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“Ethnology Has Introduced Law and Order”: Remarks on the Works of Bronisław Malinowski as a “Hybrid Activity”

These remarks are the result of a coincidence. They have resulted from an art historian's hunt for observations on the artistic culture of the native inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands region to be found in the works of Bronisław Malinowski. The object of the search were reflections which might be taken as a *sui generis* theory of tribal art. Yet such observations or reflections are scarce in Malinowski's works; those which could be found were usually superficial descriptions rather than insightful analyses of tribal artefacts. Still, this search has revealed that Malinowski's writings contain evidence of creativity of a distinctly artistic nature, which may interest a student of the visual arts. This evidence are images which are constructed from words and which evince various approaches to the poetics of imaging. In fact, the presence of such images and their diversity justifies a comparison between the works of Bronisław Malinowski and, only seemingly paradoxically, the works of James Joyce. Many passages of *Ulysses* were created by applying various literary conventions; Joyce would ironically juxtapose the poetics of a press advertisement with a pastiche of a Homeric epic, the banal form of a press report would be combined with the style of a schoolgirl's diary, a police report and a myth. Combining genres and playing with literary conventions to a great extent determined the character of Joyce's work,¹ which may be perceived as an almost anthropological vivisection of ordinary bourgeois life.²

1 Cf. R. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, New York–Oxford–Toronto, 1982, p. 357 ff. Ellmann points out that the use of many literary styles in *Ulysses* was an extension of the technique used earlier in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. On literary conventions used in *Ulysses*, cf. also: St. Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses*, New York, 1955, the chapter entitled “The Narrative of Ulysses”.

2 Richard Ellmann asserts that in *Ulysses*, where facts are juxtaposed with myth and references to the mundane reality of Dublin are interwoven with realities shown, e.g.

Malinowski created his great monographs in a similar way, although without Joyce's signature irony and inclination towards pastiche; he would use not only various literary conventions,³ but also various conventions of imaging. He resorted to these in order to represent the reality of the Trobrianders as convincingly as possible, and also in a manner that would affect the reader's imagination.⁴ The current essay is thus a layman's attempt to invade a territory that is foreign to him: a historian of art is trying here to treat selected passages from the works of an ethnologist in a manner that is relevant to his own area of study.

The notion that Malinowski's monograph may be approached as per the above was suggested by, among others, the American anthropologist of culture, James Clifford. Writing about ethnography as a "hybrid activity", Clifford presented premises that permit us to associate ethnographic activity with critical approaches that are usually linked with avant-garde art.⁵ Commenting on the works of the French researchers of tribalism, e.g. Marcel Mauss, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Paul Rivet, Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille, Clifford used the terms 'ethnographic surrealism' and 'surrealist ethnography' – metaphors which powerfully point to connections between anthropological research and literature and art. It is precisely these metaphors that justify the search for

in Homer's epic or Dante's poem, we are dealing with only an illusion of reality. Ellmann also reports that the persons and situations described in *Ulysses* were modelled on those encountered by Joyce in his experience of mundane reality. Cf. Ellmann, op. cit., p. 360 ff.

- 3 That the writings of not only Bronisław Malinowski, but of ethnologists in general, are essentially of a literary nature is currently accepted as an almost unquestionable fact, based on the self-examining texts written by those students of culture themselves. At this point it is necessary to mention the by now canonical studies focusing on the "literary" character of Malinowski's work by Clifford Geertz and, following him, James Clifford. Geertz emphatically situates anthropology in the scope of literary, not scientific, discourse; in his view, anthropology is a type of literary output, "a mere game of words". Cf.: C. Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford CA, 1988, pp. 1–24, 73 ff. James Clifford, in turn, writes about the process of transforming the experiences of a field worker into a text that is essentially literary. Cf. J. Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority", in: idem, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge MA, 1988, p. 21. Doris Bachmann-Medick writes about the anthropologists' new awareness arising from what she calls a "reflexive turn" in anthropology. Cf. D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Reinbek, 2006.
- 4 Cf. the observations of the historian Ernest Gellner regarding the myth of Bronisław Malinowski as a great researcher and theoretician of culture which arose in the circles of "Malinowski's children". Gellner reconstructs and deconstructs this myth on the basis of the statements of the great ethnologist's successors and followers. Cf. E. Gellner, "On Malinowski", in: idem, *Selected Philosophical Themes. Volume I: Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences*, London–New York, 2003, p. 141.
- 5 J. Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism", in: idem, *The Predicament of Culture*, op. cit., p. 117 ff.

elements that might interest a researcher of the visual arts in the works of Bronisław Malinowski.

A passage found at the very beginning of Bronisław Malinowski's best known and most highly valued monograph, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which focuses on the ritual *kula* exchange, seems to validate the above approach with regard to this ethnologist's output. This passage discusses the difficulties posed by investigating a primitive culture and presents the role of ethnology in this study. In Malinowski's view, ethnology "has introduced law and order into what seemed chaotic and freakish. It has transformed for us the sensational, wild and unaccountable world of 'savages' into a number of well ordered communities, governed by law, behaving and thinking according to consistent principles".⁶ The assertion that ethnology introduces order into the world of "savages" seems particularly interesting. "Order" should be understood here as a synonym of the concept of "form", i.e. in the sense which a student of art usually associates with the Great Theory of Beauty deriving from ancient times.⁷ This order would be to, a great extent, defined by procedures worked out in the field of ethnology as a scientific discipline. Yet, as it will turn out, this order is defined not only by procedures proper to ethnology. Bronisław Malinowski stressed that ethnological training permitted the observer of a tribal culture to investigate it in a more profound, pedantic, systematic and methodical way; he wrote that "the object of scientific training is to provide the empirical investigator with a *mental chart*, in accordance with which he can take his bearings and lay his course".⁸ It might be stated that the great monographs authored by the Polish scholar constitute a singular map of reality in which the native Trobriand islanders used to live. At the same time, Malinowski was mindful of the aesthetic side of his works; he was attentive to their structure (the already mentioned "order") as much as to their literary aspect and the stratum of images constructed from words. The otherwise obvious fact which must be recalled at this point is that a map, being a projection of a terrain, is an image of some reality. Even though owing to its rational and utilitarian character it is situated more in the sphere of science, it is certainly not far from art.⁹ The question which arises

6 B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific. An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, London, 1932, pp. 9–10.

7 W. Tatarkiewicz, *Parerga*, Warsaw, 1978, pp. 7–8. It must be noted that in Polish the word 'ład' (order) is the root of the adverb 'ładnie', whose superlative form, 'najładniej', refers to the concept of beauty, so it seems that a researcher of art may have something to say in that matter.

8 Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., pp. 12–13.

9 Writing about visual culture in 17th-century Holland, Svetlana Alpers notes how obvious was the existence of maps – examples of a special manner of describing the world – as images of reality in this culture. She perceives Dutch mapping as an act of encompassing the world, which, in contrast to the Italian linear perspective, was not based on a human measure. She emphasises that Dutch maps were images which united

here is whether in Bronisław Malinowski's writings we are dealing with the objective "mapping" of a tribal reality understood as describing it faithfully or whether his output should be perceived as a *post factum* imposing of order on an earlier experience of the Trobriand reality. It seems that the answer cannot be clear-cut.

In the present remarks we propose that Bronisław Malinowski's writings be perceived as the practice of creating this metaphorically conceived map which consists of images of tribal culture. In the role of the images we have the descriptions of the research site locations, suggestive depictions of tropical nature and the local architecture or urban design, the regrettably scarce reports on signs of tribal artistic culture, e.g. boats or various hand-made objects produced by the natives, and, finally, the many evocative pictures from the Trobriand cultural reality: the "cinematic" (as Malinowski himself put it, to which we shall come back later) descriptions of rituals, entertainments or elements of daily life. Also, the verbal portraits of people, whom the ethnologist described both in physical and psychological aspects,¹⁰ are certainly images. In addition, his texts contain some very suggestive comparisons of concrete persons or situations to images known from famous works of art.¹¹ The list of images is completed by maps and charts, some of them having been made by the scholar himself, and numerous photographs.

The strictly "modernist" visual forms which appear in Malinowski's works, such as tables, graphs, lists, synoptic charts, diagrams, etc., are also images. The term 'modernist' serves to anchor these forms in time, because it permits us to link them with, for instance, the idea of modern – modernist – architecture, which constitutes a glorification of the principles of functionalism, mathematical order, harmony and standardisation. Paradoxically, Bronisław Malinowski's concept of functionalism, based on the theory that separate institutions of culture remain in a close and "harmonious" functional relationship and thus constitute an indivisible whole, can be perceived in the discourse of the theory of culture as a distinctive counterpart to Le Corbusier's idea of architecture. Malinowski seems to treat various institutions of culture, such as marriage, kinship, the sexual life, the *kula* ritual, myth, magic or religion, as modules which are equal to one another, which constitute a coherent whole and which can be researched in a similar manner on the basis of theoretical assumptions

artists, travellers and discoverers. Cf. S. Alpers *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago, 1983.

10 E.g. one of the descriptions of Chief To'uluwa, the person who is most often mentioned in Malinowski's Trobriand books: "I found him changed and aged, his tall figure more bent, his large face, with its expression half of benevolence and half of cunning, wrinkled and clouded over". Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., p. 468.

11 A passage from *A Diary*: "Talk with Mick; congeniality. 'Mediterranean' when he sits crouching like Achilles in a drawing by Wyspiński" is a case in point. B. Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, translated by N. Guterman, London, 1989, p. 146.

that are accepted beforehand. He was adamant in saying: “The field worker relies entirely upon inspiration from theory”¹². It is not my intention here to state that this field worker, i.e. Bronisław Malinowski himself, was inspired by Le Corbusier’s idea of architecture or vice versa. My aim is to point out that the ways of thinking that are dominant in a culture, the ideas that are “in the air”, influence various spheres of life, including architecture and ethnology; hence they may constitute a sort of a filter in the process of recognition and conceptualisation of the tribal reality by a field worker.

The term “modernist forms of imaging” authorises a reference to the European cultural tradition and to the 17th- and 18th-century tradition as described by Michel Foucault, i.e. the tradition of arranging things in order, with permanent tables being an expression of this order.¹³ Such ordered tables were treated as the cores of all knowledge; the contemporary *episteme* was impossible without a clearly arranged table that clearly displayed correspondences or differences. According to Foucault, a table was where *mathesis*, understood as imposing order on simple entities, could be combined with *taxinomia*, imposing order on complex entities. *Mathesis*, *taxinomia* and genesis made it possible to determine the network of permanent interdependencies, which defined the configuration of knowledge in the classical manner. The way the Trobriand culture is presented in Bronisław Malinowski’s monographs seems to be a distant echo of this method of apprehending reality. In *Argonauts*, Malinowski writes that an ethnologist must first construct a kind of a “skeleton of abstract constructions”, which is later filled in with the reality of the actual native life; this “skeleton” must be supplemented “by all the details of behaviour, setting and small incident”.¹⁴

A student of art will certainly be interested in Bronisław Malinowski’s method of constructing a generalised image of tribal reality. The structure, that is the “skeleton” of this image – which is a metaphorically understood map – is laid out first by the descriptions of the geographical region under research, then by the descriptions of the concrete area which is the space of research, including e.g. the location, architecture and urban design of a village, which Malinowski complemented with printed maps or his own drawings.¹⁵ The description of the racial features and the chief cultural patterns of the residents of the area in question are important elements of such narration. Further on, Bronisław Malinowski followed a procedure which he outlined

12 Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., p. 38.

13 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London–New York, 2002, p. 79 ff, 267.

14 Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., p. 18.

15 A case in point is the filmic manner in which the approach to the Boyowa Island is narrated in *Argonauts*; the narration is combined with picturesque descriptions of the landscape, including its colours, and the local residents, followed by a description of the village architecture and urban design. A map of the Trobriand Archipelago complements the narrative. Cf.: Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., p. 49 ff.

in detail at the very outset of *Argonauts*. He asserted there that first, “[t]he organisation of the tribe, and the anatomy of its culture must be recorded in a firm, clear outline. The method of concrete, statistical documentation is the means through which such an outline has to be given”.¹⁶ In the second stage of the proceedings, “[w]ithin this frame, the imponderabilia of actual life, and the type of behaviour have to be filled in” in almost the same way that a map is filled in with details. Malinowski highlighted the role of an “ethnographic diary”; he considered the procedure of keeping it to be extremely important, especially if it is “made possible by close contact with native life”. The following step in the process of creating the image of tribal life was to complement the preceding two stages with a presentation of a set of ethnographic documents. These could be statements, characteristic narratives, typical expressions, folklore themes and magic formulas used to illustrate the natives’ mentality. “These three lines of approach lead to the final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight. This goal is, briefly, to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world”,¹⁷ concluded Malinowski. As is well known, however, the final effect of the process would be a presentation of not so much the native worldview as the way in which this worldview is perceived by a European ethnographer.¹⁸

In *Argonauts*, Bronisław Malinowski attempted to construct exceedingly visual images of the Trobriand Archipelago – the area in which the *kula* exchange system was in operation. Some of these images resemble maps drawn in various scales; many are almost cinematic.¹⁹ In one of the initial descriptions, the area of the eastern end of New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands is shown first from a distance, as if from above; the reader seems to be invited to imagine the area as seen from an airplane window. Then the narrator gradually lowers the viewpoint and introduces more and more details. In addition to their cinematic quality, such images constitute a kind of map constructed from words, which provides a vivid, intensely visual picture of the terrain, showing the tropical nature and indicating the distribution of tribes resident in New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands. Malinowski mentioned the

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁸ On this topic, cf. J. Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism”, op. cit., and C. Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton NJ, 2001. The American scholar Edward M. Bruner writes about ethnography as a creation of narrative structures and questions the traditional distinction between an ethnographer as a subject and the native peoples as the object of the research; he asserts that, essentially, the work of an anthropologist is less the discovery of reality than the anthropologist’s dialogue with his or her own symbolic system. Cf. E. M. Bruner, “Ethnography as Narrative”, in: *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. V. W. Turner, E. M. Bruner, pp. 139–155.

¹⁹ Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., chapter “The Country and Inhabitants of the Kula District”, p. 27 ff.

tribes that participated in the *kula* exchange, characterised the typical physical appearance of their members and described the settlement areas and sailing routes used to conduct the ritual exchange.

As has been stated at the outset, the search for examples of Bronisław Malinowski's research perspective regarding tribal art provided the departure point for these remarks; but it turned out that the ethnologist's concern with this issue was only sporadic and, worse still, very superficial. Let it be emphasised again: his analyses of tribal works are usually limited to a very brief description and, in some cases, to a statement of admiration for their form. A student of art may thus feel disappointed. The absence of a deeper analysis of the works of Trobriand art may even seem surprising, considering the fact that Malinowski was on friendly terms with Witkacy, Leon Chwistek and the other leading lights of early 20th-century artistic culture in Poland. When mentioning the two fundamental elements of the *kula* exchange, i.e. the *mwali* bracelets and the *soulava* necklaces fashioned from red spondylus shell, Malinowski described them only as decorative objects, well-nigh ornamental trinkets, although they were carriers of symbolic meanings – components of complex mythological narratives associated with the system of religious beliefs and magical practices of the islanders. He was just as superficial in his descriptions of the ornamentation of the boats used in the *kula* exchange ritual. In *Argonauts* we find the following passage:

When the canoes then approach, and you see them rocking in the blue water in all the splendour of their fresh white, red, and black paint, with their finely designed prowboards, and clanking array of large, white cowrie shells (see Plates XLIX, LV) you understand well the admiring love which results in all this care bestowed by the native on the decoration of his canoe.²⁰

All there is are expressions of admiration for their aesthetic value; we find here no reflection whatsoever on the meanings encoded by the islanders in the decorations of their boats, which were the true reason why the decorations were made in the first place. When describing the preparations for the launch, Malinowski says: “The canoe is now ready for the sea, except for the painting, which is only for ornamentation (underline A.K.)”.²¹ A piece of information given further on seems to contradict this strong statement, however, because Malinowski says that “the whole outside of the canoe is painted in three colours”, these being white, red and black, and that the application of each is accompanied by an appropriate spell, “the most important one over the black colour”. Further on the ethnologist emphasises: “A new sailing craft is not only another utility created; it is more: it is a new entity sprung into being, something with which the future destinies of the sailors

20 Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., p. 108.

21 Ibid., p. 139.

will be bound up, and on which they will depend".²² This was owed, albeit not exclusively, to the colours used in the decoration of the boat. The white colour, applied on the sides, was an element of a narrative referring to regeneration; it was associated with the first pregnancy rites, with the beginnings of life, with the state of purity and honesty, and with children, who have no history. Red symbolised the next phase of human life, the one associated with reaching maturity and with eroticism; also, young unmarried women wore red skirts. Black was the symbol of death. One colour referred to the other and together they were a component of a multifaceted narrative about the cyclical energy of life.²³

It is truly puzzling that Malinowski, who discussed almost every other aspect of life on the Trobriand Islands, did not consider an in-depth analysis of the local artistic culture to be worth his time. Yet his Trobriand diary contains information that he copied the ornaments on a boat used in the *kula* ritual²⁴ and photographed the process of carving its decorative prow.²⁵ Also, the diary reveals Malinowski's intention to write a large monograph about the people and their culture, which was to have a very simple title: *Kiriwina*. An outline of this book is now in the archive of the London School of Economics; it was to have seven large chapters, of which the last was to focus on art.²⁶ This monograph was never written. Malinowski used the source materials intended for its basis to prepare other works, including *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which was published in 1922.

Research conducted since the 1950s by Edmund Leach, Patrick Glass, Giancarlo Scoditti and others has demonstrated that the art of communities resident in Papua New Guinea, including the Trobriand Islands, encompassed extremely broad visual and narrative spheres. For instance, the prows of boats used in the *kula* ritual turned out to convey symbolic meanings rooted in the myth of a hero named Monikuiki. The prow ornaments described his life and, at the same time, were his attribute. In one of the more recent studies concerning the art of the Trobriand Islands, in a book entitled *The Art of Kula*²⁷ published in 2002 by Shirley F. Campbell, the decorations of boats used in the *kula* ritual by the residents of Vakuta Island are analysed in terms of Roland Barthes' semiotics. Campbell presents them as a well-developed system of distinctly decorative forms which convey extremely intricate meanings. She shows that the ornamentation of boats used in the *kula* ritual did not develop in isolation but, on the contrary, by serving both as decoration and communication it constituted one of the ways of experiencing reality. On the formal level, it referred to the realities of the natural world: the universe of animals

22 Ibid., p. 146.

23 S. F. Campbell, *The Art of Kula*, Oxford, 2002, p. 118 ff.

24 Malinowski, *A Diary...*, op. cit., p. 253.

25 Ibid., p. 195.

26 S. F. Campbell, op. cit., p. 2.

27 S. F. Campbell, op. cit., p. 193.

and plants and to human body parts; it was associated with religious and magical ceremonies, for instance ones celebrating marriage, first pregnancy or death. In the *kula* ritual, as Shirley Campbell states in the conclusions of her book, art referred chiefly to the complicated interactions between the men and women of Vakuta Island. The decorations on the boats were a part of a system that also encompassed architectural decorations, especially those seen on yam storehouses, decorations on items of everyday use, ways of dressing and body decorations. This complex system expressed both religious and magical content; it reflected the ways of conceptualising reality and thus the Vakuta islanders' notions of such issues as, for example, the stages of human life: conception and childhood, development and decline. It was linked with the cultivation of gardens, with fishing, with the institution of marriage, with the belief in reincarnation and with views concerning the way a person is born. Essentially, this system was one of the most important elements that both shaped and expressed the Vakuta islanders' perception of reality.

His works may not contain in-depth analyses of artistic culture, but Malinowski's sensitivity to the visual quality of life on the Trobriand Islands is noteworthy. The painterly character of many of his descriptions reveals this clearly; here is an example:

When, on a hot day, we enter the deep shadow of fruit trees and palms, and find ourselves in the midst of the wonderfully designed and ornamented houses hiding here and there in irregular groups among the green, surrounded by little decorative gardens of shells and flowers, with pebble-bordered paths and stone-paved sitting circles, it seems as if the visions of a primeval, happy, savage life were suddenly realised, even if only in a fleeting impression. Big bodies of canoes are drawn high up the beach and covered with palm leaves ; here and there nets are drying, spread out on special stands, and on the platforms in front of the houses sit groups of men and women, busy at some domestic work, smoking and chatting.²⁸

This description easily brings to mind the paintings of Paul Gauguin. Malinowski's works also contain images in a surreal style, reflecting the character of the subject matter discussed by the ethnologist, which in this case are the Trobrianders' dreams.²⁹ His diaries reveal Malinowski's sensitivity to visual forms and colours, as well as his familiarity with artistic traditions. For instance, he compared an islander he was observing with the ancient sculpture known as *The Dying Gaul*;³⁰ elsewhere he wrote about his white friend, Mick George, that he sat “crouching like Achilles in a drawing by Wyspianski”.³¹ In his analysis of the Trobriand diaries, Dariusz Czaja found ample evidence of Malinowski's

28 Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., pp. 35–36.

29 B. Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*, New York, 1929, p. 386 ff.

30 Malinowski, *A Diary...*, op. cit., p. 222.

31 Ibid., p. 146.

excitement aroused by visual perceptions.³² Also, analysing Malinowski's sensitivity to the visual aspects of reality, he brought to attention his predilection for seeing and framing the observed reality in a painterly or photographic manner. According to Czaja, Malinowski truly was a child of his times; fed on modernist literature, his literary imagination did not deviate from the acquired model (regrettably, no examples of such reading material are given). Let it be added, however, that his imagination had been nourished not only by literature, but also by film, photography, painting and other modes of imaging, of which his texts provide ample proof.

The filmic quality of Bronisław Malinowski's descriptions of tribal life is striking indeed; for instance, at the very beginning of *Argonauts* we find the following passage:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight.³³

This suggestively picturesque image was intended to arouse the reader's imagination; it brings to mind a shot which opens an intriguing film narrative. Malinowski's works abound in distinctly filmic descriptions. This is another example:

[...] the men, adorned in full dancing attire, range themselves for the performance, the drummers and the singers in the centre of a ring formed by the decorated dancers. As in a normal dance, standing in the central place, the singers intone a chant, the dancers begin to move slowly and the drummers to beat time. But they are not allowed to proceed: almost at the first throb of the drums, there breaks forth from inside the huts the wailing of those women who are still in mourning from behind the inner row of houses, a crowd of shrieking, agitated female figures rush out and attack the dancers, beat them with sticks, and throw coconuts, stones, and pieces of wood at them.³⁴

Malinowski was fully aware that his descriptions were filmic; he intended them to be so. In *The Sexual Life of Savages* he wrote:

And now, in order to summarize briefly the results of this chapter and the previous one, let us imagine that we are taking a bird's-eye view of a native village, and are trying to form a compound moving picture (underlines A.K.) of the life of the community. Casting our glance over the central place, the street, and the surrounding grove and garden land, we see them peopled by men and women mixing freely and on terms of equality. Sometimes they go together to work in the garden, or to collect food-stuffs in the jungle or on the sea-shore. Or else they separate, each sex

32 D. Czaja, "Malinowski o kolorach. Na marginesie *Dzienników*" [Malinowski on Colours. On the Margin of the Diaries], in: idem, *Sygnatura i fragment. Narracje antropologiczne* [Signature and Fragment. Anthropological Narratives], Cracow, 2004, p. 43 ff.

33 Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., p. 4.

34 Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages...*, op. cit., p. 177.

forming a group of workers engaged in some special activity, and performing it efficiently and with interest.³⁵

A “cinematic” glance at life on the Trobriand Islands was usually a preamble leading to a systematic presentation of some cultural phenomenon that was being researched by Malinowski, e.g. the ritual *kula* exchange, the sexual life of the islanders, the institution of family, myths or totemism.

Yet the painterly or filmic descriptions, of which there are many in Malinowski’s works, are interspersed with passages where his persona is that of a level-headed constructor attempting to express the tribal reality of the Trobriand Islands by means of images that are clearly associated with the modern era and with a technological civilisation. These images are the tables, graphs, lists, diagrams, synoptic charts etc., which constitute an excellent example of the already mentioned “order” introduced by ethnology. In Malinowski’s words:

All types of economic transactions may be studied by following up connected, actual cases, and putting them into a synoptic chart; again, a table ought to be drawn up of all the gifts and presents customary in a given society, a table including the sociological, ceremonial, and economic definition of every item. Also, systems of magic, connected series of ceremonies, types of legal acts, all could be charted, allowing each entry to be synoptically defined under a number of headings. Besides this, of course, the genealogical census of every community, studied more in detail, extensive maps, plans and diagrams, illustrating ownership in garden land, hunting and fishing privileges, etc., serve as the more fundamental documents of ethnographic research.³⁶

Tables, diagrams, charts, “sociological graphs” and genealogical diagrams constitute a separate category in Malinowski’s works. The earliest example is found already in his youthful essay entitled *Observations on Friedrich Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy*.³⁷ There the young Malinowski compared, in a table form, the types and features of Apollonian art with those of Dionysian art. Tables, diagrams, charts, etc. are imaging structures of an unmistakably mimetic nature, while at the same time they help to catalogue and thus to impose order on a hardly graspable reality. They also give an illusory sense of control over reality. Examples of such images are found, among others, in tables included in *The Sexual Life of Savages*, in which Malinowski attempted to demonstrate sexual activity in various age groups by means of statistical data. Elements of the kinship system and the division of magical practices between the men and women are presented in diagrams; types of wedding gifts are listed, the terms and meanings used to denote some object or phenomenon are inventoried. This kind of imaging can be compared to modernist paintings, an

35 Ibid., pp. 185–186.

36 Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., p. 14.

37 B. Malinowski, “Observations on Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*”, in: *The Early Writings of Bronislaw Malinowski*, translated by L. Krzyżanowski, ed. R. J. Thornton, P. Skalník, Cambridge, 2006, p. 67.

exemplification of which would be a net or a grid pattern. "Geometry is the archetype of modern mind", wrote Zygmunt Bauman. "The grid is its ruling trope (and thus, so be it, Mondrian is the most *representative* among its visual artists)".³⁸ The Renaissance discovery of linear perspective, used to produce images of reality as perceived by the senses, is usually perceived as the source from which the modern-era grid system originated. The Mercator projection, used for mapping reality, was a development of the Renaissance grid created by converging lines. In time, the mapping grid developed into a coordinate system and became a model for the modern presentation of reality (e.g. in urban planning, architecture or design). Rosalind Krauss asserted: "In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art",³⁹ and she continued: "In the temporal dimension, the grid is an emblem of modernity [...]. By 'discovering' the grid, cubism, de Stijl, Mondrian, Malevich ... landed in a place that was out of reach of everything that went before. Which is to say, they landed in the present, and everything else was declared to be the past".⁴⁰

Yet, Bronisław Malinowski's view was that the "modernist" ordering of tribal reality, accomplished by inscribing its elements onto that grid, must be seen only as an introduction to further research:

I knew well that the best remedy for this was to collect concrete data, and accordingly I took a village census, wrote down genealogies, drew up plans and collected the terms of kinship. But all this remained dead material, which led no further into the understanding of real native mentality or behaviour, since I could neither procure a good native interpretation of any of these items, nor get what could be called the hang of tribal life.⁴¹

Photographs from the Trobriand Islands, about which much has already been written,⁴² constitute a separate, and very interesting, set of examples

38 Z. Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Cambridge–Malden MA, 2007, p. 15. On the modernist (and post-modernist) grid as a metaphor of modernity understood as a state of culture, cf.: Z. Bauman, "Urban Space Wars: On Destructive Order and Creative Chaos", *Space and Culture*, 1998, vol. 2, pp. 109–123; A. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, Cambridge MA, 2009; J. H. Williamson, "The Grid: History, Use and Meaning", in: *Design Discourse. History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. V. Margolin, Chicago–London, 1989; R. E. Krauss, "Grids", in: idem, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA–London, England, 1999; A. Kisielewski, "Siatka jako metafora kultury. Przypadek reklamy" [The Grid as a Metaphor of Culture], in: *Między powtórzeniem a innowacją. Seryjność w kulturze* [Between Repetition and Innovation. Seriality in Culture], ed. A. Kisielewska, Cracow, 2004.

39 R. E. Krauss, op. cit., p. 7.

40 Ibid., p. 10.

41 Malinowski, *Argonauts...*, op. cit., p. 5.

42 Cf. *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 2000, year LIV, no. 1–4. The entire issue of the periodical was devoted to the lives and work (especially photographs) of Witkacy and Bronisław Malinowski.

of images. Malinowski owed his ability to take photographs mainly to Witkacy, who, let it be recalled, had taken part in Malinowski's first expedition to Australia and New Guinea in the year 1914, precisely as a photographer. Malinowski's serious approach to photography is also a matter of record; his Trobriand diaries reveal that he was thinking of publishing an album with the photographs he had taken in the Trobriand Islands⁴³. Photographing is an essentially European/American cultural pattern, as are the ways of framing photographs that are popular at a given time.⁴⁴ It is noticeable that the reality of the tropical regions, as rendered in the photographic frames which often have the character of postcards, became one of the iconographic motifs in the visual sphere of modern mass culture. The Trobriand photographs show the islanders posed for photograph or busy with various daily chores, ritual ceremonies and the village buildings. Many of the photographs which have having the above-mentioned postcard character show tropical landscapes with boats and palms.

Malinowski himself was photographed as well, usually posed among the natives, more rarely alone. These images can be viewed as a testimony of the scholar's presence in the tropics on the one hand, and on the other, as an expression of his desire to be seen in these unquestionably unusual circumstances. They can also be viewed as a connecting link between his “objective” scholarly work on the topic of the “savages” and the far more intimate diary, working on which was certainly a sort of a self-vivisection. Hence Malinowski's presence in these photographs seems to suggest the situation of a researcher becoming the object of his own research or of a narrator entering into his own narrative and becoming one of its protagonists. In these photographs, Malinowski is the only white man among the natives and, in contrast to them, is always dressed. His presence seems to have a tinge of self-advertisement aimed at reproducing fixed cultural roles. He posed for photographs dressed in white, wearing glasses, a pith helmet and gaiters. He embodied the persona of the European field researcher, while the dark-skinned “savages” were cast as extras, whose presence in a way legitimised his cultural identity. These photographs are colonial in their character, documenting as they do the colonialist inclusion of the Trobriand islanders into the discourse of ethnology. The photographs of Malinowski among the islanders are distinctly heterotopic, because

43 Malinowski, *A Diary...*, op. cit., p. 218. He never published it; this was done by Michael Young as late as in 1998: M. W. Young, *Malinowski's Kiriwina. Fieldwork Photography 1915–1918*, Chicago, 1998. Today, all of Malinowski's photographs are accessible on the website of the London School of Economics: <http://archives.lse.ac.uk/TreeBrowse.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&field=RefNo&key=MALINOWSKI%2F3> [accessed 22 April 2015].

44 Cf. J. R. Ryan, *Picturing the Empire. Photography and the Visualisation of the British Empire*, London, 1997, esp. the chapter entitled “Framing the View”, p. 45 ff. Among others, Ryan mentions that Victorian taste is evident in landscape photography and that, in essence, this photography renders the European vision of the South Pacific islands.

they constitute an attempt at combining two extremely different realities, i.e. Malinowski's world and the world of the "savages" he researched. They are linked only by the discourse of ethnology, of which images derived from various European tradition and representing various conventions of imaging are a component. They are certainly a sign of the fragmentation of the world and, at the same time, they particularise it. They appear to be elements of a map constructed by Malinowski.

Even the very titles of Malinowski's works refer to a cultural reality that is distinctive not to the Trobriand Islands, but to Europe. These titles are often characterised by an aesthetics that is reminiscent of advertisements, yet one that is curiously poetical at the same time. Malinowski constructed them so as to draw the potential reader's attention; their poetic quality, in turn, sprang from references to the realness of myth,⁴⁵ for instance, which in itself went beyond the purely pragmatic rhetorical goal. The titles of Malinowski's best-known monographs were: *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, *The Sexual Life of Savages* or *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*. The first title is a good illustration of such advertisement rhetoric and, at the same time, has a peculiar poetic quality. Malinowski derived it from the reality of Greek myths; the Argonauts were mythological heroes, fifty-two sailors who went on an expedition to Colchis to acquire the Golden Fleece. The subtitle of the work, in turn, *An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, may be perceived as an obvious echo of travel novels and as a truly promotional promise of absorbing, imagination-stimulating reading material. This title clearly shows that in his book, Malinowski created a vision of the Trobriand reality by means of images derived from his own culture, the Homeric tradition for instance, or from travel novels. The title and content of the famous *Sexual Life of Savages*, in turn, have been interpreted as evidence of a voyeuristic fascination with eroticism, which was characteristic of European culture and which resulted from Victorian prudery regarding sexuality.⁴⁶

In his descriptions, Malinowski used the ethnographic present tense and at the same time often constructed the narration from the point of view of his own "I". He assumed, as was noted by Marianna Torgovnick, the guise of an all-knowing eye which indisputably identifies all things that constitute the

⁴⁵ It must be noted that when an ethnologist refers to a myth (similarly as James Joyce did in *Ulysses*), this seems to undermine the reliability of the narrative he or she creates (as was the case with Joyce's narrative). Admittedly, however, if we assume the ethnologist's text to be a myth, we must ipso facto consider the cultures he or she described to be mythical. Quite apart from their artistic value, Bronisław Malinowski's monographs contain the fullest collection of data concerning the world of the Trobriand islanders, which is now lost. On this topic, cf. E. Kosowska, E. Jaworski, op. cit., p. 120.

⁴⁶ M. Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive. Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Chicago-London, 1990, p. 4.

substance of ethnology.⁴⁷ Also, Malinowski often used the first person plural; he would use the pronoun "we" directly or would imply it in the imperative mood. This "we" binds together the reader and the narrator, i.e. the field researcher himself. A critical analysis of this "I-witnessing" was presented by Clifford Geertz.⁴⁸ Yet it must be noted that Malinowski possessed a remarkable linguistic awareness, as is shown by his comments on language issues found in, among others, the book *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*. The use of the "witnessing" form "we" makes it possible to develop a bond between the reader and the narrator/researcher. Both are members of the white race that is resident in Europe and North America; they are civilised men, well-educated and cultured, rather affluent, and members of at least the middle class.⁴⁹ This may be perceived as another parallel between James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Bronisław Malinowski's monographs. At the same time, the pronoun "we" constitutes an opposition to the pronoun "they", which meant the "primitives", "savages", whom in his diaries Malinowski would call, in Polish, "drjanie".⁵⁰ By means of the first person plural it is possible to create an illusion of a shared experience:

Let us imagine that we are sailing along the South coast of New Guinea towards its Eastern end. At about the middle of Orangerie Bay we arrive at the boundary of the Massim, which runs from this point north-westwards till it strikes the northern coast near Cape Nelson (see Map II). As mentioned before, the boundary of the district inhabited by this tribe corresponds to definite geographical conditions, that is, to the absence of natural, inland fastnesses, or of any obstacles to landing. [...] As we approach the

47 Ibid.

48 C. Geertz, "I-Witnessing: Malinowski's Children", in: idem, *Works and Lives*, op. cit., p. 73 ff. As noted by Michel Foucault, some elements of a text always refer to the author; these are personal pronouns, adverbials of time and place, cases. Cf. M. Foucault, "What is an Author?", translated by D. F. Bouchard, S. Simon, in: *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, ed. D. F. Bouchard, Ithaca NY, 1977, pp. 113–138. Edward M. Bruner, whose work has already been referred to in this essay, stated that an ethnographer appears as "a material body through whom a narrative structure unfolds". Cf. E. M. Bruner, op. cit., p. 274. The debate concerning the writing subject is still ongoing, not only in the context of cultural research. In her analysis of the impersonal form that is preferred in a human science text (especially a text on art) – a form which by nature is supposed to objectify and thus to be objective, Maria Poprzęcka stated that, in reality, this form is simply camouflage. In her opinion, writing art history is a form of a literary work. Cf. M. Poprzęcka, "1. os. lp." [1st Person Sing.], in: *Podmiot/podmiotowość. Artysta – historyk – krytyk* [Subject/Subjectivism. The Artist – the Historian – the Critic], ed. M. Poprzęcka, Warsaw, 2011.

49 Bronisław Malinowski's affinity with the bourgeois middle class of his day, i.e. the main addressees of his monographs, seems indisputable. The equipment he took with him to the Trobriand Islands is telling in this context; it included a portable carpet, a tarpaulin bathtub and a washstand, a sun umbrella, pyjamas and some bottles of cognac. Cf. M. W. Young, *Malinowski: Odyssey of an Anthropologist, 1884–1920*, New Haven–London, 2004.

50 In Polish: *drjanie* (today: *dranie*), i.e. rogues, scoundrels; in the translation by N. Guterman, delicately, "natives came from Vilaylima and Osapola", p. 151.

land, we can see distinctly the steep, folded slopes, covered with dense, rank jungle, brightened here and there by bold patches of langang grass.⁵¹

The application of the first person plural: “let us imagine”, “we are sailing”, “we arrive”, “we can see”, expresses the assumption that the described image is being experienced communally, and that this is an image which would appeal only to a reader having a similar range of cultural experience as Bronisław Malinowski. Such literary images are obviously a product of European culture and in their form they have very little in common with the realities of the Trobriand islanders’ lives, because, let it be emphasised again, writing did not exist in their universe and thus neither did literary descriptions, maps or filmic, photographic or painterly images as they are understood in Europe.

In conclusion, it is necessary to add that treating the work of the great Polish ethnologist in terms of artistic categories does not depreciate it. This approach may, at the most, reveal alternative ways of reading it and thus permit us to gain new insight into the reality presented therein. When reading Malinowski’s monographs, we realise that in his case, the experience of life in the tropics found an expression in the images described above, and thus it acquired a peculiarly artistic character.⁵² The comparison of Bronisław Malinowski’s writings with the output of James Joyce, with which this essay started, reveals that the manner of describing the realities of life in the tropics adopted by the Polish ethnologist in his monographs is close to the manner of representing reality proposed by Cubist painters. Remarks on Cubistic fragmentation or the collage character of modern culture often appear in contemporary analyses as metaphors used to describe this culture. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* has a similarly Cubistic quality. Bronisław Malinowski’s texts, too, often reveal a multiplicity of perspectives, for example bird’s eye views or filmic descriptions of picturesque Trobriand landscapes seen from the point of view of a passenger arriving by ship or by boat. They also have many features that make it possible to associate the Polish ethnologist’s narration with the idea of a Cubistic collage. Images built from words, representing various conventions of imaging: maps, “modernist” tables and “synoptic charts”, painterly descriptions of the natural world, “cinematic” descriptions of tribal rituals, as well as photographs – all of these are examples of Cubistic *papier collés*.

This is one of the reasons why a student of art may find in Bronisław Malinowski’s works confirmation of the already familiar hypothesis that the phenomenon described, rather infelicitously, as primitivism, which was so evident in the avant-garde art of the first half of the 20th century (one of the components of which is also, to some extent, ethnology represented by the second generation of field-working ethnologists, to which Malinowski belonged) is, in fact, a construct created by a strictly European imagination. This confirms

51 Malinowski, *Argonauts....*, op. cit., p. 33.

52 Cf. J. Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism”, op. cit., p. 117 ff.

the correctness of the by now obvious realisation that the process of constructing the image of tribal life and culture in the early 20th century was based on European culture – a culture which produced Greek myths, travel novels, the concept of art, ethnology, photography, the cinematograph, easel painting, tables, inventories, “synoptic charts” etc.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

Abstract

This essay is an attempt to look at the work of the eminent ethnologist Bronisław Malinowski as an artistic creation. His work could be of interest to visual arts researchers. In this essay, his work is treated as a collection of images with a strictly European provenance. Examples of such images could be depictions of the places where the Polish ethnologist conducted his research. These depictions are, in fact, maps which he created by means of words. The images are like painted descriptions of tropical nature or, as Malinowski himself said, cinematic representations of the everyday life of the natives from the Trobriand Islands; they are people's portraits created by verbal descriptions, numerous photographs and also specifically “modernist” visual forms, such as tables, graphs, diagrams etc. The European nature of these images confirms the hypothesis that the phenomenon described, rather infelicitously, as primitivism, of which ethnology represented by the second generation of field-working ethnologists, to which Malinowski belonged, was a component, is a construct created by a strictly European imagination.