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## The ŁÓDŹ-ORWO Collection: Typographical Identity of Socioeconomic Transition.

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### Abstract

The so-called *ŁÓDŹ-ORWO Collection* refers to a set of two hundred 35-mm slides that document typography and visual communication in the city of Łódź, Poland, in the late 1970s. The set of slides represents a unique study material into the language of visual communication within urban environment during the decade of transition from communism to capitalism in Poland. This recently rediscovered collection has been already the focus of two photography exhibitions authored by Professor Jan Kubasiewicz and prepared to premiere in the USA and Poland in 2016. This paper, conceived together with Professor Ewa Satalecka, provides a rigorous analysis and comparison of typography and visual language documented in the collection. The authors attempt to distinguish different typographical styles, from the “official” government-sponsored propaganda and corporate advertising, through “private” small business visual brands, to “personal” messages within the urban space. The selected images provide the dialogic juxtaposition of the “formal” language of propaganda billboards, mimicking the western-style corporate advertising in the “international typographic style” of the time (predominantly sans serif fonts), with examples imitating western-style signage and branding for small businesses (hand lettering and slab serif fonts), as well as samples of “personal” messages (scripts and graffiti). In addition, the paper discusses instances of visual communication that is unreadable, or barely readable, due to deterioration or physical damage, yet creating unpredictable textual/visual meta-messages. Resulting from rigorous visual studies, the paper concludes in a classification of patterns of typographical identity, as well as the semiotics of typography, contributing to a cultural narrative of that particular historical period of socioeconomic transition in Poland.

**Keywords:** Typography, Identity, Łódź, Poland, Visual Semiotics, Visual Narrative

### The Collection

The so-called *ŁÓDŹ-ORWO Collection* is a set of two hundred 35-mm slides that document vernacular typography and samples of urban visual communication in the city of Łódź, Poland, in the late 1970s. The slides were part of a bigger collection, which originated from a student research project at the State School of Art and Design (currently the Academy of Fine Arts) in Łódź, Poland.<sup>1</sup> Kubasiewicz asked his students, and later also his friends and associates, to document the urban visual environment, samples of typography, signage, word fragments, etc. on 35-mm transparency slides. Over the years the set of slides grew to several hundreds, however neither the names of photographers nor specific information on place and time related to each slide have ever been recorded.

Kubasiewicz relocated from Poland to the US in 1987 leaving the whole archive of prints, books, photographs and slides in his studio in Łódź. Over the years, the content of his studio was moved from place to place, and as a result, the slides, together with other items from the archive, were assumed lost. Unexpectedly, a single box of two hundred slides from that collection was rediscovered by Kubasiewicz in 2009.

The current name of the collection refers to the ORWO-Chrom diapositive transparency film — the only available brand of the reversal photographic stock in Poland at the time. Each individual transparency, intended for projection, was mounted manually in 2 by 2 inch plastic mount (the paper mounts typical of Kodachrome process were not available for ORWO-Chrom material). In the rediscovered box of two hundred slides, there are eight different types of plastic mount, with additional color variations, which may be an evidence of several photographers and different time periods the slides were added to the collection.

This collection as a whole is a snapshot of the city of Łódź, and it represents a unique study material into the language of visual communication within an urban environment during the late 1970s, which was a period of transition from communism to capitalism in Poland. It has been already the focus of two photography exhibitions authored by Professor Jan Kubasiewicz and prepared to premiere in the USA and Poland in 2016.<sup>2</sup>

## The Late 1970s

In his essay titled “Freedom under Control”<sup>3</sup> Krzysztof Lenk makes the following remark, which coincidentally provides a perfect description of the goal and the specific focus of this paper.

Graphic design between 1945 and 1980 was a reflection of the rapid changes taking place in Poland. ... Looking at the achievements of the designers of that period many years later, it is easier for us to describe the contexts in which they arose, and recognize the need for critical research and detailed discussions concerning various fields of graphic design. (Lenk 148)

In retrospect, the late 1970s in Poland can be described as “the beginning of the end” of communists’ centralized control over all aspects of economy, business administration, management, and consequently all other sectors of life, including cultural policy.

Cultural policy, relatively open in the early postwar years, introduced greater restrictions along with the escalation of the Cold War and in the years 1948–1949, the enforcement of a doctrine of socialist realism in art. Private publishers were closed down, while theaters and cinemas were nationalized. An omnipotent board of censors controlled all means of communication, right down to the labels on canned foodstuffs. (Lenk 136)

Virtually all visual communication in any city of communist Poland was state controlled and state produced. Although some of the large-scale, high-budget design commissions attracted top professional artists, generally the communication design output within urban environment was considered not as appealing to professional designers as poster design or book cover design. By comparison, the sophisticated visual vocabulary of the highly esteemed Polish School of Poster and the language of visual communication within urban environment, depict seemingly two different worlds and visual cultures, but in fact they coexisted.

Most signs within an urban environment operate on multiple levels. Similarly to the dichotomy of *story line* and *discourse line* in narratology, in visual semiotic analysis we can distinguish the “message” and other components, creating together an entangled hierarchy of meaning, as Umberto Eco pointed out: “... what is commonly called a 'message' is in fact a text whose content is a multilevel discourse.”<sup>4</sup>

Those other components conveying “multilevel discourse” include, but are not limited to, all aspects of typography, as well as formats of visual display within urban context (visual representation of text, craft and/or technology of fabrication, materiality and engineering of display panels, scale and integration with architectural and urban landscape, etc.). This paper focuses predominantly on typographical aspects of visual communication.

## Typographical Identities

The paper attempts to distinguish different typographical identities of multiple actors on the urban scene in the late 1970s. They are grouped, and will be discussed, in several categories and subcategories:

- I Propaganda and Political Slogans of Communist Party**
- II Marketing and Advertising**
  - Central Government Owned Corporations
  - Factory Owned Displays
  - Small Business Branding and Signage
- III Promotions and Announcements Related to Cultural Events**
  - Promotions of City-wide Events
  - Announcements of Community Events
- IIII Local and Personal Messages**

## Propaganda — Political Slogans of Communist Party

For the purpose of this paper, propaganda is defined as a form of communication, the goal of which is to pressure a population toward a certain political agenda by representing it as a social consensus. It is a universal phenomenon, observable globally and throughout history. In Poland, a minority communist party, supported by the Soviet Union enforced geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe, held power by centralized control of economy, business, administration, and consequently all other sectors of life.

Political slogans of the communist Polish Workers Party (PZPR), crafted in an awkward propaganda vocabulary, felt rather unnatural to Polish language. To balance that, a visual representation of textual messages, with its typographical and graphical elements, attempted to project an image of strength, directness, clarity and progress.

“At Every Workplace We Forge the Future of Poland” (Fig. 1) is a display panel designed with a minimalistic approach to typographical composition: Sans serif Helvetica font, asymmetrical, flush left type arrangement, supported by abstract rectangular shapes of vibrant color demanding attention. Helvetica was a novelty font at the time, imported as Letraset sheets (for designers that meant “progress” over Akzidenz Grotesk). Type was enlarged photographically, prepared as stencils, and painted manually. The Letraset sheets did not include Polish diacritical marks, and that became a laboratory for type design “experiments” — often very poorly executed.

The panel “We Build Socialism For People and By People” (Fig. 2) uses all caps bold sans serif, combined with a condensed font, “softened” by a flower iconography. The graphical element help the usage of strong “warning” color palette (yellow background with black, gray and red type) seem friendly and optimistic.

Reduced graphical vocabulary of the panel “Nation. Fatherland. Unity. State. The party's program — the nation's program” (Fig. 3) utilizes only red and white, reversed type of all caps sans serif family, and a rhythmic use of aggressive, repetitive diamond shaped components of a free standing display made of iron (rusted heavily over time). There is a striking sloppiness in the execution of the panels. The typographical inscriptions are applied with semi opaque paint to recycled panels, on which the old slogans are still readable, therefore colliding with the new.

The propaganda slogans were very often applied to panels of free-standing 3-dimensional displays, occasionally complex structures themselves, with intricate design and engineering. The audience routinely considered the placement of those 3-dimensional sculptural objects and their integration within the urban surroundings, such as parks, and squares, as questionable or simply unacceptable. In the case of the two panels “Our Goal — Building of the Developed Socialist Society; Fatherland, Poland, Party” (Fig. 4), in addition to the questionable visual quality of 3-d displays and their location, there is a problem with typographical form and composition. The block of type is centered but the lines of text composed of uppercase condensed sans serif font barely fit the size of the panel. In one instance, the uppercase “L” is replaced with lowercase “l” in order to be able to fit the line within the composition. All diacritical marks are so poorly designed they can be considered typos.

The panel “Good Work” (Fig 5) is an amazing example of the search for originality and uniqueness in font selection, which went too far. The font known today as “Archetype Catalogue Solid” (The Foundry), was originally designed by Wim Crowel in 1970 specifically for the branding of Claes Oldenburg's exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Holland. An unknown designer who appropriated the font to that propaganda slogan, provided — intentionally or not — a rather sarcastic overtone to the message. Modular and organically shaped graphemes of Crowel's design are juxtaposed by a grid of squares with slightly rounded corners, and placed on the large-scale panels behind the chain-link.

## Marketing and Advertising

In a sense, marketing and advertising of government owned big corporations, banks, insurance companies, etc. were similar to propaganda. The marketing effort attempted to project a perception of integration with “international style” of Western European, progressive, consumer society, to which — communists certainly knew that — Polish society wanted to belong.

The same “international style” was rejected as the language of typographical visual identity by a growing number of pioneers of small business — entrepreneurs risking to operate within centralized economy, and transforming the system step by step toward capitalism. They looked into a different visual typographical identity and branding, that of an American dream, visualized as, for instance, typographical 19th century Americana... or anything else but the officially accepted “international style” of visual communication.

Advertising wall mural for government owned *Prexer* (Fig. 6) a manufacturer of military optical equipment (and also consumer products) is a good case study of a large-budget corporate marketing, treated as “propaganda.” The murals functioned more as public relation announcements than advertising. Consumer products did not really need any advertising. However, government owned brands wanted visibility. *Prexer* mural is a purely abstract visual solution reminiscent of best examples of op-art by Alberto Biasi or Vasarely, and has nothing to do with the direct advertising of consumer products they manufactured, such as film and slide projectors. On many occasions, the fashionable op-art visual vocabulary became an adopted strategy in advertising of various government owned companies — big and small, from a textile manufacturer *Ortal* (Fig. 7) to a restaurant *Kaskada* (Fig. 8).

In contrast to the hard-edge abstract compositions inspired by op-art, the advertising of a local newspaper “*The Workers Voice Always With You*” (Fig. 9) sounds akin to a biblical warning, delivered purely by typographical means. The formal sans serif condensed font, reminiscent of the “official” typographical style of the party propaganda, is combined with a softer, more personal and seemingly friendly script. However, the strategic as well as symbolic placement of the message on the top of a local highrise apartment building clearly conveys intentions of the Orwellian big brother, observing the city and controlling its citizens.

Small business branding and signage stands in a striking contrast to advertising of government owned corporations. The slides of the *ŁÓDŹ-ORWO Collection* allow us to observe the traces of the past as well as up to date developments — a kind of archeology of typographical identity. We can find fading inscriptions on the wall of the building which just simply survived from the pre-WW2 era (“*Ekonom*”, Fig. 10) or did not survive due to bankruptcy during the period of communist economy. (“*Foto*”, Fig. 11)

There is a strong presence of the signage and branding characteristic of the entrepreneurship of interwar period — small shops and tiny storefronts of jewelers (“*Metaloplastyka*”, Fig. 12), shoemakers, plumbers (“*Ślusarz*”, Fig. 13), hairdressers, tailors, accessory makers, optometrists, and others. (“*Szklą Antyfaró*”, Fig 14; “*Grand Piano Tuning and Repairs*”, Fig 15; “*Cream Robot*”, Fig 16) These businesses were barely surviving economical situation during the period of the communists in power. In fact, they survived because their signage and visual information were somehow hidden behind a single store window or a single signage panel mounted on a building, literally staying in a shadow of the new urban visual language. Those small information panels and samples of signage had distinctly different style based on the tradition of pre-war hand-lettering craft. The small businesses store windows proudly displayed pre-war advertising posters, banners, and placards, typographical identity of which can be easily traced to the 1920s and 1930s tradition of type design.

In contrast, new entrepreneurs, with a lot of courage, hope and funding, identified themselves with an American dream of self-made millionaires. Their typographical identity referred stylistically to the 19th century American typography of the “wanted” posters (“*Knitting*”, Fig. 17) so well documented in the Rob Roy Kelly Collection at the University of Texas at Austin. The signage of such storefronts as “*Tali Jeans*” (Fig. 18), “*Jeans Boutique, Dernier Cri*” (Fig. 19), or “*Salon of Young Fashion*”, (Fig 20) not only perfectly represented the merchandise — jeans, apparel, accessories — but aggressively disconnected their visual language from an elegant European tradition in favor of the visual manifestation of the “new rich” in the American style.

Less risky startups and under-invested entrepreneurs could not afford or did not want to hire professional designers but instead created “do-it-yourself” equivalents of professionally designed branding and signage. In this category there are many samples of free-hand lettering trying to imitate the traditional craft of sign makers, as well as instances of innovative visual approach, following the newest trends of pop-art style. (Fig. 21)

## Promotions and Announcements Related to Cultural Events

There was another important layer of information posted anywhere and everywhere in the city: The information related to cultural events, which included nationwide promoted concerts, citywide promoted film premieres, announcements of local theater performances, invitations to community clubs or local dance parties. Depending on the budget and who the sponsor

was — nationwide or local agencies — there were clearly distinguishable various levels of professionalism, or lack thereof, in typographical and design quality of visual communication. Similarly, a broad spectrum of topics of promoted cultural events coincided with a broad spectrum of high and low quality typographical solutions.

Of course, there were colorful, offset printed posters by top Polish designers promoting nationwide film premieres or celebrity concerts. City dwellers always welcomed these posters as they were bringing to the city a dash of color on dilapidated, soot-stained buildings. And there were also black and white, purely typographical posters — large-scale, letterpress printed announcement in the tradition of 19-century public notices (known as *affiches*: French for posters). They were printed professionally with a clear typographical hierarchy and consistent set of standards (as the whole printing industry, their production was controlled by the authorities).

The concert promotion of an international celebrity Charles Aznavour is an intriguing case study. The slide (Fig. 22) depicts a 3-dimensional structure made of wood and plywood, certainly not as permanent as displays of the official propaganda built of iron. Located in a park or on a city square, the structure could be considered an abstract sculpture itself, on which a number of posters were mounted. Majority of them are typographical posters (*affiches*) and one is a poster that includes a photographic portrait of the artist and his name set in square serif font — both suggesting the “Americanized” version of the same message. On adjacent structure, fencing the main sculpture, the photographic poster of Aznavour is mounted next to the poster of Maria Limonta, another international celebrity performer, with the graphically executed portrait designed by Waldemar Świerzy, a prominent member of the Polish School of Poster.

Another revealing case study is the billboard advertising the 1976 American feature film *The Battle of Midway*.<sup>7</sup> Andrzej Krajewski, another member of the Polish School of Poster elite, designed the original poster for the movie. For the local billboards, a local designer freely appropriated certain graphical components of the original poster, including its overall pop-art style, as well as specific elements, such as the silhouettes of the planes. (Fig. 23)

The practice was rather widespread. Many local announcements were executed by local artists following the visual language of well known celebrity designers. However, many craftsmen letterers tried to preserve their autonomy, as in the case of the local poster for the 1976 Martin Scorsese film *Taxi Driver*.<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 24) On many occasions, the announcements of local cultural events became entirely informal interpretations of pop-art visual vocabulary executed free-hand by community organizers, not necessarily designers. (“Dyskoteka”, Fig. 25)

## Local and Personal Messages

Personal messages and announcements in the urban environment of the late 1970s played the role of today’s social media at the time. In local stores, simple inscriptions announced price promotions, special offers, and discounts. Private citizens offered services to others, such as the foreign language lessons, selling stuff, looking for stuff — by hanging free-hand announcements here and there. Occasionally, some angry residents inserted the inscriptions of warnings or instructions: “Do not park cars in front of my windows” (Fig. 26), “Keep dogs off the grass” (Fig. 27) These kinds of inscriptions were very personal and did not pretend to be professionally executed, yet the authors certainly took time to think about visual elements of the message, the evidence of which is often seen in the final results.

## Conclusion

The selected images and case studies described above provide the dialogic juxtaposition of the “formal” language of propaganda billboards and government sponsored marketing, mimicking the western-style corporate advertising in the “international typographic style”<sup>5</sup> with examples imitating specifically American signage and branding, for small businesses (slab serif fonts and hand lettering), as well as samples of “personal” messages (scripts and graffiti).

The ruling communist party, declaring the Marxist materialistic idealism — “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”<sup>6</sup> — adopts a visual language of corporate communication in revealing the pragmatic need for power and economic dominance. Upcoming group of capitalist entrepreneurs, declaring materialistic pragmatism, adopts the entirely different and somehow idealistic visual language to project prosperity and communicate wealth — mistakenly interpreting the American Dream with the visual language reflected in the “wanted” posters.

Further rigorous visual studies of the collection will continue to provide even more evidence of a complex relationship of typographical identity of businesses, organizations and individuals to a unique situation of socioeconomic transition in Poland in the late 1970s.

#### Endnotes:

- (1) Jan Kubasiewicz, studied at the State School of Art and Design (currently the Academy of Fine Arts) in Łódź, Poland from 1968, and graduated with MFA in graphic design in 1974. After graduation, he became Assistant and co-teacher of Professor Krzysztof Lenk, head of the *Journal Design and Printing Studio*, re-named the *Typography Design Studio* in 1976. Kubasiewicz became Lecturer in 1980, and after Professor Lenk's relocation to the US (1982), he headed the *Typography Design Studio* until himself migrated to the US in 1987. Sources: *Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych im. Władysława Strzemińskiego w Łodzi 1945 – 1995*. Łódź, 1995.; *Konceptualiści ze 109*. Interview with Krzysztof Lenk by Ewa Satalecka. 2+3D vol. 50/2014.
- (2) The first exhibition scheduled to open at the end of March 2016 is "Łódź: The Promised Land... Still" in the Jacek Giedrojc Gallery at Harvard University's Center of European Studies in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The premise of the show is to exhibit the documentation of three periods of the history of Łódź. The first period is the 19th century industrial revolution — a golden period of the city, population of which grew from one thousand in 1815 to six hundred thousand in 1915. The second period is the late 1970s, based on the ORWO-Łódź collection. And the third period is contemporary Łódź — a portrait of the city by Sławomir Krajewski, photographer. The description of Łódź as "The Promised Land" is borrowed from the title of a novel by Władysław Reymont, a Polish novelist and the 1924 laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature. His novel condemned the ruthlessness of capitalism, yet depicted Łódź as a modern city of four religions, cultures, and nations — the Poles, the Germans, the Jews, and Russian officials in the Tsarist administration. The second exhibition scheduled to open in early April of 2016 is entitled "Z życia Łodzi" (Life in Łódź), and it showcases a curated selection of sixty photographs, edited and printed from the "ŁÓDŹ-ORWO Collection" to be displayed in "Re:Medium", one of the municipal art galleries in Łódź.
- (3) Formally, that transition begins with establishment of the independent trade unions *Solidarity* in 1980, followed by an communists' attempt to dissolve the *Solidarity* movement by imposition of marshal law in 1981. It led eventually to the so-called "Polish Round Table Talks" which radically and irreversibly changed the shape of Polish government and society, and gave the momentum to the dissolution of the entire European communist bloc.
- (4) Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1979), 57.
- (5) Philip B. Meggs and Alston W. Purvis, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design* (John Wiley and Sons, Inc, 2006), 357–373.
- (6) Karl Marx, (1875). "Part I". *Critique of the Gotha Program*. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>> Retrieved 2016-02-17.
- (7) *The Battle of Midway*, Dir. Jack Smight, 1976, film.
- (8) *Taxi Driver*, Dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976, film

**Jan Kubasiewicz** is Professor of Design and Founder of Dynamic Media Institute, the graduate program in communication design at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston. At MassArt he has developed innovative graduate and undergraduate design curricula with emphasis on design research, information architecture, information visualization, motion design and user experience design. Kubasiewicz has served as visiting lecturer and critic at numerous universities in the USA, Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, Italy and Poland. He has organized exhibitions, workshops, seminars, conferences and publications on the topic of communication, design and media. As practitioner of design, Kubasiewicz has an extensive experience in information visualization, user experience design and publishing. His clients include science and technology companies, museums, galleries and educational institutions. Born and educated in Poland, Kubasiewicz holds an MFA degree in graphic design and printmaking and his personal work has been exhibited internationally in the USA, Japan, Germany, Poland, Italy and Canada. He is an affiliate of the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University.

**Ewa Satalecka** is Professor at Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technologies in Warsaw, leader of the moving type class. She represents Poland on the international forum of ATypI (International Typography Association). She organizes international design workshops, conferences, exhibitions of typography and information design. Her own works, including kinetic typography installations, were presented on the "Liquid Page" Symposium in Tate Britain (2008) and as a part of the international "Moving Type" Exhibition in the Gutenberg Museum, Mainz (2011, Germany). Edited by her: *MOTYF2013*, *MOTYF2014*, *Fajrant* (available on issue, prized TDC 2012 certificate). Her articles are included in *VeryGraphic*, *Polish Designers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (edited by Jacek Mrowczyk, IAM, 2015) and *365xytypo. 365 Stories on Type, Typography and Graphic Design* (edited by Linda Kudrnovska, Etapes, 2015).

## Figures:

“At Every Workplace We Forge the Future of Poland” (Fig. 1)



“We Build Socialism For People and By People” (Fig. 2)





“Nation. Fatherland. Unity. State.  
The party's program — the nation's program” (Fig. 3)



“Our Goal — Building of the Developed Socialist Society; Fatherland, Poland, Party” (Fig. 4)



"Good Work" (Fig 5)



“Prexer” (Fig. 6)



“Ortal” (Fig. 7)



“Kaskada” (Fig. 8)



*"The Workers Voice Always With You"* (Fig. 9)



*“Ekonom”* (Fig. 10)





“Foto” (Fig. 11)



“Metaloplastyka – metalwork” (Fig. 12)



“Ślusarz – Locksmith” (Fig. 13)



“Szkła Antyfaro – antyfaro glasses” (Fig. 14)



“Grand Piano Tuning and Repairs” (Fig. 15)



“Cream Robot – shoe polish” (Fig. 16)



“Knitting” (Fig. 17)



"Tali Jeans" (Fig. 18)





“Jeans Boutique *Dernier Cri*” (Fig. 19)



“Salon of Young Fashion” (Fig. 20)



“Wymagłuj u nas na gorąco – hot mangling here” (Fig. 21)



“Charles Aznavour” posters (Fig. 22)



“The Battle of Midway” (Fig. 23)





“*Taxi Driver*” (Fig. 24)





“Dyskoteka – disco” Fig. 25



“Do not park cars in front of my windows” (Fig. 26)



“Keep dogs off the grass” (Fig. 27)

