

Falling upon Warsaw: the shadow of the Palace of Culture

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Shadowplay

In the shops of Warsaw art galleries drinking mugs and T-shirts are sold upon which a striking image is printed (Fig. 1). Aimed at tourists to the city, the products show a car in profile, pointing to the left, as if it is about to drive off. Resting awkwardly on top of the car is a large form, bulky and rectangular at one end, but tapering through stages to develop into a needle-like point that then projects over the bonnet of the vehicle below. To someone unfamiliar with Warsaw, the ungainly over-sized mass on top of the car looks like a kind of retro-styled rocket attachment, something that might have been knocked up from available materials in a local inventor's kitchen, pieced together and then wheeled out, strapped to the roof of the 'Mały Fiat'—a model manufactured in Poland by Fiat in the 1970s—on which it sits. But for anyone who has even the most passing acquaintance with the city, the shape is instantly recognisable as that of the Palace of Culture and Science (PKiN), the gargantuan structure that was gifted to Warsaw by Stalin and that has, ever since its opening in 1955, remained the contemporary city's most unrelenting and difficult physical inheritance. The joke here is that the Palace becomes, like the goods on which its image is printed, carried away as a tourist memento. At the same time, however, the image points towards, and in some respects trades upon, the difficulty of 'reducing' the Palace in this way.



Figure 1. Karolina Breguła, from *All I Can See is the Palace* (2005; by courtesy of Karolina Breguła).

On one hand, the purpose of this postmodern joke is to laugh away the Palace, to dissipate the malignity of its presence by turning its image into a souvenir. From this point of view, regime change has given the Palace its come-uppance and it has become just another commodity, unhitched from the ground and put into motion—that is to say, economic circulation—as an object of tourist consumption, as just another, albeit impressive, piece of Soviet kitsch. The effect of this transformation of the Palace into a souvenir is to turn it into something like the Eiffel Tower and thus, even as it pokes fun at the Palace, the image—through its

miniaturisation of the edifice—appears as an attempt to recode it as something more ‘civic’ and to suggest that it might take up a position in the sequence of venerable and touristically certified European monuments that include the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum and Big Ben. In this regard, the picturing of the Palace as a souvenir is the same kind of recuperative civilising gesture as was the addition of the Millennium Clock to its upper storey in an effort to transform this unrelenting figure of subjugation into a civic clock-tower.

And yet, on the other hand, if this is miniaturisation, it is—the image implies—a difficult and unsuccessful one. This is not an Eiffel Tower scaled for the mantelpiece. The car might helpfully be pointing downhill, but at the same time we feel that if it is going to move at all it will be with difficulty with this weighing down on top of it. If this is the Palace of Culture transposed into commodity-form it looks as if it is going to be, as retailers might say, ‘hard to shift’. The image thus pictures what the joke itself aims to do, while simultaneously foregrounding its own inefficacy—and, indeed, the inefficacy of all attempts—once and for all to drive away (*wywieźć*) the shadow of the Palace of Culture. If the joke aims at relieving the sinister portentousness of the Palace by ironising it, it directs a second, and this time more emphatic, laugh toward itself for imagining that this might be so easy, the difficulty being expressed in the mass of the colossal miniature that bears down upon the vehicle and renders it, we suspect, immobile.

It is not by chance that I use the phrase ‘drive away the shadow’ when commenting on this artwork, for we need to note that it is precisely

the silhouette, or shadow, of the Palace that the image targets, this being emphasised in the graphic difference between the undifferentiated black form and the white car upon which it rests. In the image the silhouette embodies the historical shadow that the Palace of Culture has cast upon Warsaw, a shadow that is inevitably encountered and that in reality seems so difficult to detach from an edifice that although characteristically described as ‘an alien body in the heart of the city’ is also Warsaw’s foremost identifier, its troublingly unavoidable and unavoidably troubling symbol.¹ As a recent brochure produced to promote the Palace in its new guise as a corporate venue—a document almost entirely devoid of any historical narration of the building (another shadow-detaching gesture)—ambiguously puts it: ‘Well-known for its controversial presence—now we can hardly imagine the contemporary image of Warsaw without the Palace.’ ‘Everyone knows this address’ it ominously concludes in large lettering.² To the question posed by the journalist Agata Passent, ‘Is the Palace a symbol of Warsaw, our Eiffel Tower?’, one of her respondents replied ‘To me it is, against all odds’, a qualified response completely in accord with the implications of the image we have been discussing.³

The author of the artwork of the shadow on the car is Karolina Breguła, a young Polish artist who produced it for a 2005 exhibition entitled *All I Can See is the Palace*. Describing her intentions she writes: ‘The palace has been among us for such a long time, and I would like us finally to accept it and stop accusing it for its inglorious roots ... I hope that my works present it in new brighter light.’⁴ But despite, or indeed precisely because of,

her willingness to embrace the presence of the Palace, her artwork comes to participate in a historical register of representations that have imagined ungrounding, unhinging or ripping it away from the soil of Warsaw in the face of its—in the ancient sense—properly colossal obdurateness (*kolossi* being characterised by their lithic immobility).⁵ These dreams have taken two principal forms. On one hand there is the total demolition of the Palace, as mooted in post-1989 urban proposals and imagined in films such as the comedy *Rozmowy kontrolowane* (1991) in which it collapses—is ‘flushed away’—when the protagonist pulls down upon a lavatory chain in the building. And on the other, the Palace is depicted as flying away, usually as a rocket (something of this motif inheres in Breguła’s image). A cartoon strip by Piotr Młodożeniec, for example, shows a man approaching the building’s silhouette and peeling it up at the corner, before launching it into space into which it recedes, leaving in its place the word ART, while Monika Sosnowska’s *Untitled*, although not realised, envisioned a large-scale model of the Palace (a ‘cultural meteorite’) crashing into the roof of the entrance to the 2009 Frieze art fair in London.⁶ Perhaps the historical consummation of this recurrent identification of the Palace with a rocket was the visit of Yuri Gagarin, during which the cosmonaut—the late apotheosis of the exemplary heroes of mobility (and in his case altitude) promoted by Stalinist ideology—stood on the high-level observation platform and asked ‘How far to the Earth is it from here?’⁷ Above him when he spoke glittered the sputnik-like globe that was mounted into the mast structure that rose from the top of

the skyscraper and to which a laudatory verse by Witold Degler was dedicated that declared it a crystal ball foretelling the fortune and future of Warsaw.⁸ In his introduction to *The Art of Forgetting*, Adrian Forty makes the astute suggestion that ‘forgetting has ... been *the* problem of the twentieth century’, before going on to examine a series of strategies and linked techniques of representation that seem to facilitate it.⁹ One of these he classifies as ‘separation’, which he exemplifies by late mediaeval and early renaissance ‘double-decker tombs’. Often termed ‘transi tombs’, these characteristically depict a recumbent figure, arranged on two levels. On the upper the deceased appears honorifically attired, while on the lower the body is depicted as withered and cadaverous. Forty argues that this split representation is a way of separating off what is to be remembered (above), from what can be cast aside and forgotten (below), and I suppose that all the representations that aim to redeem and purify the Palace by separating off and exorcising its shadow (its ‘bad memory’) would be depictions of a similarly strategic and selective forgetting.

However the complication that immediately arises is that such representations, in their depiction of splitting, monumentalise the act of separation itself, and so—inasmuch as they are to do with forgetting—constantly return to us the thing that is to be set aside in the very process of doing so. If the double structure of the transi tombs can be described as an amnesiac technology, then at the same time we would have to acknowledge that it is a structure whose effects weigh against the possibility of us forgetting that we have forgotten, given that what is to be dispensed with is in fact

constantly held in view, and often in a state of degradation that is fascinating. In the case of the Palace of Culture, the sheer accumulated volume of cultural representations dedicated to 'taming' it testifies to a desire for forgetfulness rather than to its achievement, each new assault on the shadow serving to reiterate the problem and make it visible once more.

Silhouette

Seen in a broader perspective, the assault on the shadow is an assault upon one of the key rhetorical devices that was used in the presentation of socialist realist architecture, of which the Palace of Culture is a late example, opening two years after the death of its patron, a fact which undoubtedly contributed to its sepulchral quality and identification with Stalin's shade. 'I was afraid of the Palace of Culture', a young theatre director says. 'As so many of us, I was ... threatened by it—Uncle Stalin's gift. The fear has remained somewhere under my skin.'¹⁰ The emphasis on the shadow is particularly evident in socialist realism's high-rise forms, such as the seven high buildings in Moscow realised immediately after World War II, which were frequently represented in terms of their silhouettes.¹¹ Warsaw's Palace of Culture stands in the immediate lineage of these and we find the same insistence reiterated in the Polish architect Józef Sigalin's account of the curious episode of the determination of the height of the Palace of Culture. According to this, the team of architects, led by the Soviet architect Lev Rudnev, watched as an aeroplane trailing a balloon flew in ascending circles above the site. At 120 m, Sigalin recalled, the 'Russian architects

(especially Rudnev) [declared] "Enough, this is good for Warsaw's silhouette!"'. But the Polish contingent, in a classic instance of ideological over-identification, in which fantasies of pre-eminence were bound to subjugation, insisted that the aircraft continued to rise ('we ... as Varsovians dreaming of the future greatness of the city, were getting drunk on height').¹²

Emerging out of the complex conditions of political clientship and reconstruction in post-Yalta Warsaw, the Palace of Culture was not the first building following the War to be proposed for the site upon which it would be built. An architectural competition for the high-rise development of the site, adjudicated in 1948, awarded prizes to entries that were radically modernist.¹³ Yet within two years—and in the context of the institutional restructuring attendant on Poland's 'six-year plan' (1950–1955) – a different future for the site was being projected, as indicated by the ziggurat-like vision for central Warsaw depicted in an official presentation album of 1950. In this a Central House of Culture rose from the site in anticipation of the gift that would be sealed with the agreement signed between the Soviet and Polish governments on 5th April, 1952. This was followed by a letter of gratitude from the Polish president Bolesław Bierut to Stalin, which noted that the construction would be a 'monument to the Stalin epoch' and was published in the *Cominform* weekly.¹⁴

The process of construction of the building was symbolically highly charged. Photographs contemporary with the works show an elevated public viewing gallery erected beside the vast construction site, from which Warsaw's citizens could gaze at

what was taking shape before them. Built with great rapidity using a model Soviet workforce encamped at Warsaw, the realisation of the structure was staged as a prodigious demonstration of Soviet technique, an objective achievement that seemed, at the same time, miraculous and beyond reality. This in turn underwrote reactions to the Palace as a 'magical thing', whether these were phobic or celebratory (such as, in the case of the latter, the 'fairy-tale Palace' anticipated in the poem 'Stone Flower' by the children's poet and author Jan Brzechwa).¹⁵

If places are shadowed by the schemes that are projected for them, then the initial manifestation of the shadow of the Palace might be seen as the destruction of a rare surviving area of pre-war tenement buildings and the displacement of their 3,500 inhabitants, required for the development of the site as demanded by the project.¹⁶ Two years after Stalin's death, the building—whose official name bound it as a memorial to the recently-departed leader, Pałac Kultury i Nauki Imienia Józefa Stalina (The Palace of Culture and Science named after Josef Stalin) – was opened on 22nd July, 1955, an event co-ordinated with the Fifth World Youth Festival, held in Warsaw. As well as a huge congress hall (complete with a mechanical system for elevating Party officials onto the podium), the complex incorporated a swimming pool and gymnasium, theatres, a cinema, a technical museum, a Palace of Youth and exhibition areas.

An Irish visitor to Warsaw in 1956 characterised the cityscape he found there in this way: 'Despite ten years of reconstruction there were vast areas of ruins everywhere and standing up amongst them, visible from every angle, was the fabulous

Palace of Culture and Science.'¹⁷ This vision of a sky-scraper rising from a field of ruins is powerfully conveyed in a photograph taken in the same year by Leonard Sempoliński, which shows it as an hallucinatory presence, its singular and pale—or, as was ideologically insisted, 'radiant'—form counterposed to the surrounding shattered urban fabric that it transcended (Fig. 2). Sempoliński's image, with its parallel tram tracks visually converging at the Palace, makes visible the vanished city, as registered in the ruins, together with the newly instituted vanishing point, the organising point to which everything would henceforth be referred. 'Warsaw has no centre', as one of Passent's respondents would note 50 years later, 'but all the distances are measured from the Palace. It's a convention.'¹⁸

The Palace of Soviets

The Palace was conceived in the few years between the Polish adoption of socialist realism and the withdrawal of official support for the style following the death and denunciation of Stalin, its patron and principal referent: one commentator has written that by 1953—although many socialist realist constructions were still underway or imminent—'socialist realism was a corpse, an embellished one perhaps, but a corpse nonetheless.'¹⁹ In one regard the Palace, which became known as 'Stalin's finger', pointed back very directly to the seven sky-scrapers realised in Moscow between 1948 and 1955. The chief architect of the Palace, Lev Rudnev, had led the design of the Moscow University building, the tallest building in Europe when it was constructed, and he was joined by two others—Alexander Khriakov and Vsevolod

Figure 2. Photograph by Leonard Sempoliński: Palace of Culture and Science, 1956 (Instytut Sztuki PAN; by courtesy of Jacek Sempoliński).



Nasonov—who had also worked on the university project.²⁰ But more than this, it also pointed, as did the Moscow buildings themselves, to the virtual centrepiece to which the latter were referred, the never-to-be-completed project for the Palace of Soviets, the immense edifice whose design has been described as ‘the prototype for all Stalinist architecture’.²¹

Staged in the early 1930s, the competition for the Palace of Soviets has been seen as the tipping point at which the cultural radicalism of the Soviet 1920s was submerged under the nascent and still vague

programme of what would become known as socialist realism. Initially applied to literature, it was defined in the 1934 Charter of the Writers’ Union as ‘the true and historically authentic depiction of life in its revolutionary development’ and was soon enshrined as the official Soviet aesthetic doctrine.²² In opposition to what it decried as the capitalist cosmopolitanism of the constructivist avant-garde, it demanded an expression that was national in form but socialist in content, an ideology whose tenets have been linked to the formulations of Stalin’s 1913 essay *Marxism and the National Question*,

and among whose effects would come to be numbered the 'Polish parapet' that graces the Palace of Culture in Warsaw.

Deeply didactic and syncretic, socialist realist architecture sought to reflect the communist mastery of history in its own absorption and mastery of historical architectural forms and materials. While some scholars have stressed processes of ideological ratification and selection (the 'left side of history'), Boris Groys has argued that it was rather the drive to absorb all contradictory positions within an enveloping unity—a unity that evaporated the possibility of any legitimate position outside itself—that endowed Stalinist aesthetics and this architecture with its totalitarian character. According to Groys, 'the critical strategies articulated under Stalinism ... were all formulated within a comprehensive discourse of dialectical and historical materialism in its Leninist-Stalinist interpretation', in which dynamic 'living' antagonism superseded the moribund and formal bourgeois logic of non-contradiction. 'The doctrine of the unity and struggle of opposites constitutes', he goes on, 'the underlying motif and entire inner mystery of Stalinist totalitarianism.'²³

Although the four-stage competition for the Palace of Soviets ran between 1931 and 1933, the idea for the project extended back to Sergei Kirov's proposal for a House of the USSR to be built in central Moscow, made at the first All-Union Congress of Soviets, and the subsequent Palace of Labour competition held the following year.²⁴ Launched in 1931, during the first Five Year Plan, the competition was administered by a specially formed body, the Palace Construction Council, chaired by Viacheslav

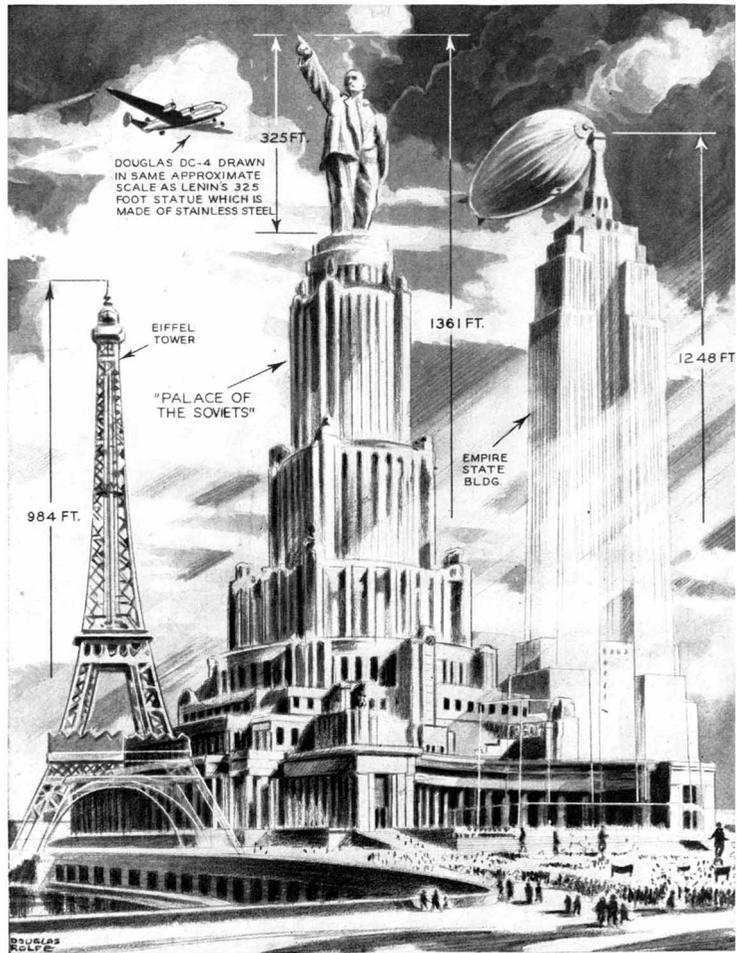
Molotov. Internationally publicised—with special commissions for entries extended to leading foreign architects such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Erich Mendelsohn—the open competition attracted 160 submissions, including 10 from American architects.²⁵ Although another site was initially envisioned, a month before the public announcement of the competition the Construction Council identified the vast Tsarist Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which was subsequently dynamited, as the location of the new structure.

Sona Stephan Hoisington has argued that the logic of the destruction, substitution and supercession of this building, whose outline had previously dominated Moscow, decisively orientated the project in a new monumental direction, as reflected in the conditions of the new brief issued to competitors in the closed competition.²⁶ The project that emerged as winner—or at least as representing a 'working basis' for further development—from the final, closed stage, was by the Italian-trained Boris Iofan, whose entry, by his own account, referred to the Monument to Victor Emmanuel II in Rome and, beyond that, to the Great Altar of Zeus at Pergamon.²⁷

A series of vertically-articulated drums, rising from an orthogonal, colonnaded base reached by monumental steps, the project was subsequently developed in collaboration with—or, Hoisington suggests, by—the Leningrad architects Shchuko and Gel'freikh, who had themselves been final-stage competitors. In the final approved project, the drums had become incrementally extended to form a kind of columnar pedestal surmounted by a titanic colossus of Lenin, arm extended and pointing

Figure 3. The Palace of Soviets as it appeared in the September, 1939 issue of the American magazine *Mechanix Illustrated* (collection of the Author).

WORLD'S TALLEST BUILDING



In this drawing, the artist has shown how the "Palace of the Soviets," now under construction in Moscow, will compare in height with the Empire State building, in New York City, at present the world's tallest structure, and with Europe's tallest, the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The Palace of the Soviets will be completed in 1942 and, including the stainless steel statue of Lenin on top, will be the world's tallest and most spacious building. The main hall will seat 25,000 and another hall will seat 6,000. The ceiling of the interior dome will be 300 feet high. The building will be serviced by 120 elevators, 60 escalators, and will contain halls, clubs, galleries, museums, and will house government archives.

upward/forward, whose inclusion was said to have been at the suggestion of Stalin himself.

In Vladimir Paperny's structural analysis of transformations in Soviet Architecture from the 1920s to the 1950s, he distinguishes between what he terms Culture One and Culture Two, with the Palace of Soviets standing as the exemplary—and because of this, 'impossible'—manifestation of the latter. Although Paperny suggests that an oscillation between these two cultural tendencies can be discerned throughout Russian history, his argument is emphatically focussed on the immediate post-revolutionary to the immediate post-war period. In Paperny's account, the transition to Culture Two—which might be read in the progress of the Palace of Soviets competition itself—involved an increased emphasis on, and valorisation of, the 'centre', which opposed the despised cosmopolitanism, 'foreignness' and horizontality of the constructivist avant-garde of Culture One.²⁸ To this increasing centralisation corresponded a new assertion of boundaries, emblematised by those characteristic heroes of socialist realist sculpture, border guards. While Culture One wanted to erase the past and establish itself as a new beginning, for Culture Two 'the present turned out not to be the first moment in history, but rather the last', which required an encompassing, incorporative ideology that demanded that the totality of history be absorbed and displayed: as a 1940 booklet declared of the Palace of Soviets 'All of the many centuries of the culture of human art will enter into this people's building.'²⁹

At the same time the orientation to the future became a kind of postponement, which took the

form of an ecstatic endless striving, this commuting the future into eternity and rendering progress in the present towards it equivalent to immobility. Against the horizontality of Culture One, Culture Two extolled verticalisation, the joyful ascent hymned in the popular song 'Ever Higher', made manifest in (Soviet, as opposed to capitalist) high-rise construction, and epitomised in the approved project for the Palace of Soviets as the 'highest building on earth' (Fig. 3).³⁰ At the same time, the delegates' resolution at the Seventeenth Party Congress that 'No project shall be fully accepted for construction' registered, Paperny notes, the inevitable gap that now opened between the ideal edifice—the perfect construction that was aimed for—and even the most accomplished of designs, which inevitably fell short.³¹ Thus, he suggests, the failure to realise the Palace of Soviets was a kind of structural necessity: 'The primary construction of the primary city should possess a level of perfection too high to be embodied in a real building. If ordinary Moscow buildings are built in Culture Two, then the primary building must remain an unrealized ideal, marking the transition to another level.'³²

According to Paperny, the pictographic key to the Palace of Soviets was made clear in an analogous construction composed of living human bodies supporting a statue of Lenin that was paraded in Red Square on 24th July, 1938 (a similar 'living edifice', the 'Pyramid of Peace', was performed at the Festival of Youth in Warsaw, which coincided with the opening of the Palace of Culture in 1955). If the architecture of the Palace of Soviets was the image of the masses (the vertical pilasters

that formed the 'fluting' of the columnar base) and their deity Lenin, then in the seven Moscow high buildings that were constructed after the War, ringing the empty site of the Palace of Soviets, although figuration was subdued, its afterimage remained through the presence of the buildings' spires, which apparently were insisted upon by Stalin.³³ The high buildings, as representatives and delegates of the Palace of Soviets, indexically 'pointed' to it, while the abstraction of figure into spire endowed the latter with metonymic implication. Furthermore, the sense of Paperny's formulation is that even though 'the figure of Lenin [was] symbolically ... represented with spires' in these surrogates of the Palace of Soviets, as apexes they—at the same time—pointed to and personified the ultimate apex of Culture Two's hierarchy, Stalin himself, whose presence, although merely the 'pupil' of the departed Lenin, still represented and maintained the link to the ideal, much as the secondary high buildings related to the 'invisible' perfection of the never-to-be-completed Palace of Soviets.³⁴

Figure/finger

Descriptions of the work of the Russian artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid have characterised it as 'perverted simulation' and 'post-Socialist Realism'.³⁵ In the early 1980s they painted a striking variation on the 'origin of painting' theme, entitled *The Origin of Socialist Realism* (Fig. 4). In the story, as recounted in his *Natural History*, Pliny tells of a maiden who inscribes the profile of a young man whom she loves on a wall by tracing the outline of his shadow, cast by a lamp. In Komar's and Mela-

mid's reworking of the scene, a left-handed muse of painting leans across the seated figure of her 'lover' Stalin, in order to record his profile on a pedestal base. In the painting Stalin's 'fatherly'/phallic pipe substitutes for the young man's sword, its implication reinforced by the art-historical/Magritean understanding of the pipe as a sign of something that is other than what it appears to be. Komar's and Melamid's image suggests that the presence of the leader—as it is transmitted through the agency of the shadow—is the foundational moment of socialist realism (hence the pedestal or base), but is also constantly reiterated in its various manifestations. As the art historian Victor Stoichita writes: 'They uncover the "primitive" side of the Socialist Realist programme and show that the person who was behind it is the man portrayed, and suggest that the programme only ever generated one "shadow": that of Stalin himself.'³⁶ When Robin Evans considered Schinkel's rendition of the same theme, he pointed out that the architect chose to depict it in a natural setting: that is, logically prior to architecture, which is dependent on the act of delineation that is inaugurated in the myth.³⁷ Komar's and Melamid's setting of the event in a socialist realist interior—which is itself a transposition from the quasi-natural (if not non-architectural) setting of their model, which is Eduard Daegé's *The Invention of Painting* (1832)—stresses the reiterative character of socialist realism. For not only is Stalin's shadow, as the painting insists, the origin of socialist realism, but it is also constantly re-inscribed within it, as the already-existing architectural setting indicates. And insofar as the left-handedness of the muse refers, as Stoichita



Figure 4. Komar and Melamid, *The Origin of Socialist Realism* (1982–3), oil on canvas, 72 x 48 inches. (Photograph, D. James Dee; by courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.)

suggests it may, to coercion, we might even say auto-inscribed, like a fingerprint.

Fingers, like pipes, are small things, but it is through reference to small things that the gargantuan is typically demonstrated. When A N Prokof'ev strove to illustrate the scale of the Palace of Soviets in his 1939 English-language booklet on the project, he certainly referred to other great structures, but more to the point was his commentary on the huge statue of Lenin, '... a colossus as high as a house of twenty-five storeys, the index finger of the outstretched hand measuring 20 feet ...'.³⁸ It seems not coincidental that it is the index finger that is referred to here, for it is this finger that indicates the joyous future, that points upwards and forwards, its vast size hinting at the extent of the vision to which we are directed by it. At the same time, the index finger with its print is also a characteristic authenticator of identity, a thing that points back to the identity of the leader even as it gestures forward to the vision he discerns.

In another work by Komar and Melamid, entitled *The Minotaur as a Participant at the Yalta Conference* (1984–85), we find a meditation on Stalin's finger, which well conveys the inter-relationship between these themes. A mixed-media work on a series of square panels, the composition is dominated by the figure of Stalin with his arm raised and index finger pointing upwards (capped with a red, phallic top), the gesture itself reciting and pointing towards that of Lenin in his deified and official form. Above this, and at large scale, the finger's print, its 'signature' and identifying mark, appears as the archaic and labyrinthine domain of the Minotaur.

If, following Paperny, we accept that the substitution of the (repeatable) spire for the singular colossus of Lenin in the post-war high buildings involved a kind of occultation of the figure, then it also made possible a new metonymic reading that allowed the post-war architecture to 'exceed', in a certain way, through its very secondariness, the original to which it referred. Strikingly, as we have already noted, the Palace of Culture in Warsaw became known as 'Stalin's finger', no doubt in part because of the similarity between the Polish words for palace and finger (*pałac/palec*). More generally, though, we might wonder if the strange sense of immanence that these socialist realist high buildings continue to convey is not in some way related to the complex indexical character of the finger, which as it points 'outward' toward some other object (the future, Lenin, Moscow, etc.) simultaneously points 'inward' through its metonymic embodiment of the identity, presence and rule of the leader. As David Crowley, writing on 'Stalin's finger' in Warsaw, observes: 'Rather than affectionately reduce the building to a lilliputian scale, this epithet seemed to suggest Stalin's oppressive and inescapable influence at the very heart of the cityscape.'³⁹

Something else that Stalin's finger points us to, albeit less directly, is the particular importance and rhetorical value of the model in socialist realist representation. Famously, a substantial model had been made of the Palace of Soviets, and a painting made that showed its exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, surrounded by Party leaders turned towards it. The picturing of the leader beside the model allowed a relationship to be

drawn between his body and the architecture, and an approximation between the two made. Exemplary in this regard is a painting by the Romanian artist Ștefan Szönyi (1952), which depicts an interior at the Kremlin.⁴⁰ To the left, on a table, is a model of one of the high buildings beside which, in the centre of the picture, Stalin stands. To the right is a large window through which he gazes toward the realised building that the model anticipates, rising already from the city outside. Of these three figures, the two of the model and its realisation are, on the picture plane, commensurable in size, the perspectival diminishment of the distant building bringing it into relation with the model on the table, such that the transition between the two is mediated by and through the presence of the leader's body.

Perhaps then, to think back to the image by Karolina Breguła with which we began, the difficulty of 'civilising' the Palace of Culture by miniaturising it, a difficulty we read that image as a symptom of, is because the miniature is already present and active 'on the side of the shadow' in the relationship between exemplary high-rise buildings and the socialist realist imaginary. It is there in the story of Rudnev, Sigalin and their associates estimating the height of the Palace of Culture from across the Warsaw cityscape, just as it is reflected in Agata Pasent's allusion to the Palace of Culture as an 'ugly toy'.⁴¹ And although the metonymic/metaphoric relationship with the body of the leader gives the coupling of the miniature and the gigantic a very specific value and charge in socialist realism, something of the effect is always available where structures stand free of the city fabric around and can

be viewed from a distance, to which millions of photographs of the Eiffel Tower held in tourists' hands attest.

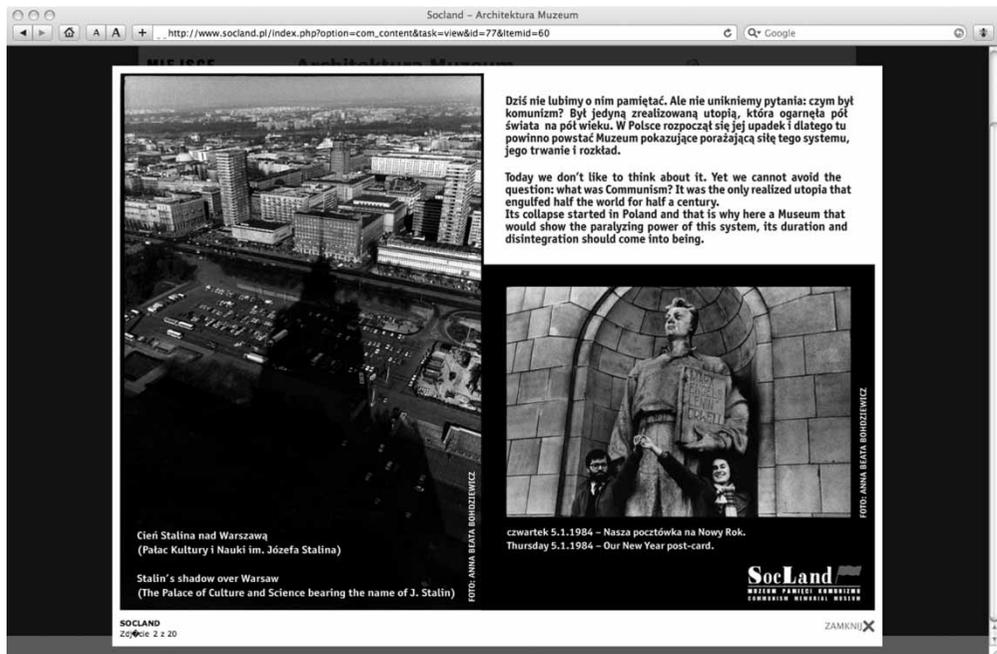
Executing the shadow

On the website of the Socland foundation—established by the film director Andrzej Wajda, the architect Czesław Bielecki and others—there is a grey photograph taken from the observation level at the top of the Palace of Culture, which shows its shadow falling over the parade ground (turned car park) below, and hence pointing East.⁴² It is in a way a familiar view, one that, for instance, fascinated the German photo-journalist Hans-Joachim Orth whose sequential images taken in the 1970s tracked the shadow as it moved over the square below.⁴³ On the Socland website, however, the full phobic implications of the socialist realist shadow are clear, and are driven home by the image's caption, which declares it to be 'Stalin's shadow over Warsaw' (Fig. 5). Those behind the Socland foundation are of an older generation, that of Solidarity, than Karolina Breguła's: their historical and cultural experience is different, their animus is raw and they want to come to terms with the Palace in a different way. The particular assault they make on the shadow is no joke and there is no attempt to laugh it away here.

Socland's proposal is that a Museum of Communism be established at the Palace of Culture, and their website illustrates an architectural project developed for this. Occupying what is described as 'the labyrinth of the existing foundations' in the Palace, it also extends out below the parade ground into the area covered by the

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the shadow of the
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Figure 5. 'Stalin's shadow over Warsaw' (www.socland.pl).



shadow on the photograph that we have just discussed. Notably the project's plan at street level is drawn without shadows, save for that of a headless figure who lies flat, the upper part of the torso and (again) raised arm passing above an area of glazing that gives light to a pit into which the head has fallen or been cast (Fig. 6). It is as if the shadow of the Palace has been gathered into the form of a figure; or, more specifically, that the shadow has become concretised into a totemic image of Stalin (the Minotaur and his fingerprint/labyrinth, to gesture back to Komar and Melamid), which is then 'executed'.

If, in their 'origin' painting Komar and Melmid depict the mythic beginnings of socialist realism, then Socland wants—through the architectural proposal it makes—to depict its end, which turns out to be a kind of reversal of the origin scene (in that the shadow of the building becomes the figure). What is more, it is one that illustrates again the kind of perverse complication we have come to expect of attempts to banish the shadow of the Palace, for we find ourselves here obliged, in order to perform the rite of execution/exorcism, to construct the huge statue of Stalin that was intended to stand in front of the Palace, but which was never realised.

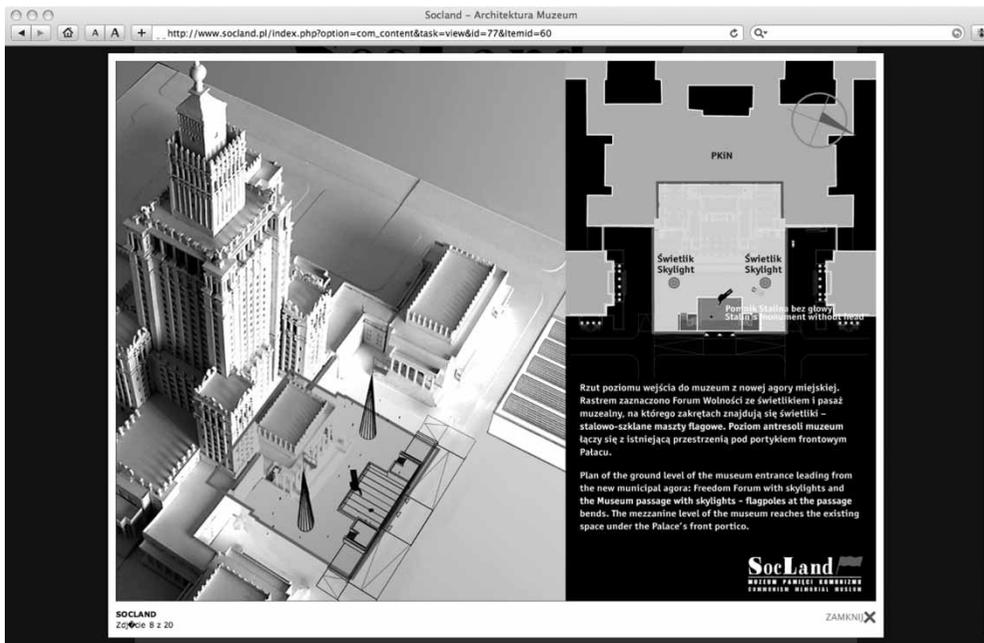


Figure 6. Ground level of museum with headless statue/shadow (www.socland.pl).

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3. Agata Passent, *Pałac wiecznie żywy (Long Live the Palace!)*, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
4. <http://www.karolinabregula.com/> (accessed 03.11.09).
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 14. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.
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