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The relationship
between the culture and social
life of a nation in Sylwester
Ambroziak's art project entitled
"Mama, I'm coming home"
The problem of Euro-orphanhood

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to present the active participation of culture in the social life of a nation on the example of Sylwester Ambroziak's art project entitled "Mama, I'm coming home". The main problem of this article is "Euro-orphanhood", which is a result of the economic emigration of parents in response to a geopolitical situation. Sylwester Ambroziak's "Mama, I'm coming home" exhibition is a reaction to the present-day problem of Euro-orphanhood and the related experiences of abandonment, exclusion and eradication. The research methods used to achieve this purpose are semiotic analysis and interpretation. Formal and content analysis of the exhibition are preceded by information concerning stagings of the exhibition in Biała Podlaska and Poznań. Individual elements of the exhibition are then described, and the modest but eloquent artistic means used by the artist are explained. The "Mama, I'm coming home" exhibition by Sylwester Ambroziak shows the current problem of Euro-orphanhood and the non-culpable (anti)social functioning of Euro-orphans. The experience of

abandonment of Euro-orphans has psycho-social effects. An external expression of the mental state of Euro-orphans is these sculptures of "Minotaurs" with their "African-embryonic-alien" shapes with inhuman faces and more-or-less outlined eyes. Their physical ugliness reflects their psycho-spiritual condition. It seems that the behavior of the "Minotaurs" in the "Mama, I'm coming home" exhibition is the result of a hidden reaction to the breakdown of family ties. In their attitude, passivity, withdrawal and fear are visible. These figures-sculptures are alienated. Formal and content analysis of the exposition finally leads to the discovery of the essence and role of the family, and the value of close relations in the life of all family members, which cannot be replaced with any material goods.

KEYWORDS: family, economic emigration, Euro-orphanhood, experience of exclusion, sculptures of „Minotaurs”

STRESZCZENIE

Zależności między kulturą i życiem społecznym narodu w projekcie artystycznym Sylwestra Ambroziaka „Mamo, wracam do domu”. Problem euro-sieroctwa.

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie aktywnego udziału kultury w życiu społecznym narodu na przykładzie projektu artystycznego Sylwestra Ambroziaka zatytułowanego „Mamo, wracam do domu”. Głównym problemem tego artykułu jest „euro-sieroctwo”, które jest wynikiem emigracji ekonomicznej rodziców w odpowiedzi na sytuację geopolityczną. Wystawa „Mamo, wracam do domu” Sylwestra Ambroziaka jest reakcją na współczesny problem tak zwanego euro-sieroctwa i związane z nim doświadczenia porzucenia, wykluczenia i eliminacji. Metodami badawczymi stosowanymi do osiągnięcia tego celu są analizy semiotyczne i interpretacja. Analizę formalną i merytoryczną wystawy poprzedzają informacje dotyczące inscenizacji wystawy w Białej Podlaskiej i Poznaniu. Poszczególne elementy wystawy są następnie opisywane i wyjaśniane. Środki artystyczne stosowane przez artystę są skromne, ale wymowne. Wystawa „Mamo, wracam do domu” autorstwa Sylwestra Ambroziaka pokazuje aktualny problem niezawinionego (anty) społecznego funkcjonowania euro-sierot. Doświadczenie porzucenia ma skutki psychospołeczne. Zewnętrznym wyrazem stanu psychicznego sierot są te rzeźby „Minotaurów” o ich „afrykańsko-embryonalno-obcych” kształtach z nieludzkimi twarzami

i zaledwie zarysowanymi oczami. Ich fizyczna brzydota odzwierciedla ich stan psychiczno-duchowy. Wydaje się, że zachowanie „Minotaurów” na wystawie „Mama, wracam do domu” jest wynikiem ukrytej reakcji na zerwanie więzi rodzinnych. W ich postawie widoczna jest pasywność, wycofanie się i strach. Te figury-rzeźby są wyobcowane. Analiza formalna i merytoryczna ekspozycji ostatecznie prowadzi do odkrycia istoty i roli rodziny oraz wartości bliskich relacji w życiu wszystkich członków rodziny, których nie można zastąpić żadnymi dobrami materialnymi.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: rodzina, emigracja ekonomiczna,
 eurosieroctwo, doświadczenie
 wykluczenia, rzeźby „Minotaury”

Introduction

Culture is an element of every nation. There is a mutual relationship between a nation and its culture. A nation creates culture and culture forms a nation. Next to science, morality and religion, art is one of the fields of culture. In the context of the political transformations in Poland at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, in the field of fine arts the trend of critical art came into existence and this was a type of engaged art, criticizing the current social and political situation. In its artistic description of reality, consumer culture became the crucial point of reference. The idea of this newly created art was formed at the Faculty of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, in Professor Grzegorz Kowalski’s workshop, which was called the “Kowalnia” (the Foundry). This art trend is internally diverse yet unified ideologically. It derived its theoretical basis from the views of Michael Foucault and Jacques Lacana, the postmodernism of the 1980s, and the ideologies of the feminism and gender social movements. Furthermore, critical art drew its inspiration from the western artistic practice and actions of Viennese actionists, the Sociological Art Collective, and Object art (Struzik, 2017, 76). Loneliness, social exclusion and eradication are mentioned as the main topics of critical art.

Sylwester Ambroziak (born 1964) is one of the artists descended from this artistic circle. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw (1983-1989) and was awarded a diploma in 1989 in the workshop of Professor Grzegorz Kowalski. He is a distinguished artist who debuted while still studying when he presented his artistic projects at the “Dziekanka”

art gallery (the Dean's leave) and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. He is the author of more than seventy individual exhibitions and has participated in more than one hundred group exhibitions in Poland and all over the world. An art historian and curator of the "Mama, I'm coming home" exhibition in Poznań, Michał Haake maintains that Sylwester Ambroziak is one of the most remarkable contemporary sculptors. He carves wood, and nowadays he also uses silicone, acrylic mass and epoxy resin. As Ambroziak himself claims, "The shape of my sculptures is the result of a years-long search for the form which would suit the best my temperament. I search for original features in a human and that is why I turn to religious folk culture and primary culture – African or Amazon – but at the same time I draw inspiration from mass culture: comic books and animated films. Sculpture has lost its spirit and I attempt to bring it back – to retrieve the emotions in it. I do not treat my characters only as sculptures, it is my language, a form of a theatre, a way of communicating. It is closer to shamanism" (culture.pl). Apart from sculpture, the artist occupies himself with drawing, installations and experimental animated films. His actions and sculptures from his time as a student fell into the pattern of the New Expression of the younger generation. His mature works are distinguished by a style which is based on expressive means such as shape deformation, simplification, brutalization of forms, exaggeration in drawing figures and details' proportions, and colourful polychrome.

Apart from criticism of contemporary phenomena, Sylwester Ambroziak's art contains a message that aims to achieve positive change and which results from the aesthetic assumptions of his works formed at the "Kowalnia" (the Foundry). The author compares the role of the artist in culture to "the shaman's actions – an artist, priest and healer". In the case of the exhibition "Mama, I'm coming home", the author presents the problem of Euro-orphanhood as the result of the economic emigration of parents in relation to a geopolitical situation, thus indirectly indicating the value of close relations in the life of all family members.

The aim of this article is to present the active participation of culture in the social life of a nation. Sylwester Ambroziak's "Mama, I'm coming home" exhibition is a reaction to the present-day problem of Euro-orphanhood and the related experience of abandonment, exclusion and eradication. This project makes the viewer think about these disturbing social phenomena. Formal and content analysis of the exposition finally leads to the discovery of the essence and role of the family, which cannot be replaced with any material goods. The research methods used to achieve this purpose are semiotic analysis and interpretation.

Formal and content analysis of the “Mama, I’m coming home” exhibition

In 2018, Sylwester Ambroziak twice presented his project “Mama, I’m coming home”: once as part of his individual exhibition in Biała Podlaska (2-28 February), and again in Poznań (24 May to 4 July). The artist borrowed the title of the exhibition from the Black Sabbath song by Ozzy Osbourne and Lemmy Kilmister. As the artist states himself, “the experience of abandonment, loneliness and the loss of family ties, caused by the growing number of children deprived of parental care as a result of mass migration” was the inspiration for this project. In this context, the artist also poses a question about the status of an individual in the modern world who is searching for answers in his art.

In Biała Podlaska, the Art Gallery hosted the exhibition on two floors, whereas in Poznań it was presented in the “Przystań Sztuki” (Marina of Art) in the centre of the city. Additionally, part of the exhibition was placed in a corridor on the ground floor inside the Concordia Design event centre. The “Przystań Sztuki” (Marina of Art) is a town square between the Concordia Design building and the newly built Bałtyk building. It is a cosy square with a verdancy of trees, as well as benches and restaurants, all of which are conducive to social meetings. According to the idea of its creators, as Ewa Voelkel-Krokowicz, chief executive officer of the Concordia Design emphasizes, the idea of “Przystań Sztuki” (Marina of Art) is to enable direct encounters with art for those who do not visit art galleries, museums or concert halls. Concerts, performances, exhibitions etc. are held in the square. “Art is coming out into the streets”, thanks to which it is accessible to a wide audience. It is said that several thousand people pass through the square every day. One should pay attention to the architectural surroundings of “Przystań Sztuki” (Marina of Art), as it is important for the atmosphere of this place. The Concordia Design building is located in an Art Nouveau-style building, whereas the Bałtyk building is a modern office building inspired by Poznań Modernism, especially by the Okrągłak building designed by Marek Leykman and built in the years 1948-1954, which is considered an icon of style. Sylwester Ambroziak admitted that the exhibition in “Przystań Sztuki” (Marina of Art) was a challenge for him because of the open space; however, as he emphasizes, finally it was not difficult for him as he is a professional. Because of the location of the exhibition in Poznań, people of different ages and representing various social groups benefited from it. As Ewa Voelkel-Krokowicz states, the exhibition was already receiving widespread acclaim during its installation. Passersby stopped and talked with one another about it; they were very often

not prepared for direct contact with this kind of art and were shocked at the form of Sylwester Ambroziak's sculptures.

The exhibition "Mama, I'm coming home" is a sound and sculpture installation which is accompanied by 5 film animations in specially designed containers and which combines a few kinds of art. During the vernissage in Poznań, there was also a debate entitled "Public space – common space. Exclusion and building a heterogeneous society". The following people took part in it: Sylwester Ambroziak (the artist), Michał Haake (the curator of the exhibition), Marta Mazurek (a proxy of the Poznań's president for dealing with exclusion), and priest Radek Rakowski (an author of social actions). The debate was conducted by Jakub Głaz.

Sylwester Ambroziak's project consists of 40 sculptures in all. The artist used sculptures from the previous exhibitions: "Piaskownica" (Sandpit), "Łóžeczko" (Cot), "Opuszczone" (Abandoned), and "Laleczki" (Dollies). Such a large number of sculptures seem intended to reveal the scale of the presented social phenomenon. Additionally, some of the sculptures move and make sounds, which strengthens the intended artistic effect. The sculptures, called "Minotaurs" by their creator, are the artistic medium through which Sylwester Ambroziak expresses himself. They are humanoid figures with anonymous faces. Michał Haake describes them as "humanoid creatures with bizarre heads". They are bulky and naked figures with large heads, without individual features, as if wearing masks. Their shapes resemble an embryonic child. All the "Minotaurs" represent homo sapiens, but the figures do not resemble ordinary people. These are caricatures under the influence of external circumstances and thus acquire a new external countenance. As Natalia Ambroziak states, "A doll figure serves for confrontation of uninhibited children's imagination with the constant struggle with brutal reality. Grotesquely deformed, resized and uncut – Ambroziak's figures are almost provocatively ugly" (Ambroziak, 2016).

The artist presents the "Minotaurs" in various configurations: the sculptures are sitting, lying, crawling, or standing, but always without any purposeful reference to other "Minotaurs" nearby. It should be emphasized that in this artistic project one should pay little attention to the repulsive heroes of this exhibition, and more to the relations between these beings and in reality to the lack of any emotional relations between them. What strikes the recipient who experiences this art is the solitude of the individual sculptures and their isolation. Although there is a large number of these figures, it can be noticed that each of them feels abandoned. This is how Euro-orphans feel and (do not) socially function. Each "Minotaur" feels "different" – feels worse than the others – and thinks that he does not fit into the group, hence his isolation and social exclusion. It turns out that this is only their subjective feeling as in fact they all feel the same: absolute solitude.

The “Piaskownica” (Sandpit) (2016) is the central object of the “Mama, I’m coming home” exhibition. It is a closed square space surrounded by a high metal mesh fence topped with barbed wire, inside of which there are few sitting “Minotaur” figures. Each of the figures’ heads is slightly raised, as if they were seeking outside help, or liberation. There is no contact between them – each is isolated from the others. A striking element of this installation is the sculpture located on the outside and near the top of the metal mesh. It hangs on the mesh with its arms straightened, holding the metal rod that forms the top of the fence. The figure is moving, as evidenced by the left limb bent at the knee. According to Michał Haake, this sculpture evokes ambivalent feelings in its recipients because it is difficult to state unequivocally whether this figure is escaping from the sandpit or is climbing to join the sculptures inside. The question arises whether the “Minotaur” has enough internal strength to fight for his liberation: was he able to stand up and climb the mesh to leave the sandpit? Or maybe this figure is climbing up the mesh to get into the sandpit, wanting to join the children trapped there because it is not possible to live a different life whilst feeling alienated. A sandpit, which by its very nature should be a place of fun and joy – a place of establishing new social relations – in this artistic project is a place of the spiritual death of these “Minotaurs”. Looking at this sandpit, you can associate it with a concentration camp – a place of extermination for innocent people.

Another element of the “Mama, I’m coming home” exhibition is the “Łózczyko” (Cot) (2015) sculptural installation, consisting of a metal bed measuring 110x60x70cm in which there is a sculpture of an alienated baby made from a bituminous mass with a height of approx. 130 cm. The child is kept in constant motion by an electric mechanism and also makes sounds, thus deepening the drama of the situation. The character performs a monotonous forward-and-reverse movement, typical of emotionally traumatized orphans. The wobble of this sculpture gives an unbearable sound – a rasp that is unpleasant to the recipient’s ear. A sentence repeated with a child’s voice, “Mom loves you”, strengthens the effect of orphanhood. In fact, this alienated baby resembles an unwanted doll abandoned in the trash. Next to the bed there are three other childlike sculptures: one is crawling, while the other two remain in a kneeling position. Their attitude, arrangement of heads and hands is also an appeal for help.

According to Michał Haake, the optimistic point of this exhibition is a sculpture standing on a skull with a leg extended forward, expressing forward motion, looking ahead. The skull in European art symbolizes the transitory nature of life and earthly goods. It is the only “Minotaur” that gives hope for overcoming one’s passivity, for internal liberation.

Conclusions

The “Mama, I’m coming home” exhibition by Sylwester Ambroziak shows with modest but eloquent artistic means the current problem of Euro-orphanhood – the non-culpable (anti)social functioning of Euro-orphans. The experience of abandonment and violence has psycho-social effects. An external expression of the mental state of Euro orphans is the sculptures of the “Minotaurs” with their “African-embryonic-alien” shapes, with inhuman faces with more-or-less outlined eyes. This physical ugliness reflects their psycho-spiritual condition. According to Michał Haake, these characters present a species of homo sapiens: they are close to us, but they are different from us – they are simply “different”.

It is difficult to remain indifferent towards this exhibition, which evokes such strong emotions in recipients. Emotions simply emanate from the sculptures. As Michał Haake stresses, emotions are not suppressed due to the ambiguity of these sculptures. It is difficult to determine what these sculptures think; it is difficult to define their behaviour. According to the curator of this exhibition, the artist just wanted to “knock the recipient out of his mental peace” with his art, so that he would take a stance on the subject of this artistic project in a more engaged way.

Although economic emigration is in principle a temporary separation, it has serious psycho-social consequences. In view of the scale of the problem, in 2014 a report was issued at the request of the Children’s Ombudsman entitled *A child, family and school against parental migration: 10 years after the accession to the European Union* (Walczak, 2014), referring to previous studies from 2008 carried out under the initiative of the same public authority. According to data from the 2011 National Census, more than two million Poles were living abroad at that time. Approximately 2% of school children in Poland were under non-parental care due to their parents’ economic emigration. An incomplete family is often a dysfunctional family. The negative effects of economic emigration include the destabilization of the family due to the breakdown of internal relations, constant swapping of father and mother roles, loneliness of the child, a lack of stability, loss of the child’s sense of security, as well as the predominance of material values (Serkowska-Mąka, 2012, 117-128). The functioning of children in such an environment results in some disturbing behaviour: “Euro-orphans are attributed various features which are conducive to the disclosure of behaviour typical of disorders that are internalizing and externalizing. In general, they are the result of a long separation from parents who travel abroad in search of a job. Internalizing disorders usually include fear (e.g. separation anxiety disorder), chronically depressed mood, sub-depressive states and depression, withdrawal, passivity, low motivation to undertake

educational challenges. In turn, externalizing disorders include aggression and self-aggression, oppositional-defiant behaviour, antisocial behaviour, e.g. theft, extortion, violence, vandalism, experimenting with intoxicants” (Trusz, Kwiecień, 2013, 8). It seems that the behaviour of the “Minotaurs” in the “Mama, I’m coming home” exhibition is the result of a hidden reaction to the breakdown of family ties. In their attitudes, passivity, withdrawal and fear are visible. These figure-sculptures are powerless against the situation forced on them by economic conditions.

Any decision concerning economic emigration is not easy. It is caused by a lack of work, low wages and a desire for material goods. Parents–emigrants, however, are convinced that their travel abroad is for the good of family members as it will improve their material well-being. In view of the negative effects described above, the exhibition by Sylwester Ambroziak is also an appeal to politicians on whom the employment strategy of the country depends. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 also mentions the human right to work, which is directly related to human nature. Material means are necessary for a dignified life; however, a problem arises when consumption is treated as a determinant of the quality of life (hedonistic materialism). Experience shows that no material goods will compensate a child for separation from his loved ones, which he always feels acutely. Additionally, economic emigration is often accompanied by the phenomenon of all family members being uprooted from their native culture. Emigrants more or less consciously cut themselves off from Polish tradition. This eradication is manifested, for example, in the abandonment of traditional Polish names given to children in favour of names typical of the place of emigration. This is why nowadays one can meet Alex, Max, Naomi, Nikola or Nadia more and more often in the playground. Emigrants are thus absorbed by foreign culture through their consumptive lifestyle, which deepens the alienation of Euro-orphans.

Sylwester Ambroziak’s “Minotaurs” let out the silent cry “Mama, I’m coming home”, as is indicated by the title of the exhibition. It is the voice of helpless children expressing a deep desire to live in a functional family. Deep in their hearts these sculptures yearn for close family relationships that are able to heal their mutilated interiors; they are a salvation for them and a chance for a normal life in the future. The alienated “Minotaurs” do not function properly in society, they do not participate in cultural, political and economic activities. While living, they experience spiritual death. When spontaneously looking at these lonely “Minotaurs”, a question arises about the parents of these figure–sculptures: where are they? Are they aware of the dramatic situation of their children? At the same time, the idea of a family appears as a unique community of life and love. In this way, the artist’s work fulfils a mission towards society. On the one hand, in

a shocking way with the help of expressive means he shows the problem of Euro-orphanhood. On the other hand, the artist points to the unchanging value of the family.

It should be emphasized that the artistic project "Mama, I'm coming home" is not intended to please the recipient in accordance with the modern concept of fine arts. The artist replaces beauty with new forms of sculptures and installations that shock the viewer. This art therefore has no aesthetic goals – only subjective ones. It calls for an internal transformation of life. This artistic project of Sylwester Ambroziak follows the aesthetic assumptions of modern anti-art, which explains the manic "expressive" theory of art.

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Sylwester Ambroziak's exhibition „Mamo, I'am coming home” in the „Przystań Sztuki” (Marina of Art) in Poznań, photo from artist's private archive.



Sylwester Ambroziak, *Piaskownica* (Sandpit), photo from artist's private archive.