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Memories of Joy for a Futureless World: Aesthetic and Political Commitment in Jasiński and Pasolini

Abstract

Discussions of cultural disappearance are often couched in terms of nostalgia and tragedy. Bruno Jasiński in *Bal manekinów* and Pier Paolo Pasolini in *Ragazzi di vita* offer an alternative form of remembering disappearance through memories of joy, understood as a distinctly political practice. Acutely aware of the untenability of what they were celebrating (pockets of liberty from cultural uniformity, in local cultures and aesthetic experimentation, respectively), both writers maintained a sense of political commitment, offering a good broader model for thinking about a world without a future.

Key words: joy, socialist realism, proletarian aesthetics, folk cultures

Parole chiave: gioia, realismo socialista, estetica proletaria, culture contadine

In the years leading up to the institutionalization of socialist realism as the cultural doctrine of the Soviet Union, a long debate about the best manner of narrating literature for the proletariat engulfed the literary circles in the country. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar for Education and a patron of among others Mayakovsky and Meyerhold, defended the right to aesthetics and fantasy as elements of life that Marxist art ought to depict and then fairly explain (1928). Critics of artistic conventionality and formalism found it entirely opposed to Marxism in its inability to recognize external factors and their influence on literature (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1991: 67). A thirty-year-old Polish writer, who had just arrived from

France in search of a new homeland a year prior, waded into this debate in a characteristic, if entirely impolitic way. In 1931, describing his newest published work, he said:

Napisałem w tym czasie sztukę-groteskę *Bal manekinów*, wyszydającą współczesną zachodnią socjaldemokrację. Pobudziła mnie do tego nieobecność w naszym rewolucyjnym repertuarze spektakli wesotych, które by widzowi proletariackiemu dawały możliwość pośmiać się przez dwie godziny z jego wrogów zdrowym, beztroskim śmiechem, dającym rewolucyjny trening. Postanowiłem podjąć próbę stworzenia rewolucyjnej farsy. Przedsięwzięcie, na mój gust, wyszło pomyślnie. Zresztą, niech to osądzi czytelnik – *Bal manekinów* ukaże się lada dzień w osobnym wydaniu książkowym. Na scenę jak dotąd nie trafił. (Jasieński 1972: 253)

(During that time, I wrote *Mannequins' Ball*, a grotesque play mocking contemporary social-democratic parties in the West. I was prompted by the lack of merry plays in our revolutionary repertoire, presenting the proletarian audience with an opportunity to laugh a healthy, carefree laughter at their enemies for two hours, giving them revolutionary training. I decided to give revolutionary farce a try. To my mind, the attempt was successful. I will let the reader decide, however – *Mannequins' Ball* will soon appear independently as a book. It has yet to make it to the stage.)¹

The author's clear commitment to joy as a political practice reflected his sincere belief in the political power of aesthetics: he thought of his play not as a light respite from politics and revolutionary work but quite the opposite, as the work of revolution itself. The revolutionary training of laughing at class enemies would be part of political work: not just a grotesque farce, criticized by Soviet literary ideologues of the time as "bourgeois formalism," but a revolutionary one, too. At the same time, as the tone of uncertainty makes clear, the author of those words was also painfully aware that what he was doing was not only new but also potentially dangerous – precisely because of the combination of joyful elements and revolutionary ones. Indeed, Soviet audiences would have to wait forty-five years after these words had been written, and for long after their author's death, before the first staging of the play in the country.

Writing four decades later and in a different national context, a poet, director, and public intellectual used the following words to describe the lost organic energy of proletarian joy, still to be gleaned in Rome in the 1950s:

¹ All translations from Polish, Italian, and Russian, unless noted otherwise, are by the author.

Una volta il fornarino, o cascherino – come lo chiamano qui a Roma – era sempre, eternamente allegro: un'allegria vera, che gli sprizzava dagli occhi. Se ne andava in giro per le strade fischiando e lanciando motti. La sua vitalità era irresistibile. Era vestito molto più poveramente di adesso: i calzoni erano rattoppati, addirittura spesse volte la camicetta uno straccio. Però tutto ciò faceva parte di un modello che nella sua borgata aveva un valore, un senso. Ed egli ne era fiero. Al mondo della ricchezza egli aveva da opporre un altro mondo altrettanto valido. Giungeva nella casa del ricco con un riso naturaliter anarchico, che screditava tutto: benché egli fosse magari rispettoso. Ma era appunto il rispetto di una persona profondamente estranea. E insomma, ciò che conta, questa persona, questo ragazzo, era allegro. Non è la felicità che conta? Non è per la felicità che si fa la rivoluzione? [...] Oggi, questa felicità – con lo Sviluppo – è andata perduta. (Pasolini 2009: 330–331)

(Once, a baker's apprentice, or a *cascherino*, as we call them in Rome, was always, forever happy: it was a true happiness, coming forth from his eyes. He would walk the streets whistling and shouting out loud. His vitality was irresistible. He was dressed much more scantily than today: his stockings were patched, his shirt was often a rag. But all that was part of a model that had a value and meaning in his *borgata*. And he was proud of it. He had a world of his own, of equal value, to oppose to the world of the riches. He would arrive in the houses of the rich with a natural, anarchic laughter, dismissing everything – even if he was respectful. It was indeed the respect of someone fundamentally different. And, in short, what matters is that the person, that boy, was happy. Isn't it happiness that matters? Isn't it for happiness that one makes a revolution? [...] Today, with Development, that happiness is gone.)

The time difference between the two quotations marks a transition from the present to the past: where the former excerpt imagines its proletarian audience laughing, the latter already mourns the loss of that laughter. What does not disappear, however, standing out from both texts, is a strong conviction about the clear connection between joy and politics. While it is true that the vision of the lost figure of the *cascherino* entering the house of the rich with an anarchic smile is a nostalgic idealization of the lost past, it is also marked by a clear political commitment, avoiding the trap of a nihilist removal from politics, often associated with simplistic notions of nostalgia (Sindbæk Andersen and Ortner 2019). The provocative rhetorical question at the end (“Non è per la felicità che si fa la rivoluzione?”), which echoes vaguely a quotation frequently misattributed to Emma Goldman (“if I can't dance, it's not my revolution” (Hemmings 2018: 218)), reflects its author's uneasy positioning within the Italian left.

It is this odd positioning within their respective groups, coupled with their embrace of joy as a political practice, that earned Bruno Jasiński and Pier Paolo Pasolini – the authors of the first and second excerpt, respectively – scorn from their environments. While both had a lifelong commitment to communism and social equality in some form, they also stood firmly for joy as a necessary component of public life – joy as an organically political practice derived, as Jasiński and Pasolini saw it, from peasant cultures in Poland and the USSR, and Italy, respectively. Both were terrified of the monotony that accompanied the social transformations in the countries where they lived at the time these words were written (the USSR and Italy); they perceived it as a threat to the political work of preserving the cultural and historical memory of peasant cultures. If we transcend the established reading of the two authors as either “radicals” or aesthetically-inclined “snobs,” we can perceive the nuanced political stance of their joyful depictions of proletarian laughter. More importantly, we can also appreciate the political commentary that comes as part and parcel of their discussion of aesthetics. Witness the following comment from Pasolini about the youth of the 1970s, who, as he observes, no longer carried the autonomous joy of the *cascherino*, instead remaining neurotic and full of anxiety:

metà e più dei giovani che vivono nelle borgate romane, o insomma dentro il mondo sottoproletario e proletario romano, sono, dal punto di vista della fedina penale, onesti. Sono anche bravi ragazzi. Ma non sono più simpatici. Sono tristi, nevrotici, incerti, pieni d'una ansia piccolo borghese; si vergognano di essere operai; cercano di imitare i «figli di papà», i «farlocchi». Sì, oggi assistiamo alla rivincita e al trionfo dei «figli di papà». (2009: 678)

(half, and more than half, of the young people who live in the working-class quarters of Rome or, in short, within the Roman proletariat or sub-proletariat, are honest as far as criminal records go. They are clever boys too, but they are no longer sympathetic. They are sad, neurotic, full of petty bourgeois anxiety; they are ashamed of being workers; they try to imitate the well-off kids. [Yes, today we are aiding the revenge and the triumph of “daddy’s boys.”]) (1987: 103; trans. Stuart Hood with the translation of the last sentence amended by the author)

Just like Jasiński in his later critiques of the aesthetic rigidity of socialist realism, Pasolini here combines a political awareness and class consciousness with what might read as a nostalgic renunciation, but is in fact a celebration of the aesthetics of joy. By bringing together politics and joy, the two writers avoid the well-worn binary opposition between politics and aesthetics which, depending on the ideological angle of the critic, implies and positions as suspicious either the individualist,

“formalist,” attention to ornamentation or the collective, leftist commitment to ideological doctrine. In this article, I go beyond this kind of rigid interpretations of the work of Jasieński and Pasolini, focusing instead on their combination of a penchant for politics with a commitment to aesthetics: how do the writers engage memories of joy as a political tool? How do they discuss the lack or loss of joy without losing a political grounding?

I address these questions by examining the writers’ attempts to come to terms with the disappearance of the organic forms of expression of class identity, as seen in their two texts, *Bal manekinów* (*Mannequins’ Ball*) and *Ragazzi di vita* (*The Street Kids*), respectively. The sweeping transformation brought in by industrial modernity, either in capitalist post-World War II countries or the pre-War industrial transformation of the Soviet Union, effaced pre-modern forms of entertainment. As Jasieński and Pasolini grapple with how to remember the “healthy, proletarian laughter” and “spontaneous, anarchic [joy]” otherwise than through a nostalgic or tragic lens, they explore ideological failure as a way of breaking outside ideologically-informed conventions of writing. This legacy of their writing is important to understand, as it runs counter to prevailing narratives about politics, aesthetics, and ideological engagement in the arts.

As part of a broader tradition of reading left idealist writers and artists as disillusioned, scholars working on Pasolini and Jasieński have read them in a biographical way, either through their tragic deaths (Jasieński was executed as part of the Great Purge in 1938 and Pasolini was killed in 1975 outside Rome in a likely politically-inspired assassination) or through their supposed disillusionment and embrace of nihilism in their final years. For instance, many scholars working on Jasieński frame his work and life story within a narrative of disillusionment, emphasizing idealism and its failure as a means to engage with the complicated trajectory of this futurist-turned-socialist-realist writer.² Witness Stanisław Barańczak’s comment on Jasieński and his literary milieu:

Myślę, że zjawisko futuryzmu okazuje się naprawdę interesujące dopiero wtedy, gdy próbujemy odpowiedzieć, dlaczego futuryści przegrali. Dlaczego przegrali tak dotkliwie. I gdy widzimy w ich przegranej prefigurację straconych złudzeń całej naszej epoki. Biografia dosłownie każdego z polskich futurystów stoi właśnie pod znakiem złudzenia, w które z całą szczerością się wierzy i które w pewnym momencie kończy się dotkliwym rozczarowaniem lub tragiczną porażką. Z początku są to złudzenia właśnie futurystyczne: niezmacona wiara w przyszłość, w radykalną nowość rozwiązań, jakie – natychmiast, już jutro – przyniesie historia, postęp, technika, w możliwość uwolnienia się za jednym

² For examples of this narrative, see Michnik (1986), Barańczak (1979), Orliński (2000), Jaworski (2009).

zamachem od wszelkich zobowiązań, jakie niesie z sobą tradycja, kultura, zbiorowe doświadczenie ludzkości. (1979: 73)

(I think that the phenomenon of futurism becomes truly interesting only when we try to answer why the futurists lost, and why they lost so badly. And when we see in their loss a foreshadowing of the lost illusions of our entire epoch. The biography of literally every Polish futurist has been marked by this illusion, which they believed in wholeheartedly and which at some point led to a severe disillusionment or a tragic failure. Initially, it is precisely a futurist illusion: an unquestioning faith in the future, in the radical novelty of new solutions which will be brought (soon, tomorrow) by history, progress, and technology, a faith in the possibility of a sudden liberation from all commitments of tradition, culture, and the collective experience of humanity.)

Futurism becomes “truly interesting” when it is linked to its failure: this claim by Barańczak already at the outset suggests that the movement’s idealism is mostly valuable as a lesson – a lesson in the futility of idealism perhaps? If the failure of futurists is the “foreshadowing of the lost illusions of our entire epoch,” it is no less than a failure of the future, understood as a political aspiration and engagement in a traditional progressive framework. Writing in the 1970s, Barańczak constructed a narrative that continues to dominate the discussion on futurism and Jasiński to this day: a young, idealist writer, seeking “liberation from all commitments,” is burned by a reality that the non-utopian, older critic had known all along.

In addition to this inability to see through such political interpretation of Jasiński’s work, scholarly discussions of the writer often rely on his participation in the Polish futurism as an interpretive key to his work, despite his rejection of the movement in 1923. And yet, Jasiński’s post-1923 oeuvre has been seen by Polish critics as “burdened by a futurist awareness” and steeped in expressionist aesthetics (Balcerzan 1972: LV). This interpretation even influenced the TV Theater production of *Bal manekinów*, staged originally in 1978 at the Ateneum Theater in Warsaw, which used Jasiński’s futurist poetry in the play, interspersed with the original script (*Bal manekinów* 1978). I see this interpretation as an inability to transcend the futurist legacy of Jasiński and to read his writings of the 1930s and their political nuance in their own right. Stuck between the suspicion of his contemporaries and equally dismissive (though far less lethal) political accusations of later critics, Jasiński remains misunderstood by both groups.³

³ There are examples of scholarship and public writing addressing Jasiński’s work in a more nuanced way and thus breaking away from the narrative of disillusionment. See, for instance Volynska (1994) or Szybowicz (2009).

Jasieński's complicated trajectory and life story invites these kinds of misunderstandings to a certain degree. He was born in what is today central Poland to an assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie. Best known as Poland's foremost futurist poet, he disavowed the legacy of futurism early on and left Poland in 1925 to work as a foreign correspondent for Polish newspapers in Paris. There, he worked on a long-form poem, play, and several other works, including his best-known grotesque apocalyptic novel, *Pałę Paryż (I Burn Paris)*. Following the publication of the latter, which included scenes of a communist revolution taking over Paris, he was expelled from France and left for the Soviet Union in 1929. In the nine years between his arrival and his execution as part of the Great Purge, Jasieński devoted himself to political and editorial work and also published several texts, including *Bal manekinów*. His attachment to grotesque aesthetics soon brought criticism on Jasieński, accused of being an apolitical formalist. In response, instead of recanting his views, he doubled down on calls to combine imagination and realism in literature. His propositions were not met with enthusiasm, however: as the Great Purge turned on more and more devoted communists in the Soviet Union, Jasieński was finally accused of espionage and Polish nationalism, arrested, and executed in 1938.

Given his unorthodox aesthetic and political self-positioning, it is no coincidence that the life of Pier Paolo Pasolini, the other writer discussed in this article has also been often seen through the limiting lens of tragedy. Born in 1922 in Bologna, Pasolini spent his early years in northern Italy as a poet, committed to the exploration of local languages. In the 1950s, he moved to Rome, where he became fascinated with the world of the Roman *borgate* (suburbs) and turned to fiction and eventually film as his preferred medium. He was murdered in 1975 on the beaches of Ostia in what to this day remains a mysterious case. His late writings, decrying the transformation of the Italian society, which he described as, among other terms, "malattia borghese" (bourgeois disease) or "mutazione antropologica" (anthropological mutation) were published originally in various Italian daily newspapers and later collected in *Scritti corsari* in 1975, shaping the image of Pasolini as a disillusioned, hopeless, or even nihilist writer. Stefania Parigi, for instance, sees his late work as produced despite "the self-destruction of Pasolini's nihilist gestures towards the end of his life," reading his work through the lens of tragedy (2019: 111).

Though much better known globally than Jasieński, Pasolini shares a similar fate when it comes to the reception of his works and life story. Scholars too often ignore the nuance of Pasolini's political commitments and leave little room for an appreciation of joy as a political practice in his work. And yet, still in his university years, Pasolini had a strong sense of personal progress and hope – in a letter to his friends with whom he ran the magazine "Eredi", he wrote: "pensate in due anni (o anche uno) quale sviluppo possono avere delle culture adolescenti come le nostre!" (1976: 11) ("think what progress can adolescent cultures like our make in

two years (or even one!)"). While his belief in progress (especially in his criticism of post-war development of Italy) waned over time, he maintained a belief in change as a possibility, however slim it might be. Writing in 1974, a year before his death and at a time when his public writing on the destruction of non-bourgeois Italian cultures came out weekly in the press, Pasolini emphasized the role of optimism in his thought:

Una visione apocalittica, certamente, la mia. Ma se accanto ad essa e all'angoscia che la produce, non vi fosse in me anche un elemento di ottimismo, il pensiero cioè che esiste la possibilità di lottare contro tutto questo, semplicemente non sarei qui, tra voi, a parlare. (2009: 516–517)

(It's certainly apocalyptic, this vision of mine. But if there wasn't also an element of optimism, in addition to the anguish that drives this vision, if there wasn't the thought that there is the possibility of fighting against it all, I simply would not come here, to you, to talk.)

The vision and optimism identified by Pasolini as drivers of his political engagement were closely related to the idea of joy as an organic, pre-verbal phenomenon. Describing the reaction of Ninetto Davoli, a Calabria-born actor who starred in many of his films, to first seeing snow, Pasolini depicts a seventeen-year-old boy who "si abbandona a una gioia priva di ogni pudore" ("abandons himself to a completely shameless joy"), dances ecstatically, and issues "un grido di gioia orgiastico-infantile [...] un grido che non ha un corrispettivo grafico" (1972: 73) ("an orgiastic-infantile shout of joy [...] a shout that does not have a written equivalent").

Seen from this point of view, Pasolini's depiction of the life of Roman street kids in *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) can be seen as another element of the celebration of joy in his work. The novel tells the story of a group of petty criminal youth traveling around Rome *and* depicts several inter-class encounters between the bourgeois and the sub-proletarian protagonists. In one episode, as the teenage boys roam the city center, they poke fun at and insult passersby for seemingly no reason:

« Quanto me piace de divertimme ! » diceva il Caciotta, sortendo tutto allegrotto dal cinema, quattro ore dopo, chè s'erano visti il film due volte. S'accomodò sul marciapiede di via Due Macelli, intuzzava apposta contro i passanti.

« A brutta ! » gridava a qualche signora che vedendoselo venire adosso lo guardava facendo l'urtosa. Se poi quella, per caso, si rivoltava un'altra volta, addio : in bilico in pizza al marciapiede, con la mano sull'angolo sinistro della bocca, quelli strillavano ancora più forte:

« A brutta, a racchiona, a sviolinata ! » (1963: 71)

“Man, I love to have fun!” said Caciotta, coming gleefully out of the theater, four hours later, because they’d seen the film twice. He settled the sunglasses on his nose, and, flopping around as he walked along the sidewalk of Via Due Macelli, purposely bumped into the passersby.

“Hey, ugly!” he’d call to a woman who, seeing him come toward her, gave him a look of annoyance. If she then happened to turn around again it was all over: balancing on the edge of the sidewalk, their hands on the left corner of their mouths, the two of them shouted even louder: “Hey ugly, hey dogface, hey slut!” (2016: 63–64, trans. Ann Goldstein)

The setting of this exchange helps illuminate the dynamics at play: via Due Macelli in Rome, located between Villa Borghese and Fontana di Trevi, is home to a number of bistros and a theater. Ricetto and Cacciotta come here to “have fun” and harass the respected, mostly bourgeois clientele of the local businesses. The fun they aim to have consists in violating the social conventions of the place and playing the role of the underclass (*il sottoproletariato*, literally translatable as ‘subproletariat’), as expected by the bourgeois passersby. The boys engage in “fun” while maintaining a clear awareness of the class distinction between them and the passersby, an awareness whose disappearance Pasolini would mourn in his writings in the 1970s. The very language used in the description accentuates the class distinction, as if siding with the protagonists in its focalization. And so, the insulted woman turns around “annoyed,” a term rendered in the original Italian by “facendo urtosa,” a term from the “gergo della malavita o della plebe romana” (‘the jargon of criminals or plebeians in Rome’), as Pasolini explains in the glossary appendix at the end of the book (Pasolini 1963: 283). By using jargon and then explaining it in the glossary, the text at once offers the description through the language of the Roman underclass and reminds the book’s middle and upper-class readers about the distance they find themselves at.

The celebration of this inaccessible and unrestrained joy of Ricetto and his friends is in stark contrast to the ending of the novel, where Pasolini’s hopeless approach to the transformation of Italian society takes over. In a final scene, Ricetto, now 20, swims across the Aniene river, followed by a young boy, Genesio, who struggles to cross the river and drowns. Ricetto sees Genesio carried downstream and does nothing, deciding to get away from the scene instead:

Il Ricetto, con le mani che gli tremavano, s’infilò in fretta i calzoncini, che teneva sotto il braccio, senza più guardare verso la finestrella della fabbrica, e stette ancora un po’ lì fermo, senza sapere che fare. Si sentivano da sotto il ponte Borgo Antico e Mariuccio che urlavano e piangevano, Mariuccio sempre stringendosi contro il petto la canottiera e i calzoncini di Genesio; e già cominciavano a salire aiutandosi con le mani su per la scarpata.

«Tajamo, è mejo», disse tra sé il Riccetto che quasi piangeva anche lui, incamminandosi in fretta lungo il sentiero, verso la Tiburtina; andava quasi di corsa, per arrivare sul ponte prima dei due ragazzini. «Io je vojo bene ar Riccetto, sa!», pensava. S'arrampicò scivolando, e aggrappandosi ai monconi dei cespugli su per lo scoscendimento coperto di polvere e di sterpi bruciati, fu in cima, e senza guardarsi indietro, imboccò il ponte. (1963: 281)

(Riccetto, his hands trembling, quickly put on his pants, which he was holding under his arm, without another glance at the factory window, and stood there a moment, not knowing what to do. He heard from below the bridge Borgo Antico and Mariuccio screaming and crying, Mariuccio still hugging to his chest Genesio's shirt and pants; and already they were starting to clamber up the slope with their hands.

"Let's split, it's better," Riccetto said to himself, almost crying, walking in a hurry along the path, toward Via Tiburtina; in fact he was almost running, to get to the bridge before the two boys. "Hey, I'm for Riccetto!" he thought. Slipping and sliding he scrambled up the steep dusty slope scattered with burned brush, and, grabbing hold of the stumps of bushes, he got to the top; without looking around he turned onto the bridge.) (2016: 238)

Riccetto's refusal to intervene in the drowning of Genesio is not just a matter of a bad trait of character. Carried away by the *malattia borghese*, he decides that what is best is what is best for him: "io je vojo bbene ar Riccetto," he reminds himself. The scene, echoing the saving of a drowning swallow by Riccetto in the opening scenes of the novel, reflects the protagonist's transformation over the course of the novel into a *persona seria*, someone assimilated to the national bourgeois culture and devoid of (sub)proletarian joy.

The preoccupation with the lost memories of folk cultures also marks the work of Bruno Jasioński, who explored Polish peasants' narratives around serfdom in his long-form poem *Słowo o Jakubie Szeli*, detailing the bloody 1846 anti-serfdom peasant revolt. In the last stage of his life, Jasioński moved to the preservation of the organic energies of folk and proletarian cultures, despite their incompatibility with the doctrine of socialist realism, starting his literary career with a bold intervention in Soviet theater. Importantly, at the time of his arrival in the USSR, Jasioński was no stranger to theater as such: after all, during his Paris years, he created a Polish workers' theater, which staged several productions. He also transformed his *Słowo o Jakubie Szeli* into a play (*Rzecz gromadzka*), giving more space to songs inspired by the Polish folk tradition. Importantly, Jasioński appreciated theater not only on aesthetic grounds – he also was keenly aware of the medium's ability to communicate ideas to a large audience. As he recalled a couple years later, a lecture would

attract twenty to thirty people and a rally would bring fifty to a hundred. The workers' theater productions brought three to four, and up to six hundred spectators (Jasieński 1929: 33–43).

In a way, Jasieński's comment, cited at the top of this article, about the reader's opportunity to find out whether *Bal manekinów* was indeed funny points to his awareness about the controversial status of the play. After all, would not a play's success be judged primarily by its audiences? Jasieński's words turned out to be prophetic, however: the only way to reach his proletarian audience was through the published edition in 1931, with Anatolii Lunacharsky's introduction. The play was not to be staged in the Soviet Union until long after the writer's death and only following his rehabilitation by the courts: its premiere in the USSR took place in Chelyabinsk in 1976 and in Poland in 1957 (Gerould 2000: xv).

Jasieński remained undeterred in his pursuit of the literary value of proletarian joy. Speaking at the inaugural congress of the All-Union Writers Congress, he criticized their simplistic understanding of Engels's formula for literature (portraying "typical characters in typical circumstances" (1888)), poking fun at it by imagining a proletarian reader's response:

наш рабочий, который прочел три-четыре романа о новостройках и встречал в них неизменно комбинации одних и тех же типичных обстоятельств, беря в руки пятую книгу, нередко говорит: «Опять о новостройке Это, я уже читал». (Luppol 1990: 277)

(Our worker, who has read three or four novels about new construction projects and always encountered them in combination with the same typical circumstances, will say, picking up the fifth book: "About new buildings again. I have already read that.")

Instead of repetition and monotony, Jasieński argued, proletarian readers needed more joyful depictions of the world, combining revolutionary politics with fantastical aesthetics: "I raise my voice as in a toast: to bold invention, raised on the material of living reality, but not afraid to step over into tomorrow, full of the unexpected" (Kolesnikoff 1983: 117).

It is on such a foundation of bold invention and imagined proletarian joy that Jasieński constructs his play. At the same time, however, the play is clearly written with a political effect in mind, echoing Jasieński's observations about the political power of theater, cited earlier in the article. *Bal manekinów* starts at an annual ball organized by headless mannequins from the Parisian *haute couture* industry. In the first act of the play, headless mannequins from all over Paris assemble for their annual clandestine ball, which is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Paul

Ribandel, a social-democratic member of parliament, who enters the ball by mistake. The mannequins, panicked by the surprise visit, stage an impromptu tribunal hearing and sentence Ribandel to death by beheading with a giant pair of dress-maker's shears. In a grotesque turn of events, the disjointed head and body continue to live. The mannequins draw lots and the winner takes the head, which he then affixes to his shoulders. Having thus come to resemble a human, he decides to continue on Ribandel's itinerary and proceeds to a ball hosted by Monsieur Arnaux, an automobile industrialist. Over the next act, two rival industrialists try to manipulate and bribe the mannequin, whom they believe to be Ribandel, to either prevent or instigate a strike in Arnaux's factories. The mannequin-Ribandel gladly takes money from both and donates it to finance the organization of a general strike instead. This leads to a revolution, the city erupts in chaos. By the time the now-headless, real Ribandel makes it to the ball, the mannequin impersonating him has had enough of the drama of bourgeois life.

In his depiction of the characters, Jasiński draws a clear parallel between the fate of mannequins and workers. Mannequins are assumed to have a close affinity to the proletariat. They share the experience of exploitation of their labor and exhaustion of their physical energy through labor. They also present a clear awareness of shared enemies: as workers work nights to fulfill orders, the mannequins are also deprived of downtime, "na lata całe przykuci do podłogi" (Jasiński 1966: 125) ("nailed to the floor [...] for years on end" (Jasiński 2000: 8, trans. Daniel Gerould)). When reformist labor union representatives come to him for instructions, expecting to be asked to cross the picket lines and call off the strike, mannequin-Ribandel instead doubles down on the Communists' demands, saying the workers deserve more money to feed their families.

The comparison between workers and mannequins is not just a revolutionary gesture enacted in the play to fit the ideological expectations in the USSR. After all, Jasiński must have been aware that the quasi-posthuman gesture of equating workers and mannequins would inevitably draw criticism from doctrinaire figures in the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers.⁴ Rather, it was likely a gesture directed at the play's implied audience, capable of the "healthy proletarian laughter" Jasiński envisaged. The mannequins' complaint about exploitative working conditions is followed up by the call: "nie zatrzuwajmy sobie upojeń nocy myślą o przyszłych cierpieniach [...] trzeba korzystać z chwili" (Jasiński 1966: 125) ("let's not poison tonight's happiness with thoughts of future suffering [...] seize the oppor-

4 While the two groups are equated on a dramatic level, mannequins in the play even suggest that humans are but poorly made copies: "Przecież to tylko nasze nędzne kopie..." (Jasiński 1966: 129) ("They are all only worthless copies made in our image" (Jasiński 2000: 11)).

tunity” (Jasieński 2000: 8–9)). The mannequins combine a clear political vision of exploitation with an imperative to practice joy.

This coupling of proletarian laughter with mannequin joy reflects the two levels at which memories of joy operate in the play: first, diegetically, the critiques of the bourgeoisie, combined with a love for ballroom dancing and its aesthetics among the mannequins serve to model joy as a form of political praxis. Secondly, the comic elements of the play, always in the context of the same political critique, but much too frivolous for its time, given the use of the grotesque, are used to let the audience experience joy as a political emotion. The farce-like references to having “a head on [one’s] shoulders” (Jasieński 2000: 26) accentuate this link between laughter and political action. The grotesque conceit of the play (a mannequin putting on a severed head to pass as a human) links beheading – one of the most clear visual metaphors of a revolution – with a carnivalesque practice of putting on masks to manipulate social performance through play. One of the mannequin characters even goes as far as to suggest that the transgressive role-reversal allowed by the mannequins’ ball should not be restricted to just the carnival: “Dlaczego musimy czekać aż do karnawafu? Czy nie moglibyśmy się tu zbierać co noc?” (Jasieński 1966: 124) (“Why must we wait for carnival? Why shouldn’t we get together every night?” (Jasieński 2000: 7)). Read metadrammatically, this statement, rejecting the rigor of sanctioning joy by limiting it only to the carnival can be seen as a critique of the serious and hierarchical nature of the literary establishment in the USSR in the early 1930s. To have carnival every day means, on the one hand, to enact a revolution every day. On the other, it is also to embrace joy and play on a daily basis, a highly suspicious practice from the point of view of the ideologues of socialist realism.

And yet, as with Pasolini, Jasieński does not abandon political commitment to revolutionary practice. At the end of the play, when mannequin-Ribandel decides to quit his roleplay as a human, he makes his disgust for the serious affairs of humans be known:

Niech pan bierze. Niech pan prędszej bierze! Ja już mam tego dosyć! I na co się, doprawdy połasiłem? Kiedy wygrałem głowę, wydało mi się, że znalazłem skarb. A niech was licho z waszymi głowami! [...] Czyż jednak zdoła się je obciąć wam wszystkim? Nie starczy nożyc. Zresztą, to nie nasza sprawa. Przyjdą tacy, którzy to zrobią lepiej od nas. [...] To już długo nie potrwa. (1966: 208–209)

(Take it. Take it quickly! I’ve had enough of it! I was tempted for nothing! When I won the head, I was happy. I thought I’d found a treasure. To hell with your head! [...] But what’s the use? Can we cut off all your heads? There aren’t enough scissors. And it’s really not our business. Others are coming who can do a better job than we could. [...] You won’t have to wait long! (2000: 68))

The mannequin's disinterest in exercising revolutionary violence is telling. On the one hand, his final comment as he leaves the stage marks Jasieński's political commitment: the worker revolutionaries will presumably be better suited for the task, he seems to argue. The personal abdication of the impostor is thus not a suggestion of political withdrawal as a solution to the revolutionary problem. At the same time, however, the mannequin's unwillingness to wait and witness the revolution (whether it succeeds or not) is a personal reorientation from the future to the present moment, from the serious affairs of humans to the joyful world of the mannequins. Ribandel "won't have to wait long," the mannequin says, but he is not willing to stay there and wait for it. In that sense, as if foreseeing the failure of his own project, Jasieński relegates proletarian joy to the atemporal world of mannequins.

Both Jasieński and Pasolini imagine worlds which were no longer possible at the time of the publication of their books. For Pasolini, the depiction of the delinquent boys of the *borgate* is a snapshot of the pocket of liberty that was soon to be effaced by the various process set in motion by modernity. In the case of Jasieński, the impossibility of *Bal manekinów* lies not only in its grotesque nature. It is also, and perhaps more importantly so, an impossible play because of its combination of communist politics with an embrace of aesthetics of joy. The mannequins, clearly identifying with the working class in the play, live to lose themselves in the pleasures of performance, from dance to fashion, opting for joy as a political praxis. The two texts thus conclude with a mournful, hopeless ending. Ricetto, the quintessential embodiment of the kind of organic joy that Pasolini mourned in the 1970s, becomes subsumed by the bourgeois disease. The mannequin-Ribandel, eager to practice joy elsewhere, abstains from revolution in a quasi-posthumanist rejection of all that is human.

The failure of the projects of Jasieński and Pasolini is then at the same time a celebration of their short-lasting political potential: while the worlds they depict have no clear future or moral redemption, they present the moment of failure as a fundamentally political gesture of registering dissent and committing to change – even if that change can never arrive. The lessons of joy should not be overstated by those looking for a strategy – that is, those looking for action. They are, however, a good reminder of the value of keeping our political commitments in the face of an impossible future.

This transnational debate about nostalgia, memory, and disappearance is not only relevant to the Soviet Union of the 1930s and post-WWII Italy, however. The narrative mode of tragedy has been applied all too often in discussions of the climate catastrophe world, for instance, in ways that Jennifer Wenzel argues are ultimately misleading:

Many of the words commonly used to describe the environment as problem—not only tragedy, but also crisis and catastrophe—are borrowed from

the domain of the literary. As terms for dramatic genres (tragedy) or pivotal moments within the arc of a plot (crisis and catastrophe), they imply particular narrative templates and assume particular modes of causation and relationships between character and setting. These literary implications and assumptions are often of little help, however, in making sense of the environmental problem at hand: The plot logics they entail are not necessarily congruent with the forces (human and nonhuman) at work in the phenomena they are enlisted to describe. “Catastrophe” and “tragedy” are rarely invoked in their technical literary sense; instead, they colloquially name a situation that is bad, and extremely so, often for humans who had little role in causing the problem. (2019: 15)

Wenzel clearly points to the danger coming from the simplifying use of the literary mode of tragedy to discuss the end of the world. Analyzing joy then becomes a way of practicing narratives which offer motivation for political commitment without relying on a stable vision of a progressive future. The hopeless framework adopted by Pasolini and Jasieński offers a celebration of joy as a political practice of the present. By imagining (sub)proletarian laughter and also acknowledging the limits of its political efficacy in the long run, the two writers display a clear awareness of the disappearance of that phenomenon – and yet, they insist that it should not prevent one from politically-informed manifestations of joy. By resisting a nihilist reading of their work through the literary category of “tragedy,” we are able to appreciate the political dimension of their vision of joy more clearly.

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Abstrakt

Wspomnienie radości w świecie bez przyszłości Zaangażowanie estetyczne i polityczne u Jasieńskiego i Pasoliniego

Dyskusje na temat kulturowego zanikania są często prowadzone w kategoriach nostalgii i tragedii. Bruno Jasieński w *Balu manekinów* i Pier Paolo Pasolini w *Ragazzi di vita* proponują alternatywną formę pamiętania o zniknięciu poprzez wspomnienia radości, rozumianej jako praktyka wyraźnie polityczna. Doskonale świadomi niemożności utrzymania tego, co celebrowali (wolności od jednolitości kulturowej, w kulturach lokalnych i eksperymentach estetycznych), obaj pisarze zachowali poczucie zaangażowania politycznego, oferując dobry, szerszy model myślenia o świecie bez przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: radość, socrealizm, estetyka proletariacka, kultury ludowe