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RATIONALISM AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

RACJONALIZM A POSZUKIWANIE PRAWDY

Abstract

The paper constitutes part of a study on rationalist trends in contemporary architecture. The author identifies the dangers associated with the current lack of truth; the actual problems and consequences resulting from abandoning interest in what the truth in architecture is, from pursuing truth, from rejecting truth and from acknowledging that everything can be the truth. The author argues that this has a profound impact on autonomy and authenticity in the field of architecture and its relationship with reality. She then considers the attitude to the issue of truth in the rationalist trend, whose theoreticians and creators, searching for the essence of architecture, strive for the universal truth of the field. The author explores theories from the field of aesthetics and architecture that can contribute to the understanding of the subject.

Keywords: truth, post-truth, rationalism, reality, purposefulness

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest częścią badań dotyczących tendencji racjonalistycznych we współczesnej architekturze. Autorka wskazuje na zagrożenia związane z panującym współcześnie deficytem prawdy; na realne problemy i konsekwencje wynikające z rezygnacji z zainteresowania, czym jest prawda w architekturze, z dochodzenia do prawdy, z odrzucenia prawdy, lub uznania, że wszystko może być prawdą. Dowodzi, że ma to duży wpływ na autonomię i autentyczność w dziedzinie architektury i jej relacje z rzeczywistością. Przedmiotem rozważań jest następnie stosunek do zagadnienia prawdy w nurcie racjonalistycznym, którego teoretycy i twórcy, poszukując istoty architektury, dążą do prawdy uniwersalnej dziedziny. Autorka zgłębia teorie z zakresu estetyki i architektury, które mogą pomóc w zrozumieniu tematu.

Słowa kluczowe: prawda, post-prawda, racjonalizm, rzeczywistość, celowość

1. INTRODUCTION

Theories on the relation between art and truth have always existed. The notion of truth in art has undergone many changes and has served as an interface to many aesthetic problems. Starting with the search for truth consistent with the represented object (reproduction/imitation), through demanding objective truths from art, combining truth with beauty, truth as the result of sincerity, and ending with truth as compliance with the creator's intention. On the one hand, there are statements like the ones by Lord Shaftesbury¹ about truth as a sufficient condition for beauty: 'All beauty is truth',² G.W.F. Hegel on art that represents 'a moment of

¹ Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713).

² After: W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, PWN, Warszawa 1988, p. 359.

the absolute spirit, and being the highest historical expression of truth’,³ Martin Heidegger ‘art is the becoming and happening of truth’,⁴ and Pablo Picasso, on the other hand, according to which: ‘art is a lie that makes us realize truth’.⁵ The notion of truth lies between the positive and negative poles. It outlines the disputes between objectivity and subjectivity, universality and individuality, determinism and freedom, relativism, duration and change. Striving for truth in art also signals duality – the search for universal truths and/or the search for ‘one’s own’ truth of a work of art – artistic truth. Today it seems that truth has become too restrictive or even unnecessary for artists. Nevertheless, the answer to the question of whether the art of architecture should strive for truth still seems to remain unresolved. Architecture, which combines science and art, is in a special situation. It must unite scientific truth, discovered in the process of argumentation through evidence, experimentation and analysis, with free artistic truth. The contemporary deficit of truth in culture, the media and politics is of great importance in the context of architecture. The problems and consequences resulting from abandoning the interest in what the truth in architecture *per se* is, seeking the truth, from rejecting the truth, or from acknowledging that everything can be the truth, are valid especially today, in the times of post-truth. Such an approach has a major impact on autonomy and authenticity in the field of architecture and its relationship with reality. However, within the pluralism of contemporary trends, some strive for universal truth when seeking the essence of architecture. In rationalist and reductionist trends, the search for truth becomes an important criterion for creating architecture.

2. THE CRISIS OF TRUTH, THE CRISIS OF KNOWLEDGE

The concept of post-truth, which describes a significant phenomenon in the modern world, has made a glittering career in recent years. It represents an attempt to perceive the processes that shape our culture today and define ourselves, our behaviour, our thinking, our experience – as, in the end, it all derives from the culture in which we function. This phenomenon also affects the state of present-day architecture, its creation, reception and debate around it. The post-war era is an era in which categories of truth and falsehood are not valid or have lost their traditional meaning.

According to the authors of Oxford dictionaries (the term was announced as the word of the year 2016), ‘post-truth’ is an adjective ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.⁶ There are only relativism and personal beliefs in post-true times. There is a growing lack of trust in authorities and experts. It is difficult to trust creators, the media, politicians and even scientists. The paradox of our times is that we live in an era in which these ‘objective facts’ are readily available and yet information plays an ever-smaller role in our lives. Thus, we no longer hold the ‘naïve’ belief that truth should be sought at all, or that anything can be true. However, it is difficult to function with a belief in the significance of every truth. This is a source of anxiety and confusion. This leads to a situation where

³ After: M. Perniola, *Estetyka współczesna. Panorama ogólna*. Universitas, Kraków 2018, p. 68.

⁴ M. Heidegger, *Drogi lasu*, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 1997, p. 55.

⁵ After: R. Keyes, *Czas postprawdy. Nieszczerość i oszustwa w codziennym życiu*, PWN, Warszawa 2018, p. 199.

⁶ Ł. Pawłowski, *Przedmowa* [in:] *ibidem*, p. XIV.

manipulation of truth is considered a sign of intellectual dexterity and lying is considered the norm.

Zygmunt Bauman claimed that ‘modern history has introduced and modern practice continues to multiply divisions and differences, instead of becoming homogeneous or harmonious, the partial or local orders, in which modern practice has acquired exceptional skills, make up an increasingly pluralistic world’.⁷ Rejection of truth or acceptance of many truths has become a way of dealing with the ambiguity caused by differentiation, which can no longer be forced into a designed order. Another consequence, being a means of dealing with a complicated world, is the fragmentation of intellectual life that leads to a proliferation of specialities.

Ralph Keyes has been looking for an answer to the question of the origins of the post-modern truth phenomenon – from post-modern philosophy with its scepticism regarding the possibility of finding out the objective truth, through the flourishing of pop culture, to the emergence of new technologies on the media market, with the development of the Internet at the forefront.⁸ Postmodernism challenged the rationalistic approach in favour of the empirical one. The question was asked whether it is possible to build *a priori* theorem by considering phenomena abstractly and universally. The post-modern attitude to truth led to relativism, in which truth was deprived of much of its value. The idea of absolute truth was rejected by postmodernists as dogmatic and authoritarian. For the ardent supporters of postmodernism, there is no such thing as literal truth, but only that which society calls the truth. That is why they call the idea of truth a social construct that looks different in different societies, groups and individuals.⁹ The concept of objective truth has been deconstructed. How can one look for fixed and permanent values in times when truths are variable and subjective? Such a crisis of truth also has a great impact on knowledge and science. Human thought tends towards relativity and indefiniteness. Knowledge is replaced by opinions.

As Frank Furedi points out in his book ‘Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?’, the desire for knowledge, the pursuit of perfection and truth is presented as something bizarre and inappropriate today. The truth is not valued in itself. At the same time, the search for truth has inspired a generation of thinkers of the modern age.

Unfortunately, contemporary culture regards the truth as a subject worthy of fiction rather than of intellectual pursuit. It is frequently argued that there is no such thing as the truth. Instead of the truth, people are exhorted to accept different opinions as representing many truths. Michel Foucault’s claim that there is “no truly universal truth” has gained widespread influence in academic circles. Truth is rarely represented as an objective fact; it is frequently portrayed as the product of subjective insight, which competes with other equally valid perspectives.¹⁰

Relativism has resulted in the fact that truth exists only in the plural. In times of post-truth, the quest for absolute and universal truth has been negated. As the world has become too complicated, the possibility of cognition and comprehension has been called into question.

⁷ Z. Bauman, *Prawda nauki, prawda sztuki* [in:] Z. Bauman, *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*, Sic!, Warszawa 2000, p. 218.

⁸ Ł. Pawłowski, *op. cit.*, pp. XII–XIII.

⁹ R. Keyes, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

¹⁰ F. Furedi, *Gdzie się podzieli wszyscy intelektualiści*, PIW, Warszawa 2014, p. 10.

And yet architecture needs to be based on rational knowledge which will mediate between professional decisions and subjective opinions, rational reasoning which fosters and sometimes even defends creation. Theories have always been the basis of science as the one seeking the truth. The current crisis of theory follows the general disappearance of the relationship between knowledge and its intellectual basis. Today, it seems that intellectual (scientific, cultural) life is governed by the conviction that the value of culture and education depends on the extent to which they serve practical purposes. Science and art are not valued for their own sake, but their ‘practical’ usefulness for society.

3. ON THE NEED FOR TRUTH IN ARCHITECTURE

As Władysław Tatarkiewicz points out, in the 18th-century truth appeared in treatises on art already in a figurative sense because it was applied in non-mimetic arts. The philosopher quotes J.F. Blondel’s treatise on architecture (*Cours d’architecture civile*, 1771–1777), in which the author writes:

One says metaphorically, “this architecture is real” when one means the one which, in all its parts, retains its own style without any admixture of the other, which uses only the necessary ornaments, which avoids the inappropriate diversity, which gives priority to symmetry and regularity; in the end: the real architecture is the one which pleases the eyes because it corresponds with the idea one has for this type of building.¹¹

This notion of truth in art has nothing to do with the recreation of reality. However, it indicates other important interrelations. Those of truth with relevance and purpose. Such an understanding of truth is similar to the approach represented in the rationalist and reductionist trends in architecture.

Postmodernism challenged the fundamental principles of Enlightenment – reason, rationality, the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Many of these ideals became the subject of scepticism. Faith in the power of reason began to waver. When we begin to use the concept of truth in the plural, we are faced with a multitude of standpoints that are considered to be true – they lose credibility. They become just a polemical tool. This polyphony of truths results in the fragility of authorities. Appearances begin to mean more than the essence of things. Unlike Enlightenment thinkers who advocated a universalist perspective, the contemporary ones are rather inclined to favour particularism that safeguards the welfare of a narrow interest group.¹² Yet, the search for truth should be the essence of objective science and an indispensable part of architectural culture. It should defend architecture against forces that are irrelevant to it, restore it to itself and maintain its bonds with reality. It seems that today the criterion of reality has become completely irrelevant since the only criterion has become the usefulness for the disposer of the truth (e.g. the authority, investor, engineer, subcontractor, producer, economist... the creator, least frequently). And without truth, architecture loses its autonomy.

Nowadays, we do not have any brand new, global or visionary aesthetic, economic or social programme to which architecture could refer while the world constantly demands the

¹¹ W. Tatarkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

¹² F. Furedi, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

search for categories capable of meeting the challenge of ‘new times’. Defenceless in the face of the uncertainty of the ever-changing world, creators and users of architecture are looking for something permanent, rational, logical, something that provides a sense of security. A rationalist approach without vision, without looking for novelty and without looking back with nostalgia blends into the continuity of time and guarantees the reestablishment of a real link between this field and ‘reality’. It can help to conceptualize and analyse the contemporaneity and represent a return to the *Logos*. It reminds one that cognition is rational if it is properly (logically and empirically) justified. In a rationalist approach, truth and reality become one.

Many creators consider the pursuit of truth in art to be an impossible, unnecessary, or utopian activity. Others, like architects of the broadly understood rationalist trend, developed the art of seeking and theorising about truth and made it their vocation. One of them was Antonio Monestirolí, who argued for a return to the foundations of knowledge in architecture from a universal perspective in his theoretical and design activities. Using clear and comprehensible language, he addressed the key themes in the theory of architecture, such as the definition of architecture, structure, construction, decoration, style and type. The belief that fundamental ideas and concepts do not change, but merely undergo appropriate phases of transformation throughout history, the belief in the role of type, identity and representative features of the architectural form places Monestirolí among the creators and theoreticians inclined to rationalist thinking, seeking the universal truth of architecture.

4. RATIONALISM AND THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

The truth is the natural purpose of rational cognition. As Edmund Morawiec points out:

Not only does reason constitute a source of knowledge, but it also plays the role of the final instance in assessing the value of human cognition and is a factor organizing human cognition since the subject which cognizes as a reflexive one distinguishes what is constant from what is changeable and accidental in an object.¹³

The truth, including this aesthetic one, established in a rational way, known in a certain and perfect way, through clear and distinct ideas, provides authentic, universal cognition. According to Descartes, truth should be sought in human thought: ‘Truth must be discovered and not constructed’.¹⁴ He considered clarity and distinctiveness to be guarantees, criteria of truth. Kant also placed reason in the role of the tribunal: ‘it is only the principles of reason which can give to concordant phenomena the validity of laws’.¹⁵ The qualities of truth, reason, universalism and objectivity are mutually dependent. Any deviation from the purpose of knowing the truth leads to irrationalism, absurdity.

Architects of rationalist trends, especially through ‘types’, seek ‘universal architectural truths’. They see the sources for architectural creation within the repertoire of architectural forms, ‘types’ and ways of their relations established in the past. They look for the essence

¹³ E. Morawiec, *Wybrane filozoficzne koncepcje rozumu ludzkiego i racjonalność*, Wydawnictwo Liberi Libri 2014, p. 170.

¹⁴ G. Rodis-Lewis, *Kartezjusz i racjonalizm*, Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2000, p. 12.

¹⁵ I. Kant, *Krytyka czystego rozumu*, after: Z. Bauman, *op. cit.*, pp. 202–203.

of architecture hidden in invariable, universal, recognizable forms, based on fixed and clear principles. They refer to the issue of typologies and types: types of dwelling, types of (public and private) spaces, types of buildings, types of structures. The reference to types which result from a close correlation between the purpose and the form, allows one to reveal the identity of the structure and place, and facilitates their readability and identification for the recipients. Typology is associated with an order, restraint, emphasis on spatial and temporal continuity. It is to be the result of a quest for the essence of the building under construction and to limit the infinite choices among the potentially many shapes that exist. This thinking is close to the definition by Aldo Rossi, according to whom 'type is the very idea of architecture, that which is closest to its essence'.¹⁶ The determination of the type of building appears to be the first action in which the general nature of the building is established. With the type of cause for the chosen form, the composition becomes readable. Types constitute patterns of intentions. The choice of language is only the following stage.

5. TRUTH AND PURPOSEFULNESS

An action is rational when it is motivated by a well-recognized objective and reason makes the right choice among measures leading to it. What is rational has a rightful existence. In his essay 'Rational Beauty', P. Souriau writes: 'all things are perfect if they are adapted to their purpose. The degree of perfection is measured by the relative value of the goals'.¹⁷ Georg W.F. Hegel understood rationalism in architecture as a deliberate reduction of forms resulting in a clear image of architecture as such. In his lectures on aesthetics, in the chapter on classical architecture, he perceives it

along with this the mechanical relations of support and being supported must likewise be maintained in their genuine measure and law, [...] such as that of the breadth to the length and height of the building, the height of the columns to their thickness, the intervals and number of the columns, the character and variety or simplicity of decorations.¹⁸

An assumption about rationality states that a person takes actions which, to the best of their knowledge, lead to desired objectives. Therefore, the aim and the ability to set it rationally is paramount. Rationality lies in the relationship between objectives and means within the available knowledge. Today, it seems that this is not so obvious in the field of architecture. Many contemporary buildings raise the question of the validity of their solutions. Indeed, many creators aim for novelty, surprise, shock and bravado. Numerous examples of contemporary architecture cross the line of rationality, raising questions about the sense of technical and formal solutions. Others, remaining true to the idea of rationalism, do not cut themselves off from the real purpose of architecture. Here again, one can turn to Antonio Monestiroli, who claimed that 'it is only after getting to know and determining what is to be constructed' that one should look for 'the right forms of that which is to be built'.¹⁹ He sought solutions that were

¹⁶ A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1982, p. 41.

¹⁷ P. Souriau, *Piękno racjonalne* [in:] *Antologia współczesnej estetyki francuskiej*, PWN, Warszawa 1980, p. 190.

¹⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Wykłady o estetyce*, vol. 2, PWN, Warszawa 1966, pp. 376–377.

¹⁹ A. Monestiroli, *Tryglifi metopa. Dziewięć wykładów o architekturze*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2008, p. 13.

in line with the objective, forms that represented their *raison d'être*. The word objective can be replaced by the phrase – the reason for building. The type, structure, language, form, matter, and not the other way round, are to be subordinated to this reason for building.

The choice of construction, form and matter that do not result from the purpose of the architecture – exceeding the technical, structural, functional reason – contradicting the principle of decorum postulating the consistency of form and content, results in a shift in architecture towards empty formalism. It should be emphasised that Monestiroli did not mean architecture whose primary purpose becomes function, but one that is capable of going beyond the limits of functional necessity. Establishing construction objectives enables one to distinguish between truth and falsehood, between the real and the invented, the essential and the redundant, the rational and the irrational.

6. TRUTH AND REALITY

In rationalist philosophy, the reality is the source and subject of cognition. An action is considered rational when it enhances the object to which it relates.²⁰ Rationalists must anchor their assertions in some external, objective foundation (e.g. science). Therefore, the notion of truth and the criteria of truthfulness refer to reality and correspondence with reality. Unlike any other art, architecture, creating and defining space, does not merely express a logical and aesthetic reality, but also creates a reality to which we refer both as observers and as participants. This is a very responsible task, which should be based on the truth. Unlike many contemporary trends, which create architecture resulting from the rejection of the real world, rationalist projects are strongly linked to reality. 'The cognition of reality' occurs through a 'rational thought process' that serves to bring out its essence, its true meaning, by rejecting the superficial, apparent, ephemeral. Creators seek motivation, reference, a necessity in the real world. Aldo Rossi believed that 'rational architecture is neither a moral nor aesthetic vision, not a way of life, but the only systematic answer to the problems posed by reality'.²¹ In an attempt to understand the basics of architectural design, Antonio Monestiroli explored the very relationship between architecture and reality. He claimed that discovering reality is possible by distinguishing the essence and appearances of what is permanent and lasting from what is variable and fleeting. [...] Cognition is accomplished through the transition from the superficiality of things to their essence, through the principle of abstracting, a rational process that literally extracts the essence of reality'.²² He wished for architecture built of clear and simple forms that would derive from an understanding of the complexity of what they represent and would result from finding the identity of the structure. He called for the creation of architecture related to reality, as opposed to the trends allowing the creation of the architecture of escape, architecture as the construction of alternative worlds. He even argued that architecture that arises from a peculiar rejection of reality becomes commercial.²³ Independence from that which is temporary, superficial, unimportant and unnecessary is to lead to – the universal truth.

²⁰ E. Morawiec, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

²¹ F. Visconti, R. Capozzi, *Architettura Razionale 1973–2008*, Clean Edizioni, Napoli 2008, p. 1.

²² A. Monestiroli, *Architektura rzeczywistości*, Pretekst, 2010, no. 3, p. 79.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

7. CONCLUSION

The history of architecture has always oscillated between tolerance to a lie and its rejection. Undoubtedly, there will always be truth-seeking trends in architecture and those that disregard the truth. Truth is an ideal that can never be fulfilled. One should also remember that the notion of truth belongs to the rhetoric of the fight for gaining and maintaining power. It is an *agonistic* concept; it becomes meaningful in the context of conflict and opposition.²⁴ Those who fight for power in architecture become the owners of the truth: economists, politicians, media representatives, producers, technologists, environmentalists, scientists. Today, creators are often at the end of this list. Therefore, the counterweight offered by the defenders of truth in architecture is very much needed nowadays in the post-truth era.

For centuries, philosophers have been arguing about the meaning of the notion of truth, trying to define it better and better and to find a precise criterion of truthfulness. Science (such as architecture) should also recognise the search for truth and its manifestation as its duty. One can risk the formulation of the thesis that rationalists, contrary to the prevailing views on science (relativism of truth, truth as a limitation), in the context of the pursuit of truth, return to the philosophical sources of this notion – the classic approach to truth as the correspondence between intellect and thing (St Thomas Aquinas).²⁵

Overwhelmed with anxiety that we will either possess knowledge that is firmly anchored in something external and eternal or that we will be doomed to relativism, some of the creators are leaning towards rationalist thought in architecture. It seeks the universal truth – in referring to actual reality, in the unity between function, form, construction and matter, in clear and readable ordering rules, in an aptly recognised purpose, in values that last in time. Such respect for the truth of architecture may protect it from forces that are irrelevant to it and may guarantee its autonomy.

In his book 'Filozofia nauki' (The Philosophy of Science), professor Heller reminds us of the consequences behind the choice of the postulate to be guided by rationality in science:

Rationality is a value. This becomes evident when rationality is juxtaposed with irrationality. The former is seen as good and the latter as evil. If the choice of rationality is a choice of value, then it is essentially a moral choice. The moral decision is therefore at the heart of science.²⁶

This is also the responsibility of the architect as a representative of the field that combines science and art. Undoubtedly, the creators of the rationalist trend, believing in the possibility of reaching the truth and striving to approach it in architecture, make such an ethical effort.

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²⁴ Z. Bauman, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

²⁵ J. Pruś, *Teorie prawdy: klasyczna, korespondencyjna i semantyczna – próba uściślenia relacji*, *Rocznik Filozoficzny Ignatianum*, 2018, vol. 24, no. 2, p. 59, <https://czasopisma.ignatianum.edu.pl/index.php/rfi> (access: 12.06.2020).

²⁶ M. Heller, *Filozofia nauki*, Copernicus Center Press, Kraków 2019, p. 199.

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