance of the time in between. Therefore, there are three female figures or types of energy: the one that begins, the one that maintains, and the one that ends⁵⁹. There are reminiscences of these ancient myths in more contemporary ones, from the time of patriarchal pagan gods like Zeus, Thor or Triglav: for example, three Moirai in Greek myths, three Norns in Scandinavian beliefs, and *rozhanitsy* in Slavic folklore. All these female figures are associated with spinning and weaving, activities seen as eminently and indivisibly feminine⁶⁰, and are also seen as responsible for people's fates. In Homer's works, all the gods and goddesses worship Moira, understood as fate in the sense of impersonal cause for everything, and for Hesiod, Moira divided into three Moirai with their own names⁶¹. For Scandinavian people there are analogous figures known as the three Norns⁶² who connect the temporal and spiritual worlds inhabited by people, gods, and other beings⁶³. In Slavic folklore we find the spirit of fate called *dola*⁶⁴, or Dola, and although she is sometimes seen in a male form, she is no doubt of the feminine grammatical gender and usually divided into three⁶⁵.

However, apart from female deities understood as natural powers, there appeared later goddesses as well as gods. The oft-debated fact that far more gods than goddesses have been remembered until our time is primarily associated with the spheres of competence of these deities. The masculine deities, associated mainly with the light, heavenly, fiery, and social spheres, were worshiped in public; the feminine ones had more of a chthonic nature and were connected into deeper matters such as life, death, destiny, and interiority, on top of knowledge of the present and future (not forgetting the oracles of Triglav in Szczecin⁶⁶, Sventevith in Arkona⁶⁷, and Svarozic in Radogoszcz⁶⁸, described late in the 11th and 12th centuries). Relationships with these feminine deities

⁵⁹ Kohli 2007.

⁶⁰ Mierzwiński 2019.

⁶¹ Krokiewicz 1959, pp. 73-96.

⁶² Kempinski 1993, p. 310; p. 160; about magic wands as spindles, cf. Gardela 2016.

⁶³ Słupecki 2003, p. 238.

⁶⁴ Józefów-Czerwińska 2017, pp. 2019-223.

⁶⁵ When a young Slav was born, his or her fate was settled by the *rozhanitsy*, appearing in folklore under different names, e.g., *rojenica* (Slovenian), *roženica* (Croatian), *sudička* (Czech), or *sojenica* (Slovak), Gieysztor 2006, 204; Szyjewski 2003, pp. 190-195; Strzelczyk 1998, p. 66, p. 174), who considered to be three female beings, invisible but concrete, clothed in white and arriving to the child on the third, or rarely the seventh, night of the infant's life, and deciding about his or her destiny that cannot be changed (Moszyński 1968, p. 247, pp. 623-624; Rękas 2010, p. 215).

⁶⁶ Labuda 1999, p. 174

⁶⁷ Saxo Grammaticus 1999, pp. 180-181.

⁶⁸ Thietmar 2002, p. 131.

tended to be implicit and, in some respects, more domestic⁶⁹. Therefore, it is a consequence of this situation, although seemingly perverse, that with the paucity of our knowledge about the names of female characters in Slavic beliefs, we can say much more about their activities, because these have survived, only shallowly concealed, in folk beliefs. The same cannot be said of the main gods of the Slavs, whose overthrow was a public act, and in the process of Christianization, special care was taken to eradicate their official worship⁷⁰.

It is not possible to describe all the individual goddesses who survived by name here, but let us just mention Mokosh⁷¹, Marzanna (Morena)⁷², Dziewanna⁷³, the reconstructed Perperuna (Gieysztor, 2006, 89), perhaps Siwa (Żywia? Zhiva?)⁷⁴, and maybe even Nyja (if that is not a masculine deity)⁷⁵. Due to the lack of historical representation of the female Slavic deities, the imagination is free (though conditioned culturally) to create new representations. Here we would turn to the photograph by Jacek Gajak from 2017, with Katarzyna Górewicz embodying Slavic goddess Mokosh: protector of women's work such as weaving, and of destiny in connection with rozhanitsy, the invisible – and usually three-fold – deities of fate.

5. Mokosh by Katarzyna Górewicz

The photograph of Mokosh (fig. 2) is part of a 12-piece series of the Slavic pantheon of gods and goddess initiated by Igor and Katarzyna Górewicz, who have published them in Triglav Publishing House as a calendar⁷⁶. The photo depicts one out of four goddesses (Mokosh, Živa, Devana, Rozhanitsy). The popularist form of the publication, a calendar, is no cause to disempower these images of their right to be analysed artistically and aesthetically. Within the pragmatist framework, art is a kind of an experience, a specific value penetrat-

⁶⁹ The dominance of male gods in our perception of the old Slavs' beliefs was probably also influenced by the well-known pattern in the history of religion, manifested by the transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal system of beliefs (Krzak 2007). There was a takeover of some of the powers formerly affiliated with the feminine sphere – chthonicity, interiority, caverns, moisture, and everything coded by the number 3 – by male gods (Krzak 2007; Szyjewski 2003).

⁷⁰ Literature on the significance of the act of destroying pagan statues is very abundant. Cf. Banaszekiewicz 2013.

⁷¹ Łuczyński 2020, pp. 134-147; Rybakov 2002, pp. 360-375; Gieysztor 2006, pp. 201-204.

⁷² Szczepanik 2018, pp. 101-106; Łuczyński 2020, pp. 242-250.

⁷³ Kowalik 2004 pp. 72-84; Łuczyński 2020, pp. 236-239.

⁷⁴ Strzelczyk 1998, p. 188; Łuczyński 2020, pp. 91-101.

⁷⁵ Szczepanik 2018, pp. 91-101.

⁷⁶ <<https://triglav.com.pl/kalendarze/bogi-s%C5%82owian,-kalendarz-2017-szczegoly.html>>, 4.9.2022.

ing the experience, as John Dewey put it⁷⁷ – there is no strong essential division between ‘high art’ and ‘popular art’. If the piece gives us a strong experience, if it enriches us in some way, it should be recognized as art. The elitist division between high art and popular art has historically been constructed to maintain power structures and status quo for certain social groups, as was convincingly demonstrated by Richard Shusterman in developing Dewey’s reflections on art⁷⁸. Charles Batteaux published in 1746 *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe*⁷⁹ which in conjunction with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s 1750-1758 *Aesthetica*⁸⁰ defined art in the time of rococo, just before the French Revolution in 1789. This can be interpreted as establishing of a certain cultural order by the aristocracy before radical political and economic changes in societies occurred. The knowledge and appreciation of certain categories and forms of art are cultural capital which can be transferred into other types of capital, as Pierre Bourdieu explained⁸¹: one’s taste is defined culturally and socially, and it defines its’ owner in socio-cultural terms⁸². When considering art, it is justified to analyse pieces that pertain both to high and popular art (as Shusterman proposed in regard to rap music like *Talkin’ All That Jazz* by Stetsasonic⁸³).

Pre-iconographic analysis of the photograph of Górewicz informs that there is a woman with the attributes of the horn, spindle, and red thread expressing her strength, pride, power, and self-confidence; iconographic analysis informs that she is the personification of Mokosh⁸⁴, slowly being overgrown by roots on the background of thick earth. The spindle symbolizes women’s activities, with an important eschatological meaning of having power over human destiny, while a horn symbolizes abundance. On the woman’s belly there is a symbol of Mokosh consisting of four rhombuses, which is a symbol of a sown field from the Belarusian vyshyvanka⁸⁵. Górewicz plays, or rather she incarnates, Mokosh referring to the idea of the Great Mother, creating a different situation than in the case of Karolina Mełnicka. Mełnicka dresses up, she literally covers herself, while Górewicz undresses. While Mełnicka is showing oppression and invisibility, Górewicz expresses her strength, beauty, and mature womanhood. These images are different also from a formal point of view, as Mełnicka’s image is juxtaposing symbols, contradicting them, erasing in a dialectic way, while Górewicz’s image is symbolic. On symbolic representation, Rancière writes that it

⁷⁷ Dewey 1934, pp. 10-12.

⁷⁸ Shusterman 2000.

⁷⁹ Batteaux 1746.

⁸⁰ Baumgarten 1750-1758.

⁸¹ Bourdieu 1986.

⁸² Bourdieu 1996, p. 111.

⁸³ Shusterman 2000, pp. 221-234.

⁸⁴ Panofsky 1970, pp. 51-81.

⁸⁵ Кауап 2013.

also relates heterogeneous elements and constructs little machines through a montage of unrelated elements. But it assembles them in accordance with the opposite logic. Between elements that are foreign to one another it works to establish a familiarity, an occasional analogy, attesting to a more fundamental relationship of co-belonging, a shared world where heterogeneous elements are caught up in the same essential fabric, and are therefore always open to being assembled in accordance with the fraternity of a new metaphor. If the dialectical way aims, through the clash of different elements, at the secret of a heterogeneous order, the symbolist way assembles elements in the form of mystery⁸⁶.

The symbolism implied in *Mokosh* embodied by Górewicz, though heterogeneous, construes coherent meaning. The figure of *Mokosh* resembles the snake goddess figurines excavated in 1903 in the Minoan palace at Knossos in the Greek island of Crete, dated around 1600 BC. The ancient meaning of the priestess or goddess is played through reference to woman's power, continuous and fundamental for both life and death, nevermind the changes of social and political systems. This power is rediscovered and praised not as an external force, but as internal female energy without shame or imposed modesty.

In this way Górewicz makes the invisible visible, working to change the distribution of sensibility by managing the order of what is seen and heard, and how. The invisible femininity, from the picture of women's oppression presented in Mełnicka's work, is brought into light by Górewicz. Mełnicka's woman is completely invisible and oppressed, she claims that political history and certain national practices oppress women, while Górewicz's woman is distinctly visible and self-defined. The lack of self-defined femininity in Mełnicka's work can be interpreted within the framework of liberal feminism, which perceives a woman through the category of a(n equal) person in public and political spheres, but does not thematize femininity itself as it is burdened with cultural requirements and expectations. This leads to overlooking the more essential part of being a woman, which may be explained in biological, performative, emotional, and epistemic perspectives (widely discussed within feminist theories and which cannot be elaborated here due to scarcity of space). This invisibility becomes visible in Górewicz's work. Its reference to tradition can be understood using Clement Greenberg's category of 'devolution', the regression to older forms in search for a means to maintain aesthetic values, opposing the current trends in contemporary art. Greenberg explains that devolution is "an unraveling of anterior tradition, but it also means its continuation"⁸⁷. Górewicz's *Mokosh* with her breast bare and hair covered with a scarf relates strongly to tradition, in an empowering way, finding in it a source for blooming and not the means of oppression. Old or even ancient traditions may be better for this task than the more recent ones, as they are less

⁸⁶ Rancière 2007, p. 57.

⁸⁷ Greenberg 1965, p. 9.

burdened with political implications contorting the understanding of symbols to become tools in a political game. Visible, strong femininity is an image that can encourage. Although the political conservatist's discourse calls out for the Polish tradition, trying to localize women in the private sphere and impose weakness, their call for tradition is ideological and not based in facts.

6. Conclusions

We propose analysis of the images by Mełnicka and Górewicz because we agree that being sensitive to the social situation, we should analyze powerful images rather than powerful words, we should analyse visual culture to unpack images in such a way that it is enriching for humans, so that it gives us some portion of knowledge. Thinking about culture, we should unpack images found within it, criticizing and/or changing certain 'scopic arrangements' (as the first to use the term, Christian Metz wrote it interchangeably with 'scopic regimes', in reference to the cinema⁸⁸).

The juxtaposition of the two artworks described above, created by two contemporary young Polish women, two artists highly engaged in their work, is striking. This juxtaposition generates sparks, inviting reflection on the relation between stereotypes, tradition, historical policy, culture, society, and image, allowing us to refer more consciously to who we are. We find here examples of two large politics of aesthetics: politics of art becoming life and politics of a resistant form, considered from metapolitical levels. Different political strategies that art takes up

refuting the hierarchical divisions of the perceptible and framing a common sensorium; or (...) replacing politics as a configuration of the sensible world; or (...) becoming a kind of social hermeneutics; or even (...) the guardian of the promise of emancipation. Each of these positions may be held and has been held. This means that there is a certain undecidability in the 'politics of aesthetics'. There is a metapolitics of aesthetics which frames the possibilities of art. Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy and thrives on that ambiguity. That is why those who want to isolate it from politics are somewhat beside the point. It is also why those who want to fulfill its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy⁸⁹.

Mełnicka's *The Polish Burqa* in these terms takes up the position of «refuting the hierarchical divisions of the perceptible and framing a common sensorium», while Górewicz's *Mokosh* is «replacing politics as a configuration of the sensible world». They are then performing a deconstruction of the concept

⁸⁸ Metz 1977.

⁸⁹ Rancière 2010, p. 133.

of femininity in cultural and political spheres, in the Derridian sense, that is deconstructing – in this case a traditional image of a Polish woman – and creating a new one, in continuity with the past.

The presented analysis brings us to the conclusion that the tradition itself should not be blamed for what is being done with it by contemporary historical policy, which distorts it, presents it in a one-sided way, and uses it for pragmatic political goals; this misrepresentation is sometimes deliberate, but not always conscious. Subordinating women is in the interest of those who do not want a change in the system of forces, do not want development, but who want to satisfy their need of power, ownership, and money. We should then not be disgusted with our own tradition, nor present the world in a biased way – from the left perspective, or from the right perspective – we should try to go forward in between, staying oriented on the social good. In this perspective it is unfavourable to obscure the situation either with the left, or with the right side of the picture. Such more radical approaches are easily manipulable in global games between the world powers and corporations. One should be a more reasonable person, having one's base in history, tradition, ancestors, from whom not all were glorious nor commendable: everybody has various personages in one's ancestors' pantheon. It is good to be conscious of them, to rely on some of them, thinking for the future on social consent and the greater good, accepting and cooperating transculturally in accordance with technological development.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. Karolina Melnicka, *The Polish Burqa* (1'15) 2013 [screenshot of the publicly accessible video]



Fig. 2. The photograph of Katarzyna Górewicz as *Mokosh* by Jacek Gajak, with makeup by Liliana Landa, 2017. Concept: Igor Górewicz

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