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A CONCRETE CUBOID – PHILOSOPHICAL EGG OF THE DEAD

BETONOWY PROSTOPADŁOŚCIAN – JAJO FILOZOFICZNE UMARŁYCH

Abstract

Concrete arouses fear with its stony calm. Its austerity, indifference, chill and color bring to mind the architecture of a bunker, cellar, shelter...or grave...And although concrete buildings also emerge on the surface in the shape of “beautiful flowers”, we always experience a sense of solemnity and obscurity, which is characteristic of their underground roots and aura of mystery. A small concrete cuboid is often a companion of our (in all likelihood) ultimate transmutation – then it becomes a part of a dramatic mystery.

Keywords: concrete, transmutation, fear, mystery

Streszczenie

Beton budzi strach swoim kamiennym spokojem. Jego surowość, obojętność, chłód i kolor kojarzą się z architekturą bunkra, piwnicy, schronu... grobu... I choć betonowe budowle wyrzają się także na powierzchnię w postaci „pięknych kwiatów”, odczuwamy zawsze powagę i mrok właściwe ich podziemnym korzeniom i tajemnicy.

Niewielki, betonowy prostopadłościan bywa towarzyszem naszej (najprawdopodobniej) ostatecznej transmutacji – wtedy staje się częścią dramatycznego misterium.

Słowa kluczowe: beton, transmutacja, strach, tajemnica

1. CONCRETE CUBOID – A PHILOSOPHICAL EGG OF THE DEAD

Concrete arouses fear with its stony calm. Its austerity, indifference, chill and color bring to mind the architecture of a bunker, cellar, shelter...or grave...And although concrete buildings also emerge on the surface in the shape of “beautiful flowers”, we always experience a sense of solemnity and obscurity, which is characteristic of their underground roots, and a certain aura of mystery.

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A small concrete cuboid is often a companion of our (in all likelihood) ultimate transmutation – then it becomes a part of a dramatic mystery.

Whenever life comes into collision with inanimate matter, we experience fear. We feel intuitively that concrete interior and austere spaces are filled with dead silence. The experience of otherness, of the radical difference between what is alive, warm and mobile – is confronted with what is static, indifferent and deaf. Sometimes we are unable to cope with this feeling; we cannot understand it, examine it or remove it by changing our attitude.

Our relation towards concrete is almost always associated with the need of confronting an enemy. It may well be that it is exclusively a metaphysical relation and that it cannot be expressed by means of any concepts linked to the physical world.

However, is it possible that an encounter between the “living” and the “dead” the existence of man within a concrete interior, within a space made of concrete, might define anew our identity, that it might define anew who we really are? Does “being oneself” find its confirmation here? What is the significance of the anxiety and sense of otherness aroused by such an encounter? Due to these concrete spaces „the otherness not from this world”¹ and myself, to use the words of a philosopher, define once again the essence of life, life itself and a longing after life...and some unspecified fear pushes us towards the exit. Is it some form of a subconscious escape from nihilism and an attempt to substitute one place with another? Is it an attempt to blurt out from a concrete sarcophagus, from a casing, which sometimes literally and metaphorically envelops us?

Our first impression of concrete is that it is a symbol of loneliness. In concrete interiors, each of us, one beside the other, marches along his/her own solitary path. It seems that in the concrete interiors, we – people, looked upon as a society, and a single organism, are focused on our own selves; we are oriented on ourselves and are entangled in our own and exclusively our own problems. We are helpless on this concrete scene, which though full of people, turns out to be quite empty. Why is this happening? Why does exiting from the concrete grave (which is not yet a real grave) opens up a chance for a liberation from this peculiar loneliness?

What is the reason why we often put a mark of equality between the concept of „being locked in” and that of being „concreted up”, although luckily the former can be unlocked, and the latter crumbles and cracks.

The continual changeability and diversity of the world in which we are living differ quite considerably, from what is revealed by our concepts concerning the changeability of the space in which we are enclosed. The diversity and variety of the places in which we spend our lives, the ever present chance of starting anew, stand in stark contrast to the concrete space, over and above which a stone slab slams shut with a bang. And yet, we continue trying. Due to the fact that concrete constructions and concrete spaces, permeate deeply into our consciousness and into our so called, humanity, we shall never know how to react towards those who pass us by accidentally, or those whom we pass by accidentally. Adam Zagajewski once wrote that „man is all the more human, the more inhuman he is” – thus the sweet hope of seeing a crack in our own concrete, and then seeing it crumble away completely, will probably never be fulfilled to the end – which in turn arouses our legitimate fear and even despair. We shall probably construct things from concrete indefinitely and then demolish them; we shall continue to open and close doors.

¹ K. Michalski, *Eseje o Bogu i śmierci /Essays on God and Death/*, Kurhaus, Warsaw 2014, p. 102.

In our convictions, speculations and phobias, the internal and external worlds are worlds of diverse experiences and although our cognitive abilities are finite, and the world we experience may not become the object of knowledge, we are not ready to accept these limitations.

An inclination to mutually juxtapose, try to look for opposites as well as to contrast worlds and spaces, lies in our very nature.

It seems a little puzzling that in the case of all types of concrete constructions, everything that is outside, usually looms to us as homely, open and nice, while other types of ordered spaces tend to trigger off entirely different impressions. In his book entitled „Człowiek i przestrzeń” /Man and Space/, Piotr Bogdanowicz described the process of ordering space – „It is enough to mark out a certain area by defining its boundaries as well as its constituent parts, for a sphere of chaos to arise right outside of its boundaries... The more rigorous the order within our delineated area, the bigger the chaos outside its boundaries (...), and spatial order constitutes a reflection of the order created by the human mind”². Yet is not the situation quite different in the case of concrete spaces, stone deserts and behemoth cities – for, as Jerzy Jarniewicz writes, in this case, what is outside, beyond the boundaries becomes „an overture for an idyllic landscape, a foretaste of true reality, (...) a signal of a different order which is natural, superhuman (...) existing in eternal time, measured by the cycles of seasons, as opposed to the forever grey city suspended in a vacuum”³.

Following this lead a little further – could we not say that everything seems better than the chill of the concreted world, a bunker, a cellar or a sarcophagus? The entire mess of the open world – all the slag heaps, rubble, refuse dumps and waste heaps, above which one can only see swarms of birds, and clouds chased by gusts of wind; do they not seem like a paradise when we come out of a grave? And the dirty, stinking and drunk homeless people – will they not appear to us as our beloved brothers wishing to share with us a drink of water from a plastic bottle when we come out thirsty from a bunker?

How strong an experience do we need to undergo a transformation?

Let us consider a transmutation of real concrete done by the hand of a master and artist and a transmutation of the concrete that is within us, once we begin to understand and change anew – the “new”.

Relying on I. Kant, Barbara Skarga writes that „It is the right of nature that nothing happens without a specific cause. Yet causality that is in accord with the laws of nature is not the only one, which is capable of explaining all the phenomena in the world. In order to explain them one must adopt a causality which is effected through freedom.” (...) „Such freedom, that Kant refers to as transcendental, is able to cause great embarrassment to a speculative mind; it is an ability to initiate a series of events or states that occur successively one after another (...) And that is why it is not due to time, but rather due to causality that one ought to refer to them as the absolutely primary causes of a number of phenomena... (...) For freedom, or rather, a free deed is an event that disturbs the order of time; it bursts into it with something new and unexpected. By smashing the order of things, it allows one to perform a leap forward, which changes the rhythm of time. The latter ceases to be a monotonous and rhythmical time of the clocks. It becomes suspended or speeds up rapidly and in a single

² A. Wolny-Hamkało, *Śmierć przedmieścia* /Death of a Suburb/ in: D. Czaja, *Inne przestrzenie, inne miejsca, Mapy i terytoria* /Other Spaces, Other Places, Maps and Territories/, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2013, p. 165.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 165.



moment it leaps to the future; suddenly it brings about the unexpected; it turns around reaching back to the past and leaps forward to the future”⁴.

In the case of concrete forms, sculptures or buildings, the dream of a transmutation, a transformation of one thing into another, most potently draws us into a mysterious game with ourselves. This may be caused by a subconscious image of this concrete cuboid measuring 2.0 x 2.0 x 1.0 m, arising in our minds.

Thus, we cannot fail to notice the astounding „personality” of concrete, which exerts an influence on our mental state. It may well be that concrete is (up until now) the only building material which leads to such extreme reactions within us. For it creates a symbolic construction, its own language; it is capable of changing a thing (object) into a feeling of joy or sorrow, possession into a loss, permanence and strength into transience and fragility, “narcissism of a united form”⁵, into non-existence – or conversely.

In the third chapter of „Objective Knowledge” entitled ‘Epistemology without a knowing subject’, Karl Popper presents his theory of the three worlds, within which he distinguishes: the world of physical objects or states, the world of mental states or states of consciousness, or else behavioral predispositions to act, the world of objective thought content, particularly scientific thought and poetic thought, as well as works of art”⁶; he also declares that „the third world is to a large extent autonomous, although we continue to influence it and experience its impact on us; this world is autonomous despite that fact that it is our product and that it exerts a strong influence on us, that is on the inhabitants of the second and the first world”⁶. Thus, the scenario does and at the same time does not exist. One might say that it writes itself continually anew, although also thanks to us – the successive generations.

The feelings that emerge in our relations with concrete spaces are generally those of loneliness, peace and murkiness, or else – loneliness, anxiety and murkiness.

Concrete interiors arouse within us feelings of metaphysical homelessness. They may be due to an alien – „I do not know” or „I do not know where I am” which is devoid of any content. This fear, though often totally deprived of a motif, is associated with our images of what it is like to wake up in a grave. A concrete cuboid, its inescapable necessity build successive scenarios in our imagination and casts a shadow on a concrete wall.

„The Stoics proclaimed that a true philosophy teaches death”⁷, yet no one becomes a master in this art. We wish to improve and rectify a known scenario for as long as is only possible, although a scary concrete cuboid keeps coming back, making us afraid.

In her philosophical treatise entitled “Thinking”, Hannah Arendt analyzes the problem of the fear of death, among others by looking at the reality of things, objects and places, which arouse anxiety. In her philosophical discourse, the philosopher tries to look for an answer to the question how to get over this fear, by resorting to the use of one’s consciousness,

⁴ B. Skarga, *Człowiek to nie jest piękne zwierzę* /Man is not a Beautiful Animal/, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2007, p. 169–170, I. Kant, *Krytyka czystego rozumu* /Critique of Pure Reason/ transl. R. Ingarden, vol. 2, Warsaw 1957, p. 185–186.

⁵ W. Strzemiński, *Czytelność obrazów* /Legibility of Images/, Łódź Museum of Art., Łódź 2012, p. 107.

⁶ K. Popper, *Wiedza obiektywna* /Objective Knowledge/, transl. A. Chmielewski, Warsaw 1992 [in:] W. Stróżewski, *Ontologia* /Ontology/, Wydawnictwo Aureus, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2004, p. 251, 252.

⁷ G. Steiner, *Poezja myślenia* /The Poetry of Thinking/, transl. B. Baran, Wydawnictwo Aletheia, Warsaw 2016, p. 173.



imagination, transformation of thoughts and will – „If having perceived an object outside of me, I will decide to focus on the viewed object, it is as if I lost the original object, as it ceases to exert an influence on me (...) This has a tremendous advantage, as I no longer concentrate on the object, that is something external to me; the perceived thing is now within me, invisible to the external world, as if it had never been a sensual object. It is not a thinking thing but a sensation (...) and I myself, as pure consciousness, emerge as a completely new form of being. This new being may exist independently as a sovereign entity in this world and moreover, it seems to be in control of this world, of its pure essence, freed from the existential character, and from reality which might affect me or pose a threat to me (...) It is not the mind, but rather the thus monstrously enhanced consciousness that offers a safe asylum protecting one from reality”⁸. Yet it is an asylum, which fear can have access to all the time. What we know about the past and what we also know about the future, what was and what will be – the „Inescapable” is only a question of time.

And precisely wishing to define the time coordinates of our thinking ego, Hannah Arendt refers to a parabola from Kafka’s writings. It comes from a collection of Kafka’s aphorisms, entitled “He”. „He has two opponents. The first one attacks him from behind. The second one confronts him from the front. He fights with both of them. In fact, the first opponent aids him in the struggle with the second, as he wants to push him forward, and the second similarly aids him in the struggle with the first, he pushes him backwards. But things look like this only in theory. For there are not only his two opponents, but also he himself and who knows his real intentions? His dream is to take advantage of a moment without supervision – which would require a night so dark as had never been observed here before – and find himself beyond the line of struggle, so as to rise up, thanks to the experience acquired in the struggle, to the role of an arbiter of his two opponents fighting against one another”⁹.

What is tragic is the awareness that beyond the line of struggle one can only rise up (rise from the dead?). A concrete cuboid is being constructed inexorably at the boundary line of our time, when the thinking ego is paralyzed and a deep shadow shifts the band of light, which becomes narrower and narrower, until it disappears completely, giving way to the darkness that fills out the interior of the sarcophagus.

Yet the transmutation of concrete takes place already earlier – within us, within our psyche and in our existential experience. The concrete space seems to be resistant to all change and all movement. Nevertheless, it sends us a signal and leaves a trace. It is us who undergo a transformation when our imagination, our thinking – stretched between the external world and the interior of a concrete cuboid, goes through a process of transmutation at the moment when it still can or no longer can be brought to our attention.

This transmutation is not a simple coincidence; it is the heart of life – life itself, or the heart of death – death itself; or else it tells of resurrection. It happens however that in our perception, the thought of this common transmutation makes us come close to the border-line of insanity.

⁸ H. Arendt, *Myślenie /Thinking/*, transl. H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, Czytelnik, Warsaw 2002, p. 213, 214.

⁹ F. Kafka, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, New York 1946, p. 300 in: H. Arendt, *Myślenie /Thinking/*, transl. H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, Czytelnik, Warsaw 2002, p. 267, 268.

With its coarse and mundane look, concrete reminds one of a horror movie hero. It does not let on what it really is and forces one to keep one's silence. Yet its ordinariness is only apparent. It emerges in a place where we wish to part with the dead.

It alters the past, the present and the future. Collected and dumb, it protects our dead body with its own. Its coarse figure faithfully remains with us until the end. Together with the dying, it enters the world of the supernatural...and "it constitutes a sphere of the human spirit which knows no volunteers: people do not enter this realm out of their own free will. It is a sphere of human tragedy. When forced to remain there, man begins to think, feel and desire in a different way. What is dear and precious to all people, for him suddenly becomes dispensable and alien. It is true that he is still linked to his former life by a few ties: he still cherishes some superstitious beliefs acquired in early childhood and from time to time, recalls his former fears and hopes. Sometimes a painful awareness of the past is awakened in him. But the past never comes back. The ships have sailed, the bridges have been burnt – one should walk towards the unknown and somewhat terrifying future. And man walks towards it, not knowing what to expect."¹⁰

The feeling of dread can also be aroused by other concrete graves, for instance by the sarcophagus of the nuclear power plant – a massive, concrete cover of the nuclear reactor which protects the atmosphere against ionizing radiation.

The tragedy of Chernobyl and Fukushima have changed the scale. We are dealing here with 400 000 cubic meters of concrete, which creates a sort of tomb for the remains of the reactor; right above it, there is a new ark, constructed in 2016 at the expense of 387 million euros, which in turn is to provide isolation for the existing sarcophagus for the successive 100 years.

It seems that it is only the duality of our human condition that gives us a chance to get rid of our permanent fear. The right to our own independent thinking bids us to summon for help our ordinary everyday activities, our ideas and our well-tested epistemology, so as to begin to perceive concrete constructions, concrete architecture and concrete itself, as something that also possesses its bright side, as well as a certain charm that is a characteristic feature of life and light, whose source is not only an illusory flicker or a "hallucination of warped imagination". Yet even if such was indeed the case, we must not remain exclusively on the dark side of the force, and a transmutation of concrete must find its beautiful face within us.

The process of the alchemic transmutation and all the metaphysical notions associated with transmutation, continue to grow in our imagination, creating increasingly multi-layered constructions. All the arguments "for" and "against" boil down to the experience associated with our human, individual "I". Thus does it not indicate that all of us together and each of us individually instinctively looks for meanings in the reality which surrounds us? Without understanding why, and without being able to explain the legitimacy of this fact, we attribute certain human features, such as strength, indifference, contempt, conscience as well as morality, goodness, gentleness to things or objects. In confrontation with our own selves, we are powerless. Sometimes we are tugged by contradictory feelings, by anxiety or dramatic uncertainty. We are unable to define and cognize the dimensions of what is truly happening

¹⁰ L. Szestow, *Dostojewski i Nietzsche Filozofia tragedii* /Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, the Philosophy of Tragedy/, transl. C. Wodziński, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1987, p. 42.

in our perception. It is impossible to achieve this as maybe our cognitive abilities are limited and our “spiritual constitution” is not something that is permanent and unchangeable.

Building materials, such as concrete, cement, chipping and water, sometimes plasticisers and liquefiers – all so stable and motionless – strangely permeate into our consciousness.

Maybe the reason why this happens is our mutual, magical transmutation (either good or bad), in which we transgress together the boundary of the simple truth and ask questions for which no unequivocal answers will ever be received.

Time, evanescence, death, grave, concrete, transmutation – all of these notions make up a kind of thought noose, which encapsulates the impossibility of cognizing as well as the incomprehensibility of the inescapable. A reversal of the notion “something out of nothing” into „from something into nothing”... and the puzzling famous adage: „if we had not been here for millions of years, why are we so frightened of the fact that we will not be here again?”...And what can possibly an ordinary concrete cuboid have to do with it?

Isn't it precisely concrete that confirms emphatically our existence in the world, the existence of the sphere of the everyday; doesn't it remind us (although it is not its primary function) that “non omnis moriar”. It makes us realize that something has remained, that there is some “exterior” or „above” and that these are not exclusively concrete structures., This way or another, traces of both my (Your and our) involvements, activities, as well as my (Your and our) indifference and inactivity, will be tattooed on the body of the world”¹¹.

The awareness of a concrete cuboid, of the end, the ultimate, and at the same time, doubts and unextinguished hopes – a clash between what is material, hard and coarse and what is delicate, fleeting and bright, certainty side by side uncertainty, strength vis a vis weakness, knowledge vis a vis ignorance – all of these loom to us in a situation when we are dealing with a change of our way of thinking with regard to what in its essence is unchangeable, and with regard to a compromise between what is conceivable and inconceivable.

Despite its superhuman effort, our brain is not able to cope with such a task. At the same time, it is not able to “stand even a foreboding that we are nothing but a mere agglomeration of matter... We cannot stand reflection concerning the emptiness and absurdity of life, that is, its meaninglessness: the world and our existence in it is beyond the category of sense and non-sense, beyond good and evil. These notions are empty and inadequate; they are an illusion and a magical construction themselves, just as banners without self-interest, altruism, sacrifice (...) in a reaction to the (un) realized sense of the absurd, man creates culture”¹².

Culture creates art and it is art that transforms what is common and everyday, into what is perfect. „It transforms one common thing or object into another (perfect) thing or object.” „The field of art is a transformation of fiction into fiction and reality into fiction”¹³.

In view of an imminent perspective of a close encounter of the final kind, a transmutation of concrete and of ourselves stirs our imagination and thinking.

¹¹ Z. Braun, S. Obirek, *O Bogu i człowieku rozmowy* /Conversations About God and Man/, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Warsaw 2013, p. 85.

¹² J. Krupiński, *Design – rzeczywistość i fikcja* /Design – Reality and Fiction/ in: *Wiadomości ASP, The Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow*, Kraków 2014, p. 13.

¹³ A. Pawłowski, w J. Krupiński, *Design – rzeczywistość i fikcja* /Design – Reality and Fiction/, *Wiadomości ASP, The Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow*, Kraków 2014, p. 15.

It is truly amazing how this common building material becomes perfect by creating a metaphor, which bridges the gap between what is visible and what is invisible, “between the phenomena and the thinking ego”¹⁴.

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¹⁴ H. Arendt, *Myślenie /Thinking/*, transl. H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, Czytelnik, Warsaw 2002, p. 175.