

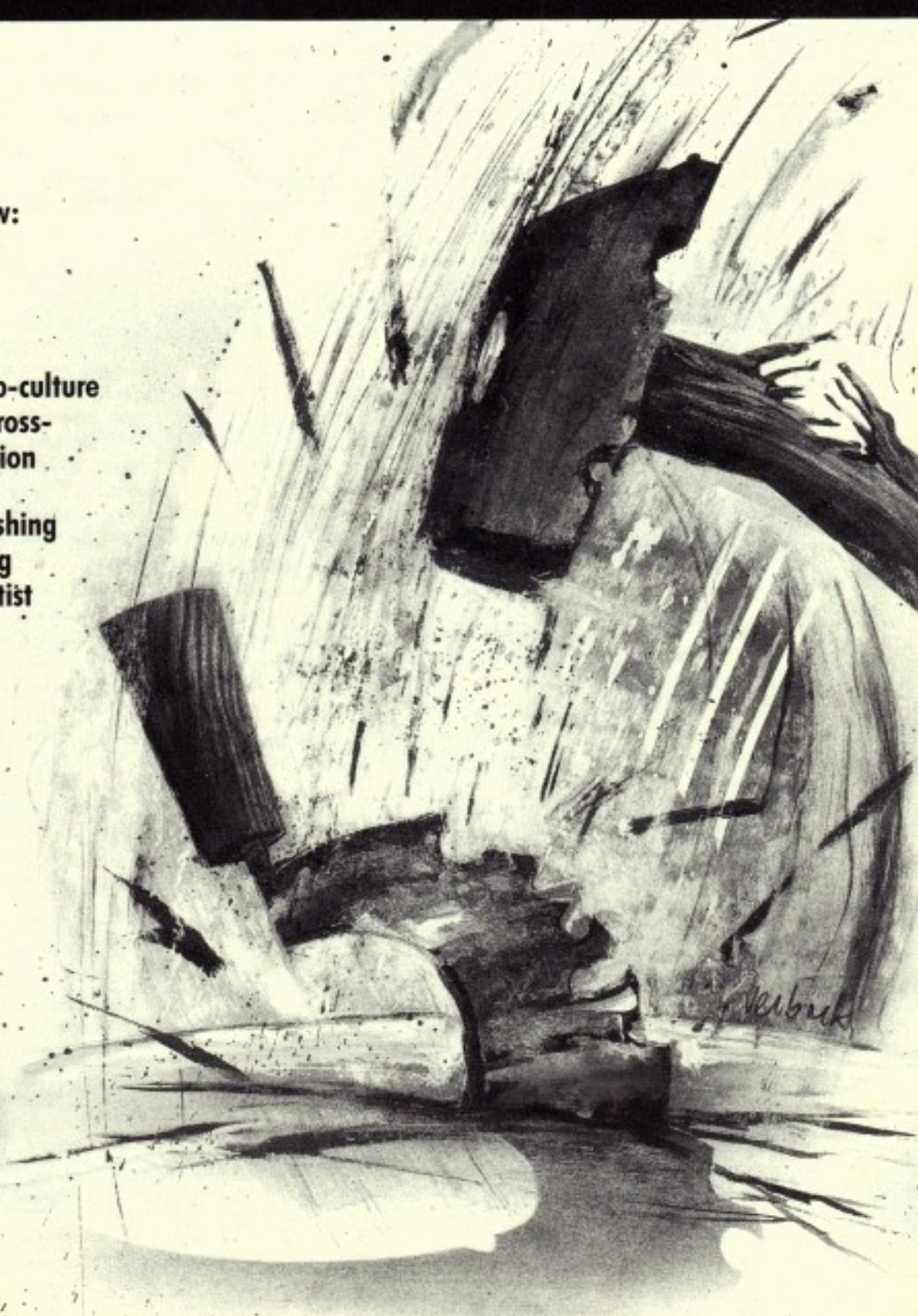
TWO AND TWO

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**Poland then and now:
out of the ruins and
into a future**

**Losing our identity:
Euro-tv making, Euro-culture
and soap opera as cross-
cultural communication**

**African film: establishing
diversity and fighting
for the individual artist**



Children of the damned: reaching for freedom

When the aeroplane would appear above our heads we ran and shouted to the sky: 'Hey, Mister pilot, you've got a hole in the plane!' Sometimes it seemed to us that he had heard and had even made a sign by waving the bright silver wings

We were all six or seven years old, the post-war children of Warsaw. We spent days playing in the ruins. There were few buildings left in the centre of town: immense jungles of brick, steel and concrete debris created a mysterious, disturbing territory. Entry was strictly forbidden. Signs with a red death symbol were posted, but treasures tempted. Sometimes we had to look for a hole in the fence to enter the area, but enter we did, searching for explosives, rusty pistols, a German helmet. Sometimes a cat gone wild would jump out of hiding with a scarey noise.

We knew that mines were deadly dangerous, but to find bullets or a hand grenade was big fun. We put them in the fire and then ran to hide, waiting for the blast.

The ruins were humid and dark; only when a sharp beam of sun would touch a wall could we see that before it had been part of a bedroom or kitchen. Cat's skeletons would shine in the darkness. But the most precious things were human skulls. You could see where a bullet entered the skull: the hole was not as big as you might think. Some of the boys had two skulls; I heard about one who had a whole skeleton.

We often went to the old ghetto site to look for treasures. Bulldozers were levelling the ruins with their remnants of daily living and people's bones to make a place to build new houses. Today this part of the city is two metres higher than the rest of the town. Walk below those houses and you feel the unbearable intensity of human tragedies, the injustice done to millions of souls.

At school we were taught that even now, in peacetime, aeroplanes could be dangerous. The

Americans might drop poisoned chocolate or even toys filled with explosives. I didn't know the taste of chocolate, but the children who had eaten it said it was worth the risk.

The most dangerous, we were told, would be the lonely high flying plane which would suspend itself above the city. That one would drop the bomb, destroying everything. People, houses and objects: up in one big ball of fire. We were told Americans had dropped these bombs on innocent people somewhere in China or Korea, just like that, without any reason, only because they loved war. When a plane was up very high, we would look up with fear. There was a saying in that time which I didn't understand very well: 'Truman, Truman, drop that bomb, we can't stand it anymore.'

Happily for us our big, peace-loving father, Josef Vissarionovich Stalin, had also invented such a device but, we were told, did not intend to use it, keeping it only to protect the peace of the world.

The Western 'conscience' of Coca-Cola and comics came later. *Superman*, *Spiderman*, *Batman*: men who walked through walls and had cosmic adventures. For a long time I believed they were not drawn by the human hand, but were created by an outside power, only found and reprinted by men. I held them in my hand, but even so could not really believe in their existence. It was as if they were dropped from the moon, so different were they from my experience.

A mysterious eroticism was part of the world of comic books. No prostitutes with drunken men going into the ruins and leaving used condoms, nothing like the heavy women on tractors waving red flags seen on posters in the streets, not bosomy and immense as the sculptured

by
Piotr Andreev

female shapes placed by the new buildings; no, the women from the comics were slim, long-legged, doe-eyed.

And these wild, comic-book people had their own music. Rock and roll. Only after years of struggle was jazz admitted to Poland, and that because it was the music of the oppressed Black people, because jazz was the sound of their despair. Rock and roll, bikini swim suits and the A-bomb – that was what the West had to offer.

We were told that Stalin was a fine, smart man, a good man with children. He may grow weary, working for our future, but he would never stop smiling through those bright, severe eyes. I was told of a May Day parade when he was handed a tribute, a huge bouquet from which a small girl rose up, giving him a kiss and another bunch of flowers. The children loved it, and I asked if out of the second bunch of flowers another, even smaller little girl would pop out.

There was a song at that time saying that Stalin's lips were sweeter than cherries. My grandmother said that she loved him too, but... never finishing the sentence. Perhaps because of her husband, my grandfather, whom I had never met. The tradition in our family was that he had simply disappeared, which, as far as it went was correct: establishing the location of his grave would have been impossible.

Our life stopped for one minute when Stalin died. The sirens signaled and police halted all traffic. People paused on the streets, inside buildings, at the factories, and in the trains people stopped. The trains themselves stopped. I wondered about airplanes, how they could stop in the air for one minute.

People cried, and some said there would be war now. But after that moment life continued, even without the man so beloved by all the children in the world, even without the man who had known how to fight for peace. And the days looked surprisingly the same.

The years passed, and we were told by college teachers that life changes for the better. We asked defiant questions which were answered in such a way that we learned to stop asking. 'Freedom does not exist,' one of my mentors told me, and then added: 'Freedom from what?' We knew what we wanted to be free from, but we also knew it was impossible. Our mentors said that democracy was alright, but it needed improvement, that as it was, it didn't work. And, our mentors continued, improvement could only happen through centralism. In other words, rule by a small committee which really meant no democracy at all.

Law was the will of the ruling class and could

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be changed at any moment, with those changes kept secret until you did something wrong; against the law. And truth? History was rewritten every few years: supplements were sent to change entries in the encyclopedia. Still, we were told that truth was important.

We could see that the most simple bits of information were lies, that promises were never kept; reality could always be re-interpreted; at the same time we were told that the future looked bright, that capitalism was decaying. Simply put, we were the best because we had a system based on justice.

But we dreamt of better. We knew, while being told of the unemployment, poverty, and exploitation that existed elsewhere, that life was still better somewhere else in the world. Of course the people governing us did not share this feeling; they simply had to react to it.

As if we were children they gave us toys. Coca-Cola was very sweet in those days; chewing gum was packed into the comic books published by the Workers Publishing Cooperative. Marlboro cigarettes were produced under licence; we ate our first hamburgers and tasted ketchup. We loved these new things: they signified the beginning of change, even if they tasted awful.

Authorities said that since we had been given toys, then we must work harder to deserve them. But to get to work the busses never ran on time, after work it was hard to find bread or cheese. And not necessarily good cheese, and certainly not sausage. I remember shops out of bread and butter, but with a full choice of Calvé sauces and shiny dark rows of Coke bottles. Toys. 'Like in the West.'

People didn't like it. We became more bitter, more police were needed to control us. The authorities got more impatient with the laziness of people: in the end, their wages depended upon the worker's pace.

The State wanted to destroy private farming, to replace it with cooperative farms under State control, so farmers were having the worst difficulties. They would work 12 hours a day for nothing because the State imposed such low prices for food products. Almost all farms stayed private in Poland, but were referred to as 'relics of the past.' In Poland at that time it was easier to buy a good tennis racket than a simple farmer's tool. A used tractor cost more than a good car. To buy one kilo of sugar, a private farmer had to deliver more than 100 cubic metres of white beets.

People got more desperate. I remember lines several kilometres long to buy bread. The Party told the artists to condemn the consumer attitude of the population in their art. In a time when you could hardly buy something to eat

much less a pair of shoes, I remember meetings of young film makers where they would arrive in their cars to debate the materialism of the population.

Cinema, theatre, arts, even pop music were treated as propaganda in an attempt to police the mind. There was growing pressure on the artist to make art saying that the problems of Poland were not a result of the imposition of a foreign power or of bad government, but were actually due to eternal and insolvable problems of human nature, but – even given how basically bad people were – that the difficulties would eventually be solved if people would ally themselves with the authorities.

The distance between reality and the images shown on the media grew and there seemed no end to the lie. There were basic problems with food, and in answer to that, the authorities told us how much bigger the crisis was on the other side, how people were starving and how difficult it was to buy sugar or bread in Sweden or France. Statistics were like rubberbands: according to the authorities Poland was the tenth industrial power in the world. Sometimes ninth.

Anger grew toward the media, educated people, artists. We were resented as the ones who helped the system. I remember filming a documentary, never released by the authorities, about people trying to find food for their Christmas dinner. Crowds attacked my crew, thinking that we were working for television news. 'Gestapo! Liars!' they shouted at us, 'You will show us in the news tonight saying there is plenty of food!'

By the time agriculture had all but collapsed, the government tried to raise food prices. The prospect of long lines for increasingly expensive food, coupled by newspapers reporting that prices were going down, infuriated the population. The confusion of facts, lies and ideas circulated by the media deepened the crisis. We were an atomised society full of artificially created tensions, but the real problems were more practical: bakers and farmers, milk and bread. They were supposed to be the villains behind our problems. But nobody mentioned that the bakers had been ruined by high taxes and the mass production from huge bakeries. Nobody would say that this was done on purpose by the State because 'who is able to control food has the power.' One Party official said, 'Government is not big, it will manage to feed itself.'

For this situation there was only one medicine: freedom. First, freedom to tell the truth, then freedom to work for change.

For artists freedom seemed the only missing element. We had everything else: friends, ambitions, motivation, even technical means. But

ILLUSTRATION BY
JOHN WOODS

without freedom, what could be accomplished? Writers could publish on an unofficial circuit, but what about sculpture, painting, theatre or cinema? Everything done in the arts had a political meaning; everything was analysed by the special committees.

Many artists reacted by telling a good story, something that would be difficult to manipulate, thus escaping from politics. They protested through disengagement, because even when you say 'no!' to a statement, you are busy with that idea; it becomes part of your reality. People who managed culture for the government understood that very well. One of them said,



'People who do not agree with the system are not our real enemies, our real enemy is indifference.' The system was so strong, there was no real fear they might lose control of it.

It would still be that way today, were it not for economics. The economy did not follow the fictitious world of propaganda. But if the economy is simply the sum of the actions of the people, why did it break when it did? Why did this system work for so many years and only begin to break down in August of 1980, with the birth of Solidarity? The answer is simple: people did not want that system any more, and they did not want it anymore because it was no longer possible to hide the reality of the world from them.

The modern world, with its communications

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and technology ridiculed the authoritarian regime. And people simply knew too much about that modern world. I remember standing in a field, talking with an old farmer, his hands full of beets. I asked him why he still picked by hand. He quoted the price of sugar on the London Stock Exchange, the price of a modern West German harvester with electronic sensors, and the price he could get for his beets. He knew he would never be able to buy a harvester, that he would pick his fields by hand for the rest of his life. It began to rain and this farmer's field in south-east Poland became a sea of mud. And minding the fact that we were having a conversation about our limitations, it was also a proof of our secret dreams and ambitions, our presence in another, modern world.