

'Self-Portrait' with scars – Jerzy Panek and Poland at the turn of the 1960s

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Panek's 'Self-Portrait I' in the context of socio-cultural changes in the Poland of the late 1950s. By putting scars on his face, Panek portrayed himself as a bandit or a drunkard, and that observation is further substantiated by an analysis of a preserved woodblock used in the making of the print. In leaving the scratches and rifts in the matrix, Panek manifested his physical anguish and stressed the connection between printing tools and pain, evoking a gloomy atmosphere of communist Poland.

PANEK AND WOODCUT

With its blending of childish naivety, art brut, primitivism, and elements of folk art, Panek's oeuvre remains unparalleled in style when it comes to the Polish art scene. Particularly fond of self-portraits, Panek created hundreds of them throughout his life. Regardless of the medium, the artist favoured quick, spontaneous lines and austere forms, often embracing an openly childish aesthetic. As long as his health allowed him, Panek's most favorite technique was woodcut. His lifelong interest in wood was sparked by his father, who worked as a printer (Dzikowska, 2011). This fascination was strengthened significantly during the artist's trip to China in 1956. The trip was made possible because the Soviet Union – which exerted a strong influence on countries from Poland to Kyrgyzstan – let artists travel within its borders as well as to its allies, including China (Gryglewicz, 2011). Whatever Panek did as an artist, he did it on his own: he used all types of wood so that not to waste any opportunity to carve – and he printed with his own hands, refraining from using a printing press (Dzikowska et al., 2002).

The woodblock used to create 'Self-Portrait I' has been preserved, together with a single print. The print draws the viewer's attention almost exclusively to the face because the silhouette, shown down to the waist, is essentially featureless

– simply contoured within a rectangular outline.

PRINT

The face is repulsive because of asymmetrical features on both sides (Figure 1). A heavy diagonal line connects the left eyelid to the snub nose, the right eye is small and almond-shaped, while the wrinkles above the thin lips diverge at different angles. If this was not enough, hideous furrows run from the top of the head to the chin, sparing neither the eyes nor the lips. The placement of

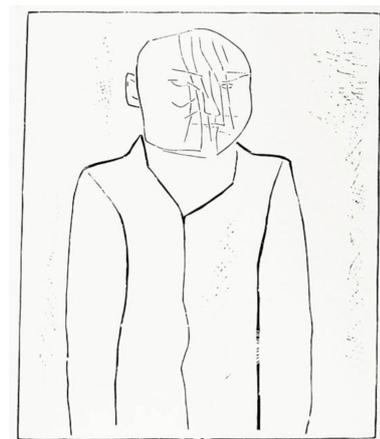


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Self-portrait I (1960) by Jerzy Panek. Woodcut, 680 x 520 mm. Pic. Rempex Auction House

Figure 2. Self-portrait I (1960) by Jerzy Panek. Woodcut matrix, 651 x 492 x 24 mm. Pic. Photography Studio, National Museum, Kraków

these scars reflects the vertical contours of the arms and the middle of the shirt, with five chisel cuts to the face and the body. Also, the double chin and the absence of the neck suggest that the man is overweight. The frown above pupil-less eyes communicates discontent bordering on aggression, and the curved cheek implies a bruised eye, most likely the result of a brawl.

All these features lead the viewer to a conclusion that they are looking at someone from the margins of society. The scars on the face ultimately become stigmata, symbolically suspended somewhere between the attribute and the stereotype (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska, 2010: 111). The man embodies an ordinary person's idea of an unkempt, perhaps violent, human being. His dishevelled appearance is further reinforced by an imperfect –seemingly 'dirty'– surface of the paper, covered in a minute web of dots and lines created as a result of the paper reaching the recessed inky areas of the block that normally do not touch it.

Panek's woodblocks are meticulously detailed, spatial reliefs that clearly do not share the austerity of his prints. In fact, in terms of their visual richness, his carved woodblock matrices and the prints that were pulled from them might seem to be worlds apart to non-printmakers. With time, his woodblock matrices gained the independent status of artworks in their own right – which is how Panek saw them. Only when pressurized by his biographer in the 1990s did he decide to use some of the blocks to make single prints (Fejkiel, 2002). Importantly, the artist would intentionally include woodblocks in his exhibitions because they were visually appealing and took the audience behind the scenes of his printmaking process.

UGLINESS

The practice of associating an ugly human being with a societal margin has a long history that goes back to the Middle Ages. In his study of the medieval phenomenon of facial disfigurement and its relation to the contemporary representations of ugliness in art, Valentin Groebner uses the term *ungestalt* that stands for both 'ugliness' and 'ugly'. The most common cause of facial disfigurement is undoubtedly violence – often extreme – whose purpose, form and, last but not least, visual representation depends on the social class represented by the victim. According to Groebner (2004: 163), 'the less civilized and refined a person was portrayed as being, and the lower his or her social status, the less he or she was expected to feel deeply.'

In the 19th century, 'internal divisions within face and body categories became even more pronounced, leading to the creation of antagonistic face types, typical of the bourgeoisie on the one hand and the proletariat on the other. Working classes were dangerous: a representative of the common people had an archetypal outlaw-criminal hidden within. The murderer's face originated as a separate category' (Courtine et al., 2007: 168). Hence, to understand Panek's work is to draw on a centuries'-old tradition of portraying criminals and



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 3. Self-portrait I (1960) by Jerzy Panek (detail). Woodcut, 680 x 520 mm. Pic. Rempex Auction House

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outlaws as ugly creatures bearing traces of their violent behaviour.

The artist's ugliness in 'Self-Portrait I' corresponds to the atmosphere permeating the Polish culture of the 1950s. At the time, alcohol abuse, theft and vandalism dominated both urban and rural landscapes. Increasing quantities of beer and wine were being purchased as the years went by, despite significant rises in price: 'In the first nine months of 1957, an average Pole spent 101 zlotys on shoes, 171 on sugar, (...) 452 on alcohol' (Kochanowski, 2017). All this resonated in the literature of the era – by the likes of Marek Hłasko or Stanisław Grochowiak – that embraced nihilism, existentialism, rural scenery and inebriated behaviour. Focusing on an individual experience, literary narratives of the time portrayed a kind of everyman representing Poles in a state of permanent crisis.

In his work, Panek also brought together well-known, rural themes – he portrayed cows and goats or women at a market – with a bitter reflection on the individual. In 'Self-portrait I', the artist is alone without any background or attributes. But while the context is by no means perceptible, the portrayed figure successfully exudes the feeling of loneliness and rejection. Alienated from the familiar world, Panek's identity remains unrecognizable, unless it were to be defined by the scars on his face.

SCULPTURAL PRINT

As Gisela Burkamp puts it: 'Panek is also a sculptor who first carves and cuts the form out of a piece of wood examining with his hands the raised webs of the wood block, whether or not they are suitable for a picture.' (Fejkiel, 2002) Panek was fascinated by sculpting and the preparation of woodblock a lot more than a final result, a print. The matrix used in the creation process of 'Self-Portrait I' (Figure 2) reveals that preference, and the richness of the wood material as well. The woodblock has multiple cuts that make it difficult to notice the raised areas that, when inked, create the impression on the paper. The cuts, made at different angles with chisels of various sizes, cross one another and run parallel to the scars, the nose, and the brows visible in the print. These cuts were undoubtedly made during severe physical labour, which only intensifies the overall impression of Panek silhouette's coarseness. A lot of chisel cuts take the form of scars or wounds on the man's face and make him look even more repulsive on the woodblock than in the print. The cuts imply the pain of the man in the portrait and become an even more profound manifestation of his progressive dehumanization.

HEAD AS MEAT

This reminds me of Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Francis Bacon's paintings. In 'Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation', Deleuze takes a look at figures deprived of skin – with meat and bones out in the open. Bacon reached the inner layers of his characters' bodies by scrubbing the surface – wiping off the skin with single brushes. As a

result, 'the face lost its form by being subjected to the techniques of rubbing and brushing that disorganize it and make a head emerge in its place. And the marks or traits of animality are not animal forms, but rather the spirits that haunt the wiped off parts, that pull at the head, individualizing and qualifying the head without a face.' (Deleuze, 2003: 21)

Deleuze differentiates between the face as an ordered structure, and the head as meat, belonging to the body. It is this impersonal head that suffers from degradation and pain. Deleuze underlines the importance of what is underneath the skin – and brought to the surface by Bacon – in interpreting the paintings that hide the true nature of the portrayed. Bacon's figures suffer 'in the very act of 'representing' horror, mutilation, prosthesis, fall or failure' (Deleuze, 2003: 62). As Deleuze (2003: 23) adds, 'meat is not dead flesh; it retains all the sufferings and assumes all the colors of living flesh. It manifests such convulsive pain and vulnerability, but also such delightful invention, colour, and acrobatics.'

SUFFERING AND SENSITIVITY

This is precisely this suffering and sensitivity that resonate in Panek's self-portrait. Even though he chose different tools and colours – a chisel and black and white tones instead of a brush and colourful hues – his figure is portrayed in a very similar manner, with what seem like open wounds on a disfigured face. Panek's silhouette appears faceless, with little but the head marked with animalistic features and hideous scars. The matrix for 'Self-Portrait I' reveals that spontaneous chisel cuts scoured the layers of pure wood from the surface of the head, as if unlayering the inner, authentic part of the self.

While Panek's representation of himself expresses his own suffering, it also reflects the nihilistic atmosphere of the late 1950s and early 1960s Poland, where everyman – be they writers or visual artists – engaged in drinking and stealing, drowning themselves in the hopelessness of the every day. In his self-portrait, Panek moves away from showcasing an individualistic experience in favour of a collective one.

Panek has been described in the following way:

Living the life of a vagabond, a tramp, and a wanderer, he had a deep connection to the province and the walls he lived in as a child. He had an inborn awareness of class.

Wróblewska, 2001: 45

When asked about his folk inspirations and the spontaneity and happiness they connoted, Panek responded:

Please take a good look at my work. It is not happy. Cheerfulness is just an appearance. I love life, but I haven't experienced much happiness.

Fejkiel, 2002: 17

Jan Fejkiel, Panek's friend and curator of numerous of his shows, gives possible reasons why the artist might have felt that way. He says that,

As a young man, [Panek] got to experience the war on the front and then lived in an occupied city where he worked as a graphic artist in a morgue. Not because he loved to draw, but because he wanted to save himself from being sent to Germany. [...] He was 24 and had already seen the worst.

Fejkiel, 2002

Bacon is known to have shouted 'Pity the meat!' as he commiserated with other humans, believing that 'every man who suffers is a piece of meat' (Deleuze, 2003: 42). In his self-portraits, Panek took on the role of a scar-faced everyman in order to show a similar understanding and pity for himself and others like him. His work is a remarkable embodiment of the gruesome reality of his times and life experiences.

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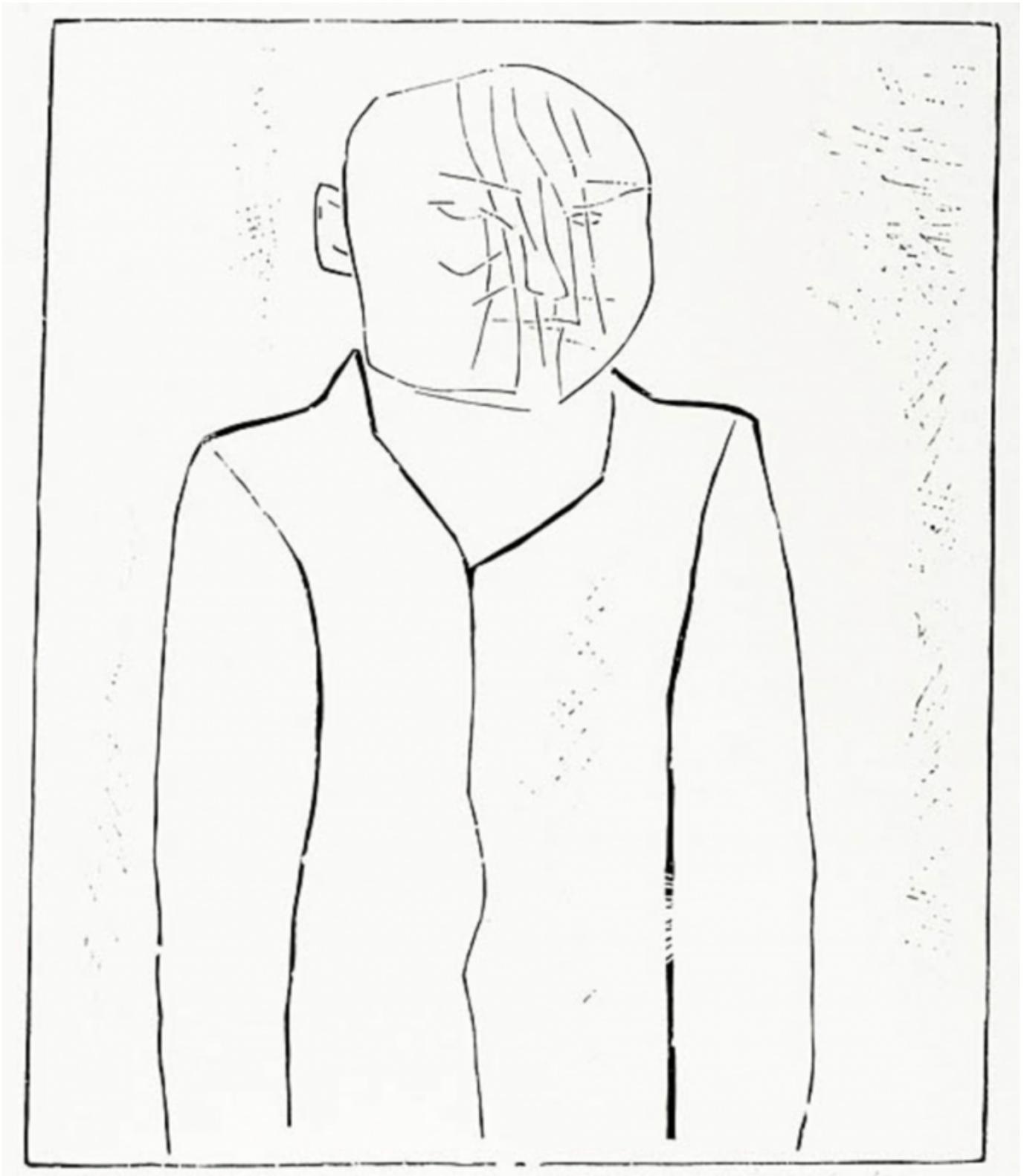


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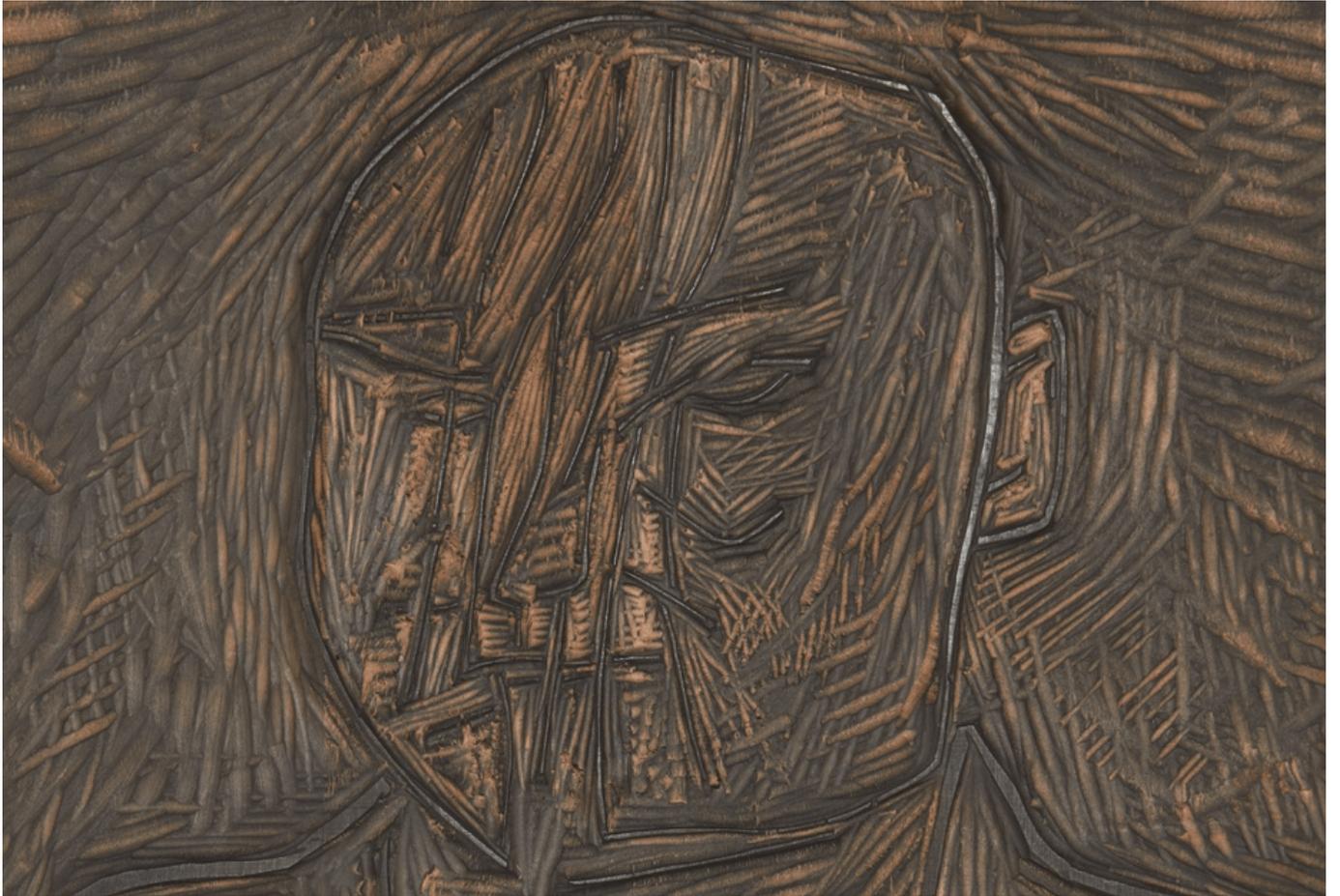


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