Agata Pietrasik

Mourning Does Not Become Electra. On the (Non)memory of War in the Work of Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski

The article analyses Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski's *Electra* in the context of the artistic discourse of the late 1940s, and attempts to situate it alongside debates on the memory of the Second World War. *Electra* (1947, **fig. 1**), currently exhibited at the Gallery of 20th and 21st Century Art of the National Museum in Warsaw, forms part of an unfinished cycle entitled "Man."[1] It is one of the most renowned paintings of the post-war decade, interpreted, i.a., as referring to the Second World War experience. In formal terms, Kowarski's work is in line with the conventions mastered by the artist: monumental painting and post-Impressionism. The central figure on the canvas is the Electra of the title, who – dressed in white, stylized ancient robes – is sitting among destroyed columns enveloped in heavy draperies. Her head is resting on her hand; she is staring absently into space. Her figure, rendered in a very sculptural manner, evokes the statuesque shapes of Picasso's *Two Women Running on the Beach* (1922).[2] The static female form is contrasted with Cupid, who – with his back to the viewer – is dynamically drawing his bow, aiming at the sun that rises beyond the ruins. The pointillist application of paint gives an impression of luminous lustre with the dominant shades being warm white, gold, blue and grey.

At the 1949 posthumous exhibition of Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski at the National Museum in Warsaw, which was the largest post-war presentation of the artist's works, *Electra* was shown between two canvases from "Man," which Kowarski had intended to complete: *Man with a Dog* (*Wanderer*) (1945) and *Ephebe* (1945).[3] Apart from these works, the cycle was to include the paintings *Player*, *Woman with a Sphere*, *Man and Horse* and *Landscape*, which were never finished.[4] A second cycle was to be devoted to the Warsaw ghetto. The artist only managed to prepare sketches for the planned works, such as *On the Doorstep* (c. 1948, **fig. 2**) and *Hunger in the Ghetto* (c. 1948, **fig. 3**).[5] Kowarski also began work on a third cycle, which was to be

1 The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. MPW 1570 MNW.

2 Musée Picasso Paris, Paris, inv. no. MP78.

3 *Ephebe*, property of Agnieszka Kowarska, *Man with a Dog* (*Wanderer*), Ministry of Culture and Art. See *Powinność i bunt. Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie 1944–2000*, exh. cat., Zachęta National Gallery of Art, 2004 (Warsaw, 2004), p. 77; *Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski. Wystawa pośmiertna w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie*, exh. cat., The National Museum in Warsaw, 1949 (Warsaw, 1949), p. 94.

4 Janusz Bogucki, *Kowarski* (Warsaw, 1956), p. 26.

5 The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. nos Rys.W.1103 MNW and Rys.W.1102 MNW; see ibid., pp. 37–38.

composed of monumental portraits of national heroes; one such example is the collective portrait *Proletarians* (1948).[6]

Man with a Dog, next to which *Electra* was presented, is another take on the subject of the lonely wanderer or vagabond, which had already been taken up by Kowarski: in 1930 in the painting *Wanderers*[7] and in 1942 in the work *Refugees*,[8] which depicts a fleeing elderly couple with a child and a dog. For Juliusz Starzyński, one of the main enthusiasts of Kowarski's art, the artist was an untimely Romantic, while *Wanderer* was his "internal portrait."[9] Kowarski was also dogged by the opinion that he was a lone artist, always sitting on the sidelines of the main art trends, working "in difficult solitude." This affected the reception of his art, which was even dubbed "anachronistic."[10]

In the late 1940s, the once "old-fashioned" works of the recluse proved to be topical as never before. In their analysis of the evolution of Kowarski's approach to the wanderer subject, his contemporary critics noted that not only the palette of his works changed after the war – becoming brighter and lighter – but also the nature of figures depicted, which took on more tangible and at the same time less symbolic shapes. This corresponded to contemporary demands of socially involved art. Kowarski's activity represented a bridge between pre- and post-war realism. As has been noted by Wojciech Włodarczyk, pre-war realism had been weaved into debates on socialist realism and became one of the ways of legitimizing the new artistic demands.[11]

Kowarski's art, in particular around 1949, was used by critics to call other artists to order: "He [Kowarski] proved that all matters of purely technical or artistic nature cannot veil, obscure or push aside the most important painterly values, that is the content of a painting. Worthless painting, 'play on forms,' 'colourful puzzles,' paintings hung this way or the other, which are always hung well for they have neither legs nor a head (so they can hang upside-down), generally speaking – abstract painting may at best perform an aesthetic role, but not a social one,"[12] wrote a reviewer of *Stolica*, discussing Kowarski's posthumous exhibition at the National Museum in Warsaw. "Kowarski understood that art cannot be a delicacy for the chosen, but has to become the everyday fare of the people,"[13] echoed the journalist of *Moda i Życie Praktyczne* with reference to the same exhibition. Kowarski's art was described as an example to be followed by artists of the younger generation. Andrzej Wróblewski wrote that Kowarski's works "are filled with topical and deep ideological and emotional content, and at the same time flawless in their artistic form, which is adapted to the content."[14]

6 The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. MPW 4057 MNW; see ibid., p. 37.

7 The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. MPW 1568 MNW.

8 The National Museum in Poznań, inv. no. MNP MP384.

9 Juliusz Starzyński, "Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski," in *Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski. Wystawa pośmiertna...*, op. cit., p. 31.

10 Janusz Bogucki, "Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski," *Przegląd Artystyczny*, no. 2 (1949), p. 5.

11 Wojciech Włodarczyk, *Socrealistyczny epizod. Warszawa 1933–Moskwa 1958* [online], [retrieved: 16 August 2014], at: <http://culture.pl/pl/artykul/socrealistyczny-epizod-warszawa-1933-moskwa-1958>.

12 Stefan Rassalski, "Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski," *Stolica*, no. 18 (1949), p. 8.

13 S.P.O., "Sztuka o sprawach człowieka Wystawa dzieł F.S. Kowarskiego," *Moda i Życie Praktyczne*, no. 14 (1949), p. 7.

14 Andrzej Wróblewski, "Malarz, pedagog i człowiek (Wystawa pośmiertna obrazów Felicjana Kowarskiego)" [online], *Echo Tygodnia*, no. 2 (1950), [retrieved: 16 August 2014], p. 3, at: <http://www.andrzejwroblewski.pl/teksty-andrzeja-wroblewskiego/malarz-pedagog-i-czlowiek-wystawa-posmiertna-obrazow-felicjana-kowarskiego/>.

There even came a time when Kowarski's painting was used to call to order not abstraction, but socialist realism. "Socialist aestheticism," wrote Janusz Bogucki, attacking the fossilized – in his mind – socialist realist painting, "[...] represents incomplete or false realism, as it does not attack the real aspects of life, contenting itself on demands only [...]."[15] He opposed "socialist aestheticism" to the realism of Kowarski, who did not descend into conventionalism in his painterly conventions, but clearly expressed fundamental matters.

The aforementioned examples of references to Kowarski's art exemplify how it became part of the dichotomy between *real* art, which defines the ethos of man, and empty aestheticism or formalism. Kowarski's oeuvre was always situated on the side of *real* art, while formalism was exemplified in various ways, depending on the context and the person formulating his or her views. This image of the artist survived the debates on socialist realism. At the 1995 monographic exhibition devoted to his work, Adam Myjak used a similar argument: "Today, when art often goes astray, feeding on the absurd ideas of embittered 'artists,' it is cathartic to recall the fundamental truths. [...] I think that this display will enable to see him [Kowarski] in a new light and discover these everlasting values for art."[16]

A similar image of the artist emerged from the numerous obituaries and memoirs published after his sudden death in 1948.[17] "One of the most outstanding contemporary Polish painters, long-time professor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski, whose art represented a true humanitarian spirit, died at the end of September," read the obituary in *Stolica*.[18] Anatol Stern additionally mentioned in his memoir that this was a death at the post of art: the painter died while working on *Proletarians*.[19] In the majority of texts summarizing the oeuvre of the author of *Electra*, the words *humanism* and *human* appeared in all possible contexts, copying the previously mentioned pattern based on the binary opposition: heartless formalism and schematism versus art expressing life. "The attentive confrontation of the work not with the photographic surface of life, but with the full complexity of events and the cause-and-effect relationships between them, the objective and somewhat sentimental attitude towards the human being and his personal, often tragic experience [...] – these are the attributes of this new realism," wrote Konrad Winkler.[20]

Despite the growing interest in Kowarski, *Electra* did not raise such enthusiasm as *Pstrowski the Miner* (1948)[21] or *Proletarians*, whose reproductions accompanied most texts on Kowarski's art. Wróblewski saw the painting at hand as the example of "the healing of war-time wounds and overcoming the tragic subject matter."[22] Winkler wrote that the work "heralds a change in man's attitude towards the world." What change, then, is heralded by *Electra*?

15 Janusz Bogucki, "Na drodze do twórczej konwencji," *Przegląd Kulturalny*, no. 18 (1954), p. 8.

16 Adam Myjak, "Wstęp," in *Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski (1890–1948). Dzieła z kolekcji Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Dorota Dąbrowska, ed., exh. cat., Gallery of the Academy of the Fine Arts in Warsaw, 1995 (Warsaw, 1995), p. V.

17 The bibliography of all press articles on the artist is available in the already mentioned Janusz Bogucki's book, *Kowarski*, op. cit., pp. 39–44.

18 "Zgon Felicjana Kowarskiego," *Stolica*, no. 42 (23 September 1948), p. 12.

19 Anatol Stern, "Zgon wielkiego artysty (o Kowarskim)," *Żołnierz Polski*, no. 9 (1948), p. 12.

20 Konrad Winkler, "Dzieło Felicjana Kowarskiego," *Dziennik Literacki*, no. 16 (1949), p. 6.

21 The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. MPW 1565 MNW.

22 Wróblewski, "Malarz, pedagog i człowiek...," op. cit., p. 3.

When analysing the painting, one has to take note of the methodology of Kowarski's work, whose art – despite its topicality – was not a live commentary, but was born out of slow contemplation and the accumulation of meanings. The artist spent a considerably long time on subsequent works, constructing them as a palimpsest, gathering sometimes distant meanings within one realization. In the artist's posthumous catalogue, Juliusz Starzyński noticed that Kowarski, despite holding Impressionism in high esteem, never painted from nature: "[...] on the characteristic sketch made probably during one of his favourite kayak trips on the Vistula in August 1933, we see the lightly, superficially marked outline of a shore with a clump of trees, a fragment of a pitched tent and a girl sitting inside it; in the upper right corner the note 'light' and an arrow marking the direction; the drawing is enclosed on four sides with numerous written annotations. We will quote some of them: '[...] illumination of the setting, misty sun – matt, grey-blue sky – steel blue background – water like sky [...].' Kowarski would return to such sketches after considerable time, sometimes even years later, turning them into a point of departure for further memory-based renditions and lengthy work. The type of his imagination was memory-based to a large extent, with synthesizing tendencies, which – given his enormous sensitivity and direct feel of nature – represented a rather unique combination."[23]

The painter's work was at the same time a work of memory, which evoked more and more images, creating new associations. That is why Michał Walicki referred to this method as "broad denotation."[24] Kowarski's works are often self-referential: *Electra*, for example, contains clear allusions to other works of the artist. An analogical study of a female head also appears in Kowarski's 1936 sketchbook, while the motif of Cupid shooting his bow can be found in his polychrome design for the Brühl Palace, also from 1936.[25]

Taking into account the date of creating *Electra*, it is difficult not to view the work from the angle of the war experience. Bogucki recalled that he had seen *Electra* when it was still on the easel in the artist's studio: "I clearly remember her unmoved face with dark eyes, open in a peculiar pensiveness, her frontally shaped figure, sitting among the rubble of Greek architecture against the grey emptiness of the vast sky. [...] When looking at this canvas, gleaming with undried paint, in the summer of 1947 – one poignantly felt its topical message contained in this statuesque vision of the ancient world, erected despite the times of genocide on an earth which has just begun to lift itself out of war-time ruin."[26] For Bogucki, the ruins Electra sat on were a peculiar extension of the ruins of Warsaw. He found the topical meaning of the painting clear and understandable.

Starzyński, who has already been quoted, spoke with a similar certainty about the topicality of another of Kowarski's works. He wrote the following about the 1944 work *Don Quixote*:[27] "Kowarski's *Don Quixote* (**fig. 4**) takes on a particular meaning if we consider its date: 1944, the year of the Warsaw Uprising, the last tragic manifestation of Polish political quixotism. Among the endless void, emphasized by the broad, monotonous line of the horizon – we see the departing knight from La Mancha. The rest is suggested by colour: the uniform, depressing grey and silver palette, with a shade of pale lilac showing through, as if reflecting distant

23 Starzyński, "Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski," op. cit., p. 31.

24 Michał Walicki, "Szerokie znakowanie," *Nowiny Literackie*, no. 52 (1948), p. 5.

25 Bogucki, *Kowarski*, op. cit., fig. nos 38, 88.

26 Ibid., p. 1.

27 The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. MPW 1164 MNW.

fires."[28] It is curious that Starzyński, who earlier painstakingly described Kowarski's method of work and the conscious accumulation of meanings, is so convinced of *Don Quixote*'s reference to events from the recent past. After all, other works by Kowarski, such as the sketch for a later painting *Head of a Jewish Woman* (**fig. 5**),[29] were also created in 1944. If the impulse that gave rise to the work was the Warsaw Uprising, which began in August 1944, the artist would have had to complete the work over the course of several months. It follows that *Don Quixote* could refer to the Warsaw ghetto uprising from the previous year – a fire that truly was distant, to paraphrase Starzyński's words. The above examples prove that the certainty with which critics spoke about references to recent historical events is problematic and entangled in their contemporary discourse. This certainty, which is in fact uncertainty, becomes a point of departure for my deliberations aimed at analysing how (or whether?) the memory of war is articulated in *Electra*.

In the context of the post-war artistic culture, the subject of the painting is extremely topical and vital. In the 1940s, the history of Agamemnon's vengeful daughter echoed in various circumstances. In 1941, the British destroyer "Electra" fought with the German "Bismarck." A film adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's 1931 play *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which transferred the classical tragedy to the American Civil War, was made in 1947. A few years later, Jean Giraudoux created his own version of *Electra*, additionally complicating the plot of the play. In Giradoux's version, after Orestes and Electra avenge the death of their father Agamemnon by murdering his killers – Aegisthus and Clytemnestra – the city of Argos, deprived of its king, is captured. The carnage of its civil population is the price of Electra's moral choice.[30]

Giraudoux's play took on a particular meaning in post-war Poland. The Secret Theatre Council operating under the German occupation, whose members included, i.a., Edmund Wierciński, Leon Schiller, Andrzej Pronaszko and Stefan Jaracz, commissioned Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz with translating *Electra*. He submitted the play in 1941. Edmund Wierciński wanted to stage Giraudoux's play already before the war, but it was not possible until February 1946. The premiere took place at the Wojska Polskiego Theatre in Łódź.[31] Initially, the play delighted the critics, both with its artistic merit and Teresa Roszkowska's set design.[32] However, with time the enthusiasm subsided, to later turn into criticism. What turned out to be a controversial moment was the ending, in which Electra, in the face of the raid on Argos and destruction of the city, asks "What is happening?" and her companion Narses answers: "I can tell that something is happening, of course, but I can't tell what it is. What do you call it when the city is in ruins, sacked and pillaged, and yet morning comes and there is freshness in the air? When the city is in flames, when all is lost, when the innocent are killing each other, and yet over in a corner in the morning light the guilty are dying?" The last sentence belongs to the

28 Juliusz Starzyński, *Polska droga do samodzielności w sztuce* (Warsaw, 1973), p. 97.

29 The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. MPW 1163 MNW.

30 Play translated into Polish by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, see Jean Giraudoux, *Teatr* (Warsaw, 1957), pp. 347–463. See Maria Bieńka, *Giraudoux w teatrze polskim* (Wrocław, 1976), pp. 33–43.

31 Wierciński's *Electra* was the subject of Joanna Krakowska's lecture *Elektra, czyli Powstanie*, which took place on 23 October 2012 at the Theatre Institute in Warsaw. Text available [online], [retrieved: 16 August 2014], at: <http://www.teatrpubliczny.pl/PRL/>.

32 The cooperation between Roszkowska and Wierciński is described by Joanna Stacewicz-Podlipska in her book: *Ja byłam wolny ptak... O życiu i sztuce Teresy Roszkowskiej* (Warsaw, 2012), pp. 303–07.

Beggar, who says: "It has a very beautiful name, Narses' wife. It is called dawn."[33] According to Marta Fik, this scene was an allusion to the Warsaw Uprising – one that was clear for all contemporary audiences. It was also the reason the play was taken off stage in an atmosphere of scandal and the Poetic Scene in Łódź, intended as a space for artistic experimentation, was closed.[34]

Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska argued against this opinion, emphasizing that seeing *Electra* as an allegory of the Warsaw Uprising was just one of the numerous possibilities of interpretation, one which was not that obvious for contemporary critics. From the standpoint of the new authorities, the artistic side of the play was more problematic (as it deviated from the demands of socialist realism) than the possibility of evoking the uprising or questioning its sense.[35] On the other hand, Joanna Krakowska pointed out that Wierciński's stage production formed part of a broader "trend of post-war plays which tried to transform the occupational experience, elevating it, shrouding it with metaphysical mist, metaphorizing it and clothing in the mythological costume."[36] Kowarski was in Łódź in 1945, before he began work at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. As Bohdan Korzeniewski recalled, "lots of intellectuals from Warsaw and other cities" travelled to see *Electra*, so Kowarski could also have seen the play or at least read about it in the press.[37]

Electra also appeared in *Oresteia*, directed by Arnold Szyfman, which could undoubtedly be classified within the "elevating movement." It premiered in March 1947 at the Polski Theatre in Warsaw.[38] Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, who was greatly impressed by the production, quoted a similarly enthusiastic opinion voiced by Marian Morelowski, who also leaves no doubt as to the contemporary reading of the play: "For it is an expression of understanding the historical moment of a Warsaw in ruins: a Warsaw of the noblest heroism and the most terrible Gehenna in the human sense of the word [...]. For it is an adaptation to the natural pathos of the capital, where virtually every stone is crying to heaven like Orestes [...]. And where the fumes of despair – as vacant as his – over the destruction give rise to an impetuous drive for health, for taking roots, despite all losses and ruins, which is rushing like a stream..."[39] This "natural pathos" of the capital in ruins is combined with the Romantic predilection for contemplating ruins, admitted by Kowarski in his memoirs in the following words: "The Greek vases I saw in my early childhood and remnants of classical monuments not only swayed me towards classicism, but rather to the romanticism of the classical world..."[40]

The dispute over Electra and her possible interpretations in recent history was in fact another debate about the Polish Romantic tradition, whose earlier episode was Maria Dąbrowska's discussion with Jan Kott.[41] The dispute directly concerned Joseph Conrad's

33 Giraudoux, *Teatr*, op. cit., p. 465.

34 Marta Fik, *Trzydzieści pięć sezonów. Teatry dramatyczne w Polsce w latach 1944–1979* (Warsaw, 1981), p. 145.

35 Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska, "Elektra na ruinach miasta, czyli pamięć świadków," in *Zła pamięć. Przeciwhistoria w polskim teatrze i dramacie*, Monika Kwaśniewska, Grzegorz Niziołek, eds (Wrocław, 2012), pp. 114–16.

36 Krakowska, op. cit.

37 As cited in: Guderian-Czaplińska, op. cit., p. 110.

38 Information on the play and selected reviews available in the database of the Theatrical Institute [online], [retrieved: 16 August 2014], at: <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/realizacje/12021,szczegoly.html>.

39 Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Teatralia* (Warsaw, 1983), p. 102.

40 Starzyński, "Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski," op. cit., p. 20.

41 For the dispute about Conrad in the context of Wierciński's *Electra*, see Krakowska, op. cit.

prose, especially his understanding of morality, honour and the principle of "being true to oneself," which was criticized by Kott as the "fidelity of slaves."[42] Analysing the attitude of captain MacWhirr from *Typhoon*, he attacked Conrad's idea of heroism, claiming that "the social assessment of heroism measures the worth of a sacrifice with the usefulness of the deed." He went on to conclude by evoking the image of the "burnt sacrifice of Warsaw," which in his eyes represented the incarnation of Conrad's ethical paradigm. At that time, Maria Dąbrowska entered into a polemic with Kott, defending the moral code of the author of *Lord Jim* and at the same time defending the soldiers of the Home Army, which at that time had fallen prey to a political witch-hunt. Dąbrowska wrote that "Kott [...] generally questions and condemns the Poles for their inclination to follow Conrad's ethical attitude [...]" and that "by cracking down on the 'fidelity' of Conrad, he cracks down on the heroic 'fidelity' of underground Poland [...]."[43]

Four years after this dispute, Kowarski's oeuvre was included in the debate. Kazimierz Wyka attempted to elaborate on the analogy between Kowarski and Conrad, claiming that both were characterized by "suprapersonal" humanism, describing "general and stoic attitudes."[44] Wyka urged "not to hand over Conrad too hastily under the sole dominion of capitalist shipowners!", as "captains, who once served on the ships of his fleet, arrived at a different place."[45] He noticed a similar evolution in Kowarski, whose greatest achievement – according to Wyka – was *Head of a Jewish Woman* and *Head of a Jew* (created between 1942 and 1946).[46] In these works, the artist dropped his humanist tendency to generalize, depicting specific "heroic heads of insurgents in the Warsaw ghetto."[47] The portraits and drawings for the planned cycle "Ghetto" – contrary to *Electra*, which Wyka regarded as excessively brimming with classicizing symbolism – referred to topical matters and, together with *Proletarians*, testified to the evolution of the Conradesque humanism of Kowarski, which had finally made it "here and now" from an unspecified past. According to Wyka, Kowarski's art went all the way from allegory to a mirror of reality, reflecting the rhythm of current changes. As he wrote: "humanist subject matter lost its generalized character, turning into the subject matter of a progressively defined history and struggle, this subject matter is now held by someone else. The rough hands of proletarians and indomitable eyes of the Jews."[48]

The aforementioned contexts of the creation of *Electra* and the outlined critical response to the work, strongly embroiled in the turbulent disputes of the 1940s, indicate two lines of thought that intertwine in the quoted statements: political and aesthetic. Both Kowarski's and Wierciński's *Electra* stops at point zero, "when all is lost, when the city is in ruins," confronting the question of the new order. Yet the emotions evoked by both works are far from despair. Teresa Roszkowska recalled that "when the Narses woman, dressed in a Phrygian cap, spoke

42 Jan Kott, "O laickim tragizmie," in id., *Mitologia i realizm* (Warsaw, 1956), p. 216. The article was originally published in *Twórczość*, nos 1–2 (1945), pp. 137–60.

43 Maria Dąbrowska, "Conradowskie pojęcie wierności" [online], *Warszawa*, no. 1 (1946), pp. 148–63, [retrieved: 16 August 2014], at: <http://www.kulturologia.uw.edu.pl/page.php?page=tekst&haslo=dabrowska>.

44 Kazimierz Wyka, "Humanizm Kowarskiego," *Przegląd Artystyczny*, nos 5–6 (1949), p. 3.

45 Ibid.

46 The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. MPW 1163 MNW; The National Museum in Krakow, inv. no. MNK II-b-1067.

47 Wyka, op. cit., p. 3.

48 Ibid.

about dawn, this had a huge impact," as "all of us, shattered inside, wanted to have hope."[49] Kowarski and Wierciński associate the hope for a better day with the motif of the rising sun which ties both works together. "Electra," after all, is Greek for "brightness."

In his post-war search for new means of expression, Kowarski not only turned to Mediterranean subjects, but also deepened his interest in Impressionism. The light in his paintings, such as *Electra* or *Ephebe*, became increasingly material and dematerializing at the same time, situating the compositions at the threshold of figurativeness and abstraction. Recalling his master, Wojciech Fangor wrote that at that time, "[Kowarski] was discovering Impressionism, pointillism and the optical vibration of the surface. He slightly brightened his palette. We do not know what turn these changes would have taken, as shortly before his death he saw a reproduction of Matisse somewhere and called emotionally: 'the background in his still life is pure vermilion, straight from the tub.' I sensed an admiration for Matisse's courage and openness to the direct and immediate lustre of colour. Colour as a phenomenon without a history or past."[50]

Not only objects, but also past events dissolve in the sunlight. The metaphor of light and shade is one of the key oppositions that organize the language of memory of the SecondWorld War. The light earlier described by Morelowski as the "natural pathos of the capital" was transformed into "artistic nature." This is how it was described by the chief architect responsible for the reconstruction of Warsaw, Jan Zachwatowicz: "When the fire is over, the building becomes quiet and almost prosaic in its indifferent, dead gaze of empty window holes. A destroyed building is either a shapeless heap of bricks or an anatomical preparation, revealing the structure [...]. What is more, the tragic nature is additionally diminished in the warm rays of the sun, which – showing complete indifference for human misery and pain – illuminates the most grim debris with a cheerful gamut of colours. [...] If the ruins rise up monumentally, juxtaposing surprising foreshortenings of shapes and surfaces which once represented an organized architectural form, we get an artistic impression, with an impact not unlike a sketch of Piranesi's."[51] The aestheticizing effect of light which changes reality into a work of art is invariably connected with indifference that supplants the tragic past.

At that time, solar subjects were also taken up by Stanisław Strzemiński in his cycle "Afterimages" (1948–49, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź), in which the artist attempted to give "colour to the inside of the eye that looked at the sun."[52] The uncompromising profusion of life is also the subject of a 1950 sketch by Strzemiński for an unrealized wall painting for the Savoy hotel, which shows golden ears of grain, a city outlined in the background and the sun towering and radiant up above. According to Ekaterina Degot, Strzemiński's return to figurativeness after the war "becomes a violent avant-garde gesture – representing emergence rather than destruction."[53]

[49] The artist's statement cited in: Stacewicz-Podlipska, op. cit., p. 304.

[50] Citation from an interview with Wojciech Fangor for the Dziennik.pl website [online], [retrieved: 16 August 2014], at: <http://kultura.dziennik.pl/artykuly/83995,socrealizm-to-sztuka-skandalu.html>.

[51] Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN) in Warsaw, Ministry of Culture and Art, Department of Visual Arts, Care of Historical Monuments, file no. 328.

[52] Julian Przyboś, "Wstęp," in *Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński*, exh. cat., Ośrodek Propagandy Sztuki, 1956 (Łódź, 1956) p. 11. For "Afterimages," see Leszek Brogowski, *Powidoki i po.... Unizm i teoria widzenia Władysława Strzemińskiego* (Gdańsk, 2001); Andrzej Turowski, "Oślepiające powidoki," *Didaskalia*, nos 103–04 (2011), pp. 54–57.

[53] Ekaterina Degot, "Malarstwo w historii," in *Władysław Strzemiński. Czytelność obrazów*, Paweł Polit, Jarosław Suchan, eds (Łódź, 2012), p. 63.

Kowarski, similarly fascinated with the triumph of the sun over the ruins of war, chose daylight as the leitmotif of his two final works. According to Bogucki, the initial version of *Electra* was monochrome, based on the contrast between white and grey: "Kowarski later repainted the composition, adding a hovering Cupid with a bow in the upper right corner and introducing colour and life to the background with the stormy shapes of clouds."[54] Bogucki did not have a positive opinion on those changes, while the well-meaning commentators of the artist's oeuvre passed over the Cupid figure with silence. The Cupid is turned with his back to the viewer, his bow aimed at the sun rising beyond the ruins. Thereby, he sentences the melancholy Electra to love of the new day, *amor fati*, and consequently – to oblivion.

Of all of Kowarski's other works, *Electra* is most similar to a drawing entitled *Israeli Woman* (1947–48, **fig. 6**),[55] which also depicts a woman dressed in stylized ancient robes sitting among ruins. Her pose does not express melancholy, like Electra's, but frozen despair.[56] Behind the female figure we see ruins, above them – an overcast sky. *Electra* is a reversal of this dramatic representation. Mourning does not become the figure flooded in the light of a sunny day, in a bright shade of blue "without a history or past." Her share is everlasting melancholy, which allows her to perceive war destruction like "a sketch of Piranesi's" and experience contemporary reality through a return to antiquity. To quote Morelowski again, light becomes a medium of "taking roots, despite all losses and ruins"[57] and of oblivion, which funds the discourse of the triumphant return of life.

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska

[54] Bogucki, *Kowarski*, op. cit., p. 1.

[55] The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. Rys.W.10212 MNW.

[56] For the iconography of representations of melancholy see Erwin Panofsky, Raymond Kalibanksy, Fritz Saxl, S*aturn i Melancholia. Studia z historii, filozofii, przyrody, medycyny, religii oraz sztuki* (Warsaw, 2009).

[57] As cited in: Iwaszkiewicz, *Teatralia*, op. cit., p. 102.