

MARZEC

M. Rutkowska

„Mistrz i Malgorzata“

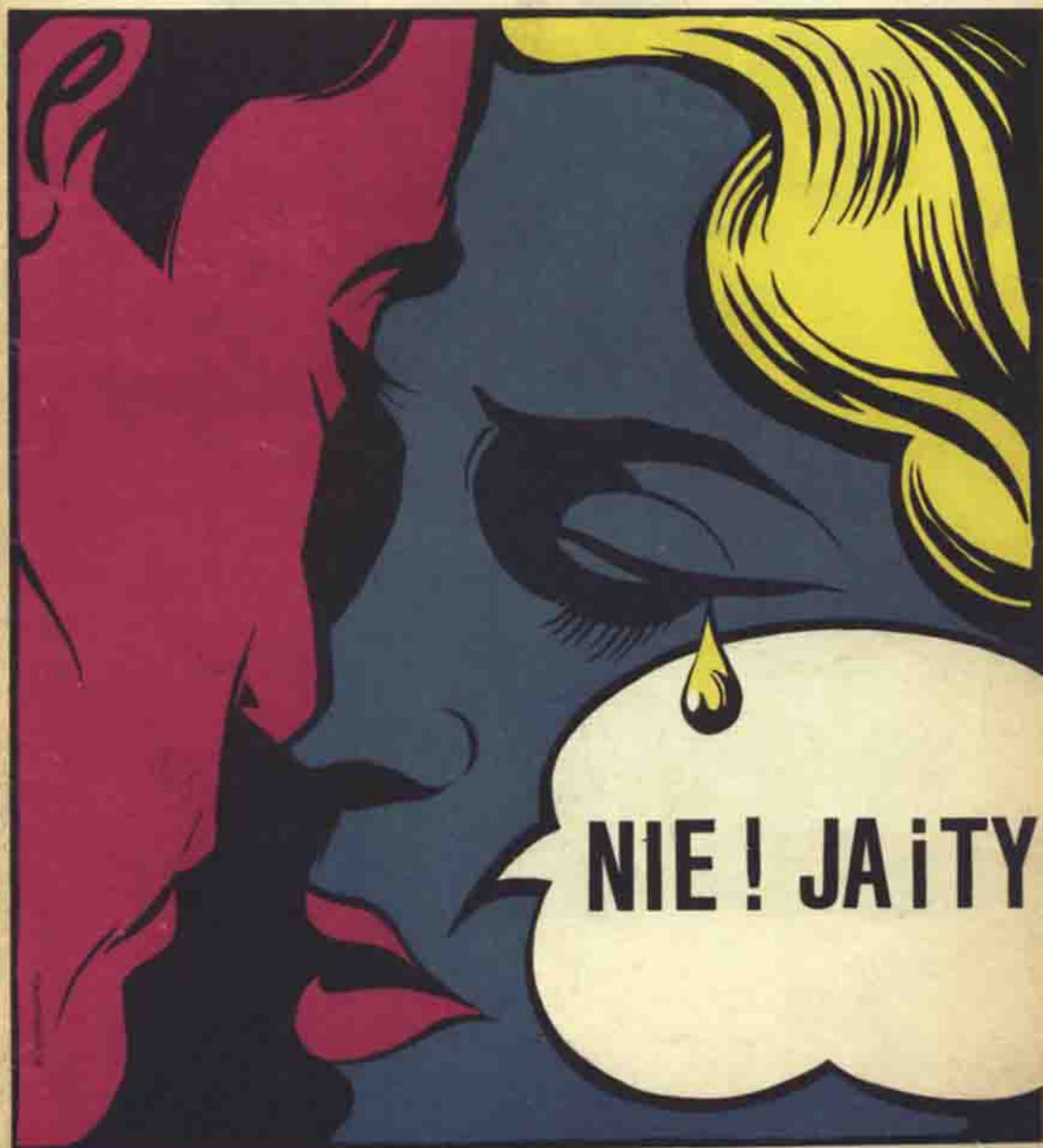
„Darling“

z Julie Christie

1967 • NR 3 (83)

cena 12 zł

ty i ja



Applied fantastic

(on the Polish Women's League magazine *Ty i Ja*)

Imagine Warsaw in 1960. What do you see? What was life like in a city under communist rule that had been a scene of almost total devastation only fifteen years earlier? What forms of culture might thrive in a new cityscape of squat apartments encircling the Stalinist Palace of Culture and the picturesque old town? Hardly the most auspicious setting for modern culture, one might think. Yet in its cracks and margins, controversy was being generated: semi-official debating clubs in dark basements compared Soviet-style communism with German fascism; Marek Hłasko's gritty novels about the everyday brutality of the city's streets and tales of sexual frustration were being published, rocking the communists' hollow images of social unity; and the city's small galleries displayed a ready familiarity with the fashions in art emanating from New York and Paris (to the extent that the Central Committee 'advised' that Polish abstraction should be kept in check so as not to 'disturb' Soviet Russian tourists to Warsaw).

These were what Michel Foucault—working at the Institut Française in Warsaw in the mid 1950s—would later call heterotopic sites. He used this term to describe ambiguous places associated with social groups or identities that resist being ordered. One by one, however, these Warsaw sites of experiment felt the pressure of communist prohibition. In the 'moment' after the crisis of 1956 when Soviet authority was rocked by the revelations about the brutality of Stalin's rule, artists, writers and filmmakers had—for a few short but productive years—been able to experiment without interference. But these freedoms were slowly called in and a steady stream of Polish artists and writers began emigrating to the West. By the mid 1960s, relatively little that might be described as 'avant-garde' remained (and much of what did was compromised by its cosy relations with authority). Strangely, one place where it continued to thrive was on the pages of a popular women's magazine, *Ty i Ja* (*You and I*).

A paradoxical compound

Ty i Ja was first published in 1959 by the Women's League, an offshoot of the official Polish United Worker's Party run by helmet-haired party haridans. Early on, however, it was hijacked by a group of young writers and designers. This was not as strange as it sounds. In the command economy—where a central planning office determined the amounts of buildings, books and spoons required by society—quantity always prevailed over quality. What mattered—at least at first—was how many magazines

were available, not what was being said on their pages. After all, *Ty i Ja* was 'just' a women's magazine.

In the hands of editor Roman Juryś, the magazine was turned into a remarkable vehicle for the popular discussion of modern life in all its dimensions. In the early 1960s, an issue might contain an earnest discussion by a psychologist on the unhappy state of marriage side-by-side with a photo-spread on erotic sculpture ornamenting Indian temples. Recipes for robust peasant dishes ran alongside historical articles charting the appetites of the Marquis de Sade. The magazine ignored the divisions of Europe drawn by the Cold War, frequently featuring the work of Paris fashion designers, West German novelists and British photographers. When the Soviet Union was discussed, it was not in terms of fawning testimony characteristic of the rest of the Polish press: the magazine's editors were far more interested in the image of revolution offered by figures like Majakovsky and Rodchenko, the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s, than in Dmitrii Nalbandian or any other 'official' Soviet artist of the Khrushchev era.

Ty i Ja's contributors struck a strange balance between fascination with the spectacle of the consumer society and its critique. This was in fact the position of many Polish intellectuals in the 1960s: left wing by inclination and by intellectual formation, they were, nevertheless, attracted to the forbidden pleasures of the consumer society. When the magazine visited the home of poster designer Waldemar Świerzy for a 'look behind the scenes', it offered a high-minded lecture on the judgement of taste. The reader was told of the importance of resisting one's possessions. Individuality was demonstrated in the ownership of attitudes rather than things. Remarkably, this critique of consumption was somewhat to the left of Party ideology. In fact, it was far closer to Marx's conception of commodity fetishism than perhaps any other pronouncement in communist Poland at that time (or after). Yet at the same time *Ty i Ja* was full of advertisements, often designed by the magazine's own staff for products which were often almost impossible to obtain. Strictly unnecessary in the command economy and subject to ideological critique by the party, advertising was 'needed' by the magazine. It was a demonstration of its understanding of the pulse of international modernity.

In the upside down world of Polish socialism, these ersatz *Ty i Ja* commercials belong to a category of images and things that Leopold Tyrmand called 'applied fantastic'. In his *Dziennik* (Diary) of 1954, a brilliant collection of short essays, Tyrmand displayed an acute eye for the telltale details of everyday life:

Lunch at the Writers' Café. Marta sat next to me ... Then two of her friends joined us, both of them elegant in art student style. In fact, this is the style of the young in the West, copied from movies and illustrated



Cieśliewicz-period Adverts

magazines, but deepened by a sense of improvised necessity, by the lack of means which triggers in girls the applied fantastic that became apparent after the war in communist, grey poverty.

Tyrmand's paradoxical compound, 'applied fantastic', inferred both dedication (in the effort required to produce the intended effect) and escape (in the pursuit of exotic style). As 'applied fantastic' these ersatz advertisements were not mere copies of Western adverts. Unencumbered by briefs or clients, they were simply better: they could exist and be visions at the same time.

Graphic heterotopia

Ty i Ja—with its serious minded rhetoric and its fantasy—might be characterised as incoherent. Yet it was not. Perhaps Foucault's idea of the heterotopia can explain why. In heterotopia, unusual and heterogeneous things can exist side-by-side without one claiming special status over the others. On the pages of *Ty i Ja*, hierarchy gave way to lateral relations. This order of things can, according to Foucault, produce 'an almost magical uncertain space' and 'monstrous combinations that unsettle the flow of discourse'. Whilst this concept is usually understood in spatial terms, he suggested that it could also be applied to describe writing that makes 'impossible' discursive statements or challenges. What was 'possible' in

socialist Poland was, of course, predetermined by a historical script written by the Party. Viewed from this context, a magazine which eschewed inscribed social hierarchies and embraced uncertainty could, it seems, be 'an almost magical space'. Not explicitly political, *Ty i Ja* took an interest in what had been rendered other or illicit by peevish minds in the Central Committee.

A rejection of order and hierarchy not only underlay the editorial content of the magazine; it shaped its appearance too. Designed by Roman Cieślewicz between 1959 and 1963, the magazine had a remarkably idiosyncratic character. He folded a steady stream of printers' devices, illustrations from nineteenth century school books and studies of natural history into the pages of the magazine, creating strangely vertiginous spreads that undermined the magazine's modernity. Victorian cyclists would wheel across pages decorated with distorted and blown-up printers' ornaments and the faces of models—from fashion spreads 'borrowed' from the pages of French *Elle* and *Vogue*—would be obscured by butterflies' wings or peacock feathers. Without the need to attract the reader, covers would feature bizarre responses to the romantic theme suggested by the magazine's title. April 1963's cover, for instance, depicted a bowler-hatted man astride an ostrich which appeared to have laid an egg in the image of his Edwardian belle. In November Franciszek Starowieyski supplied a cover made up of ranks of wood-engraved male hands gesturing in the direction of a gloved hand, appearing from within the magazine. Turn the page and the reader is presented with images of a gun-wielding female battalion from 1943.

The long life of Surrealism

Starowieyski and Cieślewicz were not alone in his taste for antiquated imagery. Some of the most significant products of the late 1950s in communist Poland thoroughly revived the genre. *Dom* (1957), a short animated film made by Jan Lenica and Walerian Borowczyk, is perhaps the most important work of this kind. Using an opening shot of a pre-war tenement as a metaphor for the mind, this short film is a series of investigations into domestic spaces of memory, desire and fear. Before each of the short episodes in this film, the camera focuses on a woman's face as she opens or closes her eyes. This gesture suggests the 'interior' location of the eccentric scenes that we are about to witness. These include the stop-frame animation of hair consuming a meal; lingering shots of *belle epoch* photographs and antique postcards; and the compulsive repetition of a man entering a room over and over again. The surrealist motifs in the film are unmistakable. They include the 'disclosure' of the menacing or enigmatic meanings' of everyday objects echoing Andre Breton's concept of 'convulsive beauty' and the uncanny animation of inert things. When the actress, Ligia Branice, caresses a plaster head, rather than come alive as one



Cieśliewicz-period fashion spread

might expect, it disintegrates in her hands, a literal reworking of one the most memorable images in Cocteau's 1930 opium fantasy, 'La Sang d'un Poète'.

Clearly indebted to dislocating visual effects of Ernst and the Surrealists, Polish interest in both the imagery of the *belle epoch* and, in particular, in the techniques of montage might seem perversely anachronistic. Theodor Adorno writing in capitalist West Germany was already ringing the death knell on the technique. Looking back to montage's height in the 1920s, he wrote 'The principle of montage was supposed to shock people into realising just how dubious notion of organic unity was. Now that the shock has lost its punch, the products of montage revert to being indifferent stuff or substance. The method of montage no longer succeeds in triggering a communicative spark between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic.' In other words, the kinds of symbolic dislocations favoured by the avant-garde of the 1920s had lost the power to challenge order: they were simply too familiar. And any claim on being avant-garde—defined by its capacity to *épater les bourgeois*—was untenable in a world where aesthetic shock was simply another order of pleasure.

For many critics in the West, montage techniques developed in the 1920s—not least those associated with surrealism—had been fatally

undermined by their spectacular qualities. In the Eastern Bloc, however, surrealist preoccupations had not been subsumed into the spectacle of advertising. In fact, the uncanny and irrational qualities of montage had very particular appeal in a world which constantly trumpeted its advanced and scientific appearance. Similarly, in a politically determined discourse which understood sex in narrow, even material, terms of reproduction (of the family or of the nation), to imagine it in terms of sublimation and fantasy was a provocation. Cieřlewicz's montage covers for the magazine are full of yearning, often making a scopophilic connection between sight and desire. Like Ligia Branice in *Dom*, Cieřlewicz frequently closes the eyelids of his graphic subjects encouraging the viewer to imagine what cannot be seen, only felt.

Cieřlewicz in Paris

Film-makers Borowczyk and Lenica liked to describe their work as 'primitive': Cieřlewicz did not find a label for his practice until he left Warsaw for Paris in 1963. Invited by Peter Knapp, art director of *Elle*, Cieřlewicz found himself the Left Bank orbit of 'Panique'. Formed the previous year by artist and writer Roland Topor, film maker Alexandro Jodorowsky and playwright Fernando Arrabal, Panique focused the contemporary fascination with the absurd into an ethos. Panique laid claim to be the last surrealist avant-garde of the twentieth century and issued its opening salvo in *La Brèche* published by André Breton. With characteristic hubris, Arrabal announced 'I proclaim now that that Panique is neither a group nor an artistic movement: it will be above all a style of living'. In its emphasis on life, it formed a bridge between the Theatre of the Absurd of Camus and Beckett of the 1950s and the fascination with the carnivalesque that climaxed in the Counter Culture of the late 1960s. Arrabal and his friends adopted fashionably new practices like the happening to command the spotlight. The first, and most elaborate Panique event was Jodorowsky's four-hour *Sacramental Melodrama* staged at the 1965 Paris Festival of Free Expression. To the accompaniment of music by a rock band and on a set dressed with the wreck of a car crash, Jodorowsky took the stage dressed in motorcyclist leather with a gaggle of bare-breasted women. He slit the throats of two geese, smashed plates and was himself stripped and whipped. Despite its incoherence and excess, this happening was hardly the scandal it set out to be. As Jodorowsky noted in the *City Lights* Journal, the audience consumed the event with relish; 'All the elements employed in the Sacramental Melodrama were thrown off the ramp into the audience: costumes, hatchets, containers, animals, bread, automobile parts; etc. Great squabble among those present who fought like birds of prey over the division of the spoils. Nothing remained.' Ultimately Panique's triumphs undermined its interest in absurdity (Topor's novel, *Le Locataire chimérique*, for instance was translated into 24 languages and made in to a film by Roman Polański for Paramount). The tremendous



Spread from Cieslewicz's catalogue of the exhibition PAS DE NOUVELLES—BONNES NOUVELLES (1986)

publicity which its members courted had the effect of rendering their most obscure ideas legible.

Formed by 'refugees' from Catholicism (Topor born in France to a family of Polish immigrants, Arabal from Franco's Spain and Jodorowsky from Chile via Mexico), the group's sensitivity to the absurdity of modern life was no doubt sharpened by the rigid moral systems that operated in the countries of their childhoods. Arabal for instance, was arrested in Spain for contravening the law of blasphemy. For Cieslewicz, this sense was amplified by his experiences of socialism in Poland. Whilst many of his contemporaries were unreserved libertarians (like film maker Borowczyk, Jodorowsky became an ideological pornographer in the 1970s), Cieslewicz went on to produce a body of politically engaged political graphic work including a one-off journal, *Kamikaze. Revue d'information panique* (1976) and exhibition *Pas de Nouvelles—Bonnes Nouvelles* (1986). Leaving the 'natural' surrealism of Catholic/Socialist Poland behind, both sets of collages drew upon the most direct forms of visual expression. His collages employed little more than graphic contrasts of scale and tone to deliver sharp critiques of the moral economy of the mass media in the West.

Cieśliewicz was never to live in Poland again. Although he continued to contribute covers and illustrations to *Ty i Ja* from Paris, the magazine began to follow a different course after his departure. Under the influence of work by figures like Willy Fleckhaus at *Twen*, young art directors, Elżbieta Strzałęcka and Bodgan Zochowski, brought a more strictly graphic character to the magazine. After Cieśliewicz's copperplate sensibility, Strzałęcka and Zochowski sought to emphasise high visual drama. They designed spreads with cinematic effects. Photographs were cropped and blown-up full page to produce intimate views. Overleaf, the next scene would be presented wide-screen with text in the form of a title sequence. Montage—in this new aesthetic regime—framed and ordered images to produce narrative effects rather than produce the unsettling achronic juxtapositions which Cieśliewicz had favoured. Nevertheless, under Strzałęcka and Zochowski's direction, the cover continued to be a space for experiment, free from the commercial imperatives that inhibited design in the West. Reflecting the common complaint of Polish designers, that printers were entirely indifferent to matters of quality, the cover often delivered visual jokes. The January 1966 cover appears to be trimmed as if by accident, creating an 'off-screen' space for images of fantasy and fear to rear into view. A 1970 cover designed by Henryk Tomaszewski, picked up the theme of the typographic error (*Ta i Ja* translating as *That and I*), creating a strangely appealing visual stammer.

Whilst the design of the magazine began to take on a more self-consciously professional appearance, *Ty i Ja*'s content continued to be characterised by unsettling diversity. The magazine's editors were put under increasing pressure to tow the line, with their coverage of Western lifestyles coming under particular attack from the censor's office. In fact, the first editor-in-chief Juryś had been sacked in 1963 for failing to direct the magazine appropriately. Despite this, the editorial direction—now credited to a 'team'—changed little. Moreover, the occasional sop in the form of politically-judicious interview with a prominent member of the Women's League did little to dampen the magazine's heterogeneous character.

Always testing the patience of the authorities, *Ty i Ja* was put under pressure by the new regime that took power in 1970. Cultural policy—under Party leader Gierek—was now dominated by an anti-semitic and anti-intelligentsia faction. The magazine's cosmopolitanism, tinged by the early 1970s with a kind of counter-cultural sensibility, was viewed—correctly—as an antagonism. The magazine regularly featured frank textual and visual images of sex and discussions of the appeal of psychedelic drugs. Its fashion spreads featured models that tested the conventional boundaries of gender. Equally controversially, it published unexpurgated works by modernist writers still censored in the Soviet Union such as



Strzalecka/Zochowski-period reportage spread

Mikhail Bulgakov. Signs of the changing political climate were clear. One morning in May 1972 Juryś, former editor-in-chief and once a journalist working for Party publications, was woken by a police raid on his home. He was one of a number of writers whose posed a 'threat to national security'. It came as no surprise then that in 1973 *Ty i Ja* was closed by order of the Central Committee of the United Workers' Party Press and Publications Bureau. Of course, there was now an unfulfilled capacity in the Central Plan and *Ty i Ja* was quickly replaced by the more solidly bourgeois *Family Magazine*, a title which represented the 'reactionary modernism' of Gierek's regime. Closure was, of course, the ultimate form of censorship: but *Ty i Ja*'s crime was not simply that it published illicit or unlicensed ideas. Controversy attached to the fact that its heterogeneous images and words were delivered without any clear hierarchy of meaning. In fact, it was the magazine's illegibility which made it so troubling to authority. In a world where the Party claimed to have been given *all* the answers by Marx, for a reader to be presented with a fashion spread or a feuilleton which produced the thought 'I do not understand this' was in itself a provocation. The exhaustion of an entire ideological system could lie in this moment of uncertainty.

David Crowley, Brighton 11.11.2004

And it seems the streets on paper could be streets of paper. There are buildings provisionally put together with boxes all around me. This must be what they call the cardboard quartier.