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GLASS HOUSES VS. GLASS ARCHITECTURE¹

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Abstract: Hanna Grzeszczuk-Brendel, GLASS HOUSES VS. GLASS ARCHITECTURE. "PORÓWNANIA" 9, 2011, Vol. IX, pp. 60-76, ISSN 1733-165X. The article is an analysis of the motif of glass houses in Stefan Żeromski's *The Spring to Come* in the context of architectural trends of the 20th century. This reflection, which has been nearly totally ignored by literary scholars, evolves from the concept of glass architecture by Joseph Paxton, Paul Scheebart, Chicago school to the futuristic cities of the future (Die Stadtkrone by Bruno Taut). Such an architectural perspective of interpretation allows to see the glass houses as similar to the concept which is in accordance with the modern view on development based on advancement in science and technology. The artist – a representative of the intelligentsia – was supposed to be the author of a better tomorrow for the inhabitants of the poverty-stricken cities. Żeromski, who is the author of the utopia of building as opposed to destroying, is seen as a follower of reforms and a professed adversary of revolution.

Abstrakt: Hanna Grzeszczuk-Brendel, SZKLANE DOMY A SZKLANA ARCHITEKTURA. „PORÓWNANIA” 9, 2011, Vol. IX, ss. 60-76, ISSN 1733-165X. Artykuł analizuje wątek „szklanych domów” z *Przedwiośnia* Stefana Żeromskiego w kontekście trendów architektonicznych początku XX wieku. Ta, niemal pominięta przez literaturoznawców refleksja, prowadzi przez ewolucję od koncepcji szklanej architektury Josepha Paxtona, Paula Scheebarta, szkoły chicagowskiej do futurystycznych miast przyszłości (Stadtkrone Bruno Tauta). Taka architektoniczna perspektywa interpretacyjna pozwala w projekcie szklanych domów dostrzec koncepcję zgodną z nowoczesną wizją postępu opartego na rozwoju nauki i techniki. Artysta – przedstawiciel inteligencji – miał być autorem „lepszego jutra” dla mieszkańców pauperyzujących się miast. Żeromski – autor utopii budowania przeciwstawionej niszczeniu – jawi się jako zwolennik reform i zadeklarowany przeciwnik rewolucji.

This article has to be preceded by an introduction that accounts for a research conduct that is at variance with the requisites of scientific adequacy. When collecting pieces of criticism related to the topic of glass houses in the literary texts by Stefan Żeromski, I was surprised to find out the negligible extent to which the relevant studies by different authors took into account the context of

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early 20th c. architecture. Waclaw Borowy gave short-shrift to it in the 1960s³, and it seems that the most recent development on the subject is an article by Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, published in this collections of papers⁴, where the “Author examines the cultural contexts of Żeromski’s ‘glass houses’ through finding references in texts by Jerzy Żuławski and Bolesław Leśmiana as well as taking into consideration stained glass windows and glass architecture”⁵.

An art historian will almost automatically associate the motif of Żeromski’s glass houses with Paul Scheerbarth’s Glasarchitektur (glass architecture). A lack of interest in these references for over 40 years⁶, if we consider Borowy’s essay as the starting point, made me scrutinise the architectural context of the writer’s idea on my own. Only upon concluding my studies did I compare my observations with Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska’s text. What I am interested in during this “experiment” is whether and to what extent an approach from the two perspectives: of a historian of literature and of an art historian, may lead to similar or divergent interpretations that arise from dissimilar positions and scholarly background.

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The motif of glass houses is considered in Stefan Żeromski’s literary texts mainly with respect to his novel *The Coming Spring* (*Przedwiośnie*), where it is one of the key components of the text, written between 1921-1924⁷. Rarely, if I am not mistaken, is it compared with a similar motif in *The Charm of Life* (*Uroda życia*), published in 1912, and the manner of interpretation seems in most cases to indicate that it is regarded as the author’s unrealistic, fantastic vision.

And yet, already the moment *The Charm of Life* came out, glass architecture had already boasted a quite long history, with which Żeromski was undoubtedly familiar. Its first major demonstration in public space was the Crystal Palace, designed by Joseph Paxton, erected during the First Great Exhibition in London (1851). In 1889 similar admiration was shown during the Paris exhibition to a machinery hall designed by Dutert and Cottancin, the building remaining in the Field of Mars until 1910. During the period between the world wars, marked by a growing fascination with America as a paragon of modernity, there was widespread familiarity with the accomplishments of the so-called Chicago School. Between 1883-1893 its representatives (e.g. William Le Baron Jenney, Louis

³ W. Borowy, *O Żeromskim. Rozprawy i szkice*, Warszawa 1964. In one of the last volumes of essays dedicated to Żeromski’s oeuvre, references to architecture did not appear in even a single article: E. Sękowska, *Konceptualizacja pojęcia ‘domu’ w Przedwiośniu Stefana Żeromskiego*, in: *Światy Stefana Żeromskiego*. Studies red. by M. J. Olszewska and G. P. Bąbiak. Warszawa 2005, p. 511-521.

⁴ M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Labirynty-kladki-drogowskazy. Szkice o literaturze od Wyspiańskiego do Gombrowicza*. Kraków 2011.

⁵ slowemmalowane.blogspot.com/2011/.../maria-podraza-kwiatkowska.../13.7.2011.

⁶ In reference to the topic, only Borowy is mentioned e.g. by: T. Sobieraj, *Heroizm i antynomie nowoczesności. Wokół światopoglądu Stefana Żeromskiego*, in: *Światy Stefana Żeromskiego*. Studies ed. by M. J. Olszewska and G. P. Bąbiak. Warszawa 2005, p. 415. In my article I often invoke T. Sobieraj’s analyses as this is one of the most up-to-date texts focusing on the question of the modern in Stefan Żeromski.

⁷ S. Pigoń maintains that the novel was begun in the spring of 1924: idem, editor’s note in: S. Żeromski, *Przedwiośnie*. Czytelnik Warszawa 1972, p. 379.

Sullivan, Daniel Burnham, John Root) made use of – on an unprecedented scale in urban public architecture – a steel skeleton structure filled with glass. The buildings dominant in the city centre became recognisable by the general public, thanks to the World's Fair that took place in Chicago in 1893. This interest was rekindled in 1923 in connection with an international competition for building the Tribune Tower in Chicago; designs representing the most modern thinking (Walter Gropius) and showing attempts at adaptation to the skyscraper of historical styles were submitted from around the world.

The modern achievements, which can safely be treated as harbingers of new architecture, co-existed with designs of cities of the future: futuristic visions by Sant'Elia from between 1912-1914, also Expressionist projects, including the most important one, Bruno Taut's *Stadtkrone* (the crown of the city). The description of the *Stadtkrone* as a city of the future was published in 1919; its central part was to be occupied by a large edifice, "pure architecture towering over the rest. This is a crystal building made of glass, a material that means more than matter in its shiny, transparent, and flickering nature"⁸. The architect referred to Paul Scheerbat's fantastic novels, describing the Andes transformed by architectural and garden projects. In 1918 Taut made use of this idea in his concept of "Alpine architecture", where the mountain ranges and valleys were to be supplemented with constructions made of iron, concrete and shiny glass, making up a friendly and artistically created world in accordance with nature. In turn Scheerbat, publishing *Glasarchitektur* in 1914 (glass architecture), dedicated it to Bruno Taut, who had designed a pavilion of the glass industry during the 1911 Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne⁹. The small pavilion, dismantled after the show, was one of the leading works of Expressionist architecture, demonstrating the possibilities offered in the future by glass as a construction material. Both works, the temporary pavilion by Taut and Scheerbat's idea, were indicative of the fascination with glass that can be traced likewise in many architectural projects of the period between the world wars, even if this is tangentially related to the current study. What is of greater significance is the mystic quality of glass, visible especially in Scheerbat, harking back to the Gothic stained glass windows with their symbolism of the Heavenly Jerusalem and the divine light.

As an art historian I will not dwell on the idea of glass houses and glass architecture, especially in that the publication date of *The Charm of Life* points to Żeromski's developing his vision earlier than he would have familiarised himself with Scheerbat's concept. Waław Borowy sees this as conclusive proof that someone wishing to "look for the 'source' of the glass houses idea should study the period prior to 1911"¹⁰.

⁸ B. Taut, *Stadtkrone*. Jena 1919, in: *Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre*. Berlin 1977, p. 294.

⁹ Scheerbat dedicated paragraph XLIX to the building, in: P. Scheerbat, *Glasarchitektur*. Verlag der Strum, Berlin 1914, p. 61.

¹⁰ W. Borowy, *O Żeromskim. Rozprawy i szkice*. Warszawa 1964, p. 117.

At the same time Borowy himself indicates this earlier provenance of the idea when he quotes a small article describing American “houses of glass”, published in 1905 in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*¹¹. Content with concluding that this proves the writer’s keeping abreast of scientific and technical progress¹², neither Borowy nor later critics continue reflection on why this became one of the major themes in Żeromski’s literary texts. I believe, however, that the examples of works and architectural concepts invoked here indicate a need for a more profound reflection on the affinity of the literary and architectural motifs.

A look on Żeromski’s oeuvre from Scheerbart’s perspective, or more broadly from the perspective of glass architecture, makes us focus on the nature of the vision, a modern utopia, included in architectural concepts and in the writer’s novel/s. Due attention should be paid not only to the role of the glass houses in Żeromski’s novel, but also to the very architectural concept, described in great detail by the writer and so closely related to Scheerbart’s proposals and Bruno Taut’s works. Possibly an analysis of the principal motif of *The Coming Spring* from the perspective of architectural concepts will allow an even more precise determination of the kind of utopia or else will introduce new elements to the “canonical” interpretations of this novel, which stress the clash between glass houses and permanent squalor, poverty and injustice. A utopia of a new civilisation is, therefore, an indication of the writer’s critique of Polish independence after 1918.

The vision of a “new civilisation”, which is offered to Cezary Baryka by his dying father, was described in the following words:

Baryka – our namesake – produces glass girders. With the aid of the prodigious energy he gets for free from the westerly current, especially from the west winds (...) He has an endless supply of electricity by which he melts down the coastal sand (...). From the vast liquid mass he extracts ready-made beams, slabs, wedges, and keystones, moulded or rather cast according to an architectonic plan. A whole single-story house of glass, with walls perfectly matched up to beams that come together in a crown and can be welded in the space of a single hour, and with floor, ceiling and roof made of panels – all this can be handed over to the buyer ready for use. In the rural houses of this type, what used to be called peasant houses, there are no stoves. In the winter hot water circulates around the walls, inside the beams, in every room. Glass vents in the ceiling regulate the desired temperature and constantly let in fresh air. (...) In the summer, cold water circulates through the same ducts around every room. The water cools the walls; as a result, even in the greatest swelter it’s as cool there as in our cellar in Baku, but without the damp and the bad smell. The very same water constantly washes the glass floors, walls and ceilings, bringing cool and cleanliness. (...) there is nothing that could rot or go moldy (...) since all the utensils, all the furniture and fittings – everything is made of glass. (...) These houses are designed by artists. Great artists. (...) They are wise, practical people, conscious and inspired creators (...). The houses are of various colors depending on the character of the neighborhood and the artist’s inspiration, but also the preferences of those who live in them. Against the background of wooded areas there are snow-white houses;

¹¹ *Domy ze szkła*, in: „Tygodnik Ilustrowany” 1905, No. 39, after: W. Borowy, *O Żeromskim. Rozprawy i szkice*. Warszawa 1964, p. 118.

¹² That Żeromski was rooted in Polish Romanticism and issues of Polish sovereignty and social equality does not mean that he was uninterested in contemporary European culture, as witnessed by his numerous references to current artistic phenomena. They were moreover expertly taken advantage of as the material of narratives in his novels and frequently had key significance. This can be seen, for instance, in the description of Judym’s and Natalia’s experiences in *Homeless People (Ludzie bezdomni)* in front of a painting by P. de Chavannes *The Poor Fisherman*, his familiarity with the idea of the *phalanstère*, and the presence of futurism and the utopia of the “new civilisation” in the conversation about the glass houses in *The Coming Spring*.

on the plains they're pink, and among hills they're pale green with a hint of purple or the color of nasturtiums. The houses are decorated in the richest, most imaginative and inventive ways according to the instructions of the artist and the tastes of the buyers, because the wall beams and roofing slabs can be dyed any color one wishes. (...) These are true futuristic dreams brought to reality in tractable, pliant glass. (...) The houses of glass are extraordinarily cheap, for there's no need for any bricklayers, carpenters, joiners, or roofers in their construction¹³.

The same motif can be found also in *The Charm of Life*, a novel published in 1912 and is a vision, like the one in *The Coming Spring*:

Sand has become the most precious treasure as it offered glass that could construct all: exquisite peasant houses, with glass furniture and fittings, colourful venues of new art made of glass, healthy places where such diseases as scarlet fever, pox, typhoid, and marsh fever have been eradicated. Large volumes of electricity powered by the River Vistula offer light to entire counties. Thousands of agricultural machines plough and cultivate the earth, thresh, winnow and clean grain. Pathways of glass slabs tiles run under linden alleys. The wonderful houses smile at the sun amidst crops. Some are blue, others pink, white or varicoloured. All that the imagination of an inspired artist prompted and all that was conceived in the secrecy of the genius, where both shape and colour are dormant, was used for the decoration of the glass beams with colour and drawing, in the slanting roofs, high towers, buttresses, doors, and windows. Man's companions — horses, cows, sheep, hogs, dogs, and poultry live in glass buildings...¹⁴

While the above excerpts should be recognisable to any final year high school student, the following quotation is familiar to only a narrow circle of specialists, especially that the texts quoted have not been translated into Polish:

[I] Our culture is in a way a product of our architecture. If we wish to elevate our culture to a higher level, we must change our architecture. (...) This, however, can only be done exclusively via the introduction of glass architecture which lets in the light of the sun, the moon and the stars not only through a couple of windows but through a the highest possible number of walls which are made of glass only, of colourful glass.

[IV] The walls may be in the distance of one metre (...) The light between the walls is projected inside and outside. Both the external and the inner walls may have a colourful ornament. (...) Naturally, the heating and cooling installations may be put inside in the form of lamps, since most of the light offered by lamps is dispensable, now that most of the light is offered by the walls. (...) Electric carpets that can cover the floors are recommended for heating.

[XXXIII] Thanks to this kind of lighting the entire glass house will become one great lamp, which in the quiet of summer and winter nights will shine like a firefly.

[XVIII] It will look like the earth has put on jewellery of diamonds and enamels (...) We then would have paradise on earth and would not need to long for the heavenly paradise.

[VI] One has to take into account also other new materials, which are not yet tried, as the [bearing] framework of glass tiles.

[XXIX] So-called glass bricks (glass blocks) are a material used for walls, which may naturally become an interesting element of glass architecture. (...) All that is fire-proof and translucent is aesthetic. Glass bricks should in many cases replace iron (bearing) frameworks.

[VII] Cabinets, tables, chairs, etc. will have to be manufactured of steel and glass if the whole surroundings are to act in unison. (...) Naturally, nickel-plated steel will be decorated with enamel and niello (...)

[XVII] (...) Glass may also be made into spider's hairs. (...) The glass fibres may give rise to a whole new art industry: bed covers, armchair upholstery, etc. can be made of glass fibres.

¹³ S. Żeromski, *The Coming Spring*. Transl. B. Johnston. Central European University Press, Budapest 2007, p. 85-88.

¹⁴ Rozłucki's observations in: S. Żeromski, *Uroda życia*, www.scribd.com/doc/43081039/Stefan-Żeromski-Uroda-Życia/13.7.2011, p. 168-169 (1st edition 1912).

[LIV] Colour cars with shiny glass surfaces and glass ships will change the landscape so pleasantly that people will most likely quickly accept the change.

[LXXVI] The development of glass architecture should be supported through the demonstration of new ideas at permanent exhibitions.¹⁵

In addition, Paul Scheerbat wrote such aphorisms:

- 3. Colour glass
Wipes anger away
- 4. The joy of colour only
In the glass culture
- 5. No glass palace
Makes life a burden (...)
- 14. Glass brings us new times
The brick culture is unpleasant¹⁶.

Żeromski's ideology focused on Poland's independence and the country's future. "The writer highlighted the connection between the idea of progress and the moral and spiritual improvement of the human person, which is a *sine qua non* condition of the progressive development of a community, nation, state, and the world"¹⁷. This idea of development was rooted in the worship of progress, which in the 19th c. was seen as a way to build an ever better world, guaranteed by advances in science and technology¹⁸. The rational nature of progress construed in this way is seen in the description of a factory manufacturing glass houses, where nature is man's servant in the construction process, a recurrent theme of modern thinking, which "subdues the earth". The Post-Enlightenment tradition of the modern includes also the concept of an ideal house/city, of constructing an adequate, instructive environment of the human person which will make him approve of the desired changes. As Scheerbat indicates: "A new glass environment will transform the human being completely. We can only wish that the new culture had few opponents"¹⁹.

In other words, a great artist (who in Żeromski is initially alone) will come and his work will offer an equitable world of a new civilisation to mankind, especially to disadvantaged groups. In the spirit of Romanticism, the founder of this new civilisation will resemble Prometheus, who brought fire to mankind even at the price of his own suffering. As many interpreters indicate, Żeromski believed that the intelligentsia, who abandon the "charm of life" for the sake of social service, will become such a collective hero.

Despite all the differences, avant-garde architects and Żeromski shared a critical approach to

¹⁵ P. Scheerbat, *Glasarchitektur*. Verlag der Strum, Berlin 1914.

¹⁶ *Sprüche für das Glashaus*, after: *Frühlicht: Beilage zur Stadtbaukunst aus alter und neuer Zeit*, H. 3, Berlin 1920, in: *Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre*. Berlin 1977, p. 2/62.

¹⁷ T. Sobieraj, *Heroizm i antynomie nowoczesności. Wokół światopoglądu Stefana Żeromskiego*, in: *Światy Stefana Żeromskiego*. Studies ed. by M. J. Olszewska and G. P. Bąbiak. Warszawa 2005, p. 405.

¹⁸ On the idea of progress, disenchantment and consequences of the paradigm of constant change see the many publications by Z. Bauman.

¹⁹ P. Scheerbat, *Glasarchitektur*. Verlag der Strum, Berlin 1914, paragraph CXI.

social pathologies, which was expressed among others in the pathologies of the city. Ugly and poor backstreets were to be replaced by new, hygienic houses full of light and air. Their characteristics described by the writer coincide with the demands put forth by the avant-garde of the period between the world wars. The new city/new architecture were not only a proposal of using a new form but a reflection of a new society and a new man; architecture in particular and art in general contributed significantly to the process of their creation. The artist, who was to create glass houses according to the tastes of the end user, was a representative of the intelligentsia, whose special role in the creation of a “better tomorrow” was stressed by Żeromski. No wonder that the architect was the hero of the circles of artistic avant-garde of the period between the world wars, while architecture was seen as an art that combined all kinds of creativity. The participation of the artist would not be limited to the designing of new forms but would make him a co-creator of the society of the future, in line with the social and artistic utopias of the avant-garde of the time. The slogans of social transformation through art or with its significant participation were put forth following the more radical attitudes of the World War I period.

The construction of a new society/civilisation was not always tied with a revolution, as in many Western European countries artists, especially architects, started to cooperate with Social Democrats that rose to power (Weimar Republic, Red Vienna). Another reason for an absence of political involvement was the conviction that art “did not call for a revolution since its was revolution itself”, as observed by Andrzej Turowski in his book under a telling title *Budowniczość świata* [Constructors of the world]²⁰. He invokes the significant declarations of the “Die Kommune” group established in 1919: “Our revolution means that in a small circle, in a pure community we create a new life. A life where the creative forces light up and strike so that life becomes a work of art”²¹. Stanisław Kubicki was a member of “Die Kommune” and also of the Poznań-based Expressionist “Bunt” group, which introduced the ideas of Expressionism in Poland. In the first years following World War I many Polish artists, including the progressive circles of the Expressionists and Futurists/Formists, believed that in an independent Poland they would be able to implement a culture “where universalism and the modern will go hand in hand with its regional and separate nature”²².

This is a vision of culture that Żeromski seems to be ascribing to; while he did not approve of revolution, he criticised independent Poland for neglecting the necessary reforms. In the context of European architectural utopias the expectation that the independence of the state will “transform Poles into angels” makes Żeromski’s observations acquire a broader significance as the debate

²⁰ A. Turowski, *Budowniczość świata. Z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej*. Kraków 2000, p. 46.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 46.

²² Ibidem, p. 52.

about Poland would be seen as part of a debate on the future of the European civilisation. What is also important in *The Coming Spring* is that the glass houses are a utopia of construction that opposes the destruction of a revolution.

The above interpretation would be especially tempting if in some way it might solve the dilemma typical of the Young Poland period, juxtaposing “individualism and its aspirations against the requirement of social service”²³. The creation of a new civilisation of glass houses would be both an artistic and political work which would not be inherently contradictory. The competence of an art historian does not suffice to verify this statement in the context of the overall message of *The Coming Spring*.

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Here we must relate this interpretation of an art historian with the observations put forth by Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska in her most recent publication²⁴. The eminent Polish literature scholar refers to the motif of glass houses and glass architecture in literary tradition and mysticism, in addition mentioning the Crystal Palace and 19th-century glass-covered arcades. However, she does not make references to Expressionist architecture, which plays a key role in my observations.

Placing the theme of glass houses in the entire texture of the novel, the critic highlights the “minimalism of vision” in *The Coming Spring*²⁵. At the same time she treats Żeromski’s vision as a symbol, which seems to further play down the importance of this motif. She unequivocally sides with those scholars²⁶ who see the sense of introducing glass houses in the clash of a utopia with Polish reality, in the expression of disappointment with the condition of Polish independence: “The degrading of the symbol was a result of Żeromski’s profound and painful disenchantment with the conduct of his compatriots in an independent Poland”²⁷.

In light of the reflections invoked in this article, it seems that an observation made by Tomasz Sobieraj that *The Coming Spring* is expressive of an “ardent yet already disenchanted faith of a modern man in the sense of modernization projects, whose implementation is a matter of primary importance as the future of an independent Poland is contingent on it”²⁸. A question arises whether and to what extent the disenchantment with Polish reality must undermine the sense of a utopia, which is by its very nature a projection into the future.

Among avant-garde circles the visions of glass architecture in the two decades between the world wars were unambiguously positive. Perhaps in this situation the motif of glass houses fulfils a double role, if this interpretation can be sustained by the development of a motif which appeared as

²³ T. Sobieraj, *Heroizm i antynomie nowoczesności...*, op. cit., p. 421.

²⁴ M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Od Niebieskiego Jeruzalem do szklanej Polski*, op. cit. p. 67-92.

²⁵ Op. cit., p. 90.

²⁶ Among others: H. Markiewicz, *Przedwiośnie*, in: idem, *O Prusie i Żeromskim*. Kraków 1995, p. 260.

²⁷ M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, op. cit., p. 91-92.

²⁸ T. Sobieraj, *Heroizm i antynomie nowoczesności. Wokół światopoglądu Stefana Żeromskiego*, op. cit. p. 420.

a fantastic vision in *The Charm of Life*. In *The Coming Spring* it is something more, namely a vision that counters the destructive force of revolution with the utopia of construction. Bruno Taut and Paul Scheerbart's utopias put forth at the time of World War I were, after all, exactly the same. Under the above reading in *The Coming Spring* glass houses would be both a dream about a free, charming and equitable Poland cherished during Poland's partitions and a proposal of a long-term vision in the face of the disappointing reality after World War I.

Transl. Marcin Turski