Polaroidisation
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Title: Polaroidisation
Doi: 10.47659/mj-v8n2id156
Publication date: 2023
Document Version: VoR
Referencing Style: Chicago
Section: Article (peer-reviewed)
Based on the work of the Polish photographer Wacław Nowak, who had the opportunity to photograph with an American Polaroid camera in the midst of the Cold War, this article focuses on the political entanglement of various materials and things identified with Western culture. Polaroidisation, as used in the title of the text, is the equivalent of the terms McDonaldisation or Coca-colonisation, which appear in treatises on American economic and political expansion. The subject of the text has become the entanglement of instant photographic techniques in the cultural rivalry of warring blocs of states. Like the famous exhibition The Family of Man (MoMA, 1955), which toured the world, repeatedly crossing the borders of the Iron Curtain, Polaroid materials and process were used as tools of Western propaganda, promoting American values and technological inventions.

Keywords: polaroid, polaroidisation, communism, western products, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, cold war photography, cultural rivalry
Introduction

In 1973, on the wave of the recent political changes in the People’s Republic of Poland, it was possible to organise several presentations of Polaroid Corporation’s instant techniques and materials, conducted by an envoy of the company’s European branch, Manfred Heiting. It was then that a partnership was established between the American company and the Polish photographer Waclaw Nowak (1924–1976), who received a free camera and a substantial stock of films through the Artist Support Programme. This seemingly trivial gesture had major political and aesthetic consequences. On the one hand, during the Cold War, the American product crossed the closely guarded Iron Curtain, the boundary separating capitalism and communism, the reality of consumerist prosperity and a deprivation-filled economy, the colourful world of freedom and the grey reality of an authoritarian regime. On the other hand, the Polish photographer, best known for his work in the field of formalistic, large-format black-and-white experimental photography that is part of the aesthetics of subjective photography, suddenly found himself with equipment for the production of small, unique and colourful snapshots, which radically changed the direction of his work. This article, based on selected excerpts from the book *Waclaw Nowak. Polaroid – imported process* (Kanicki 2021) (Figure 1), focuses on the political and cultural specificity of American photographic technology and materials. As it turns out, the promotion of instant materials in a communist country can be understood as one element of cultural rivalry. Polaroid materials assumed the role of a cultural weapon in this context.

In the preface to his book demythologising the history of the Polaroid brand and its products, Peter Buse affirms that nearly everyone knows instant cameras and their characteristic features: “the click and whirr of the motor, the image sliding out of those familiar jaws, still milky and minutes from completion; the wide white border for pulling it away, an inviting place to write” (Buse 2016, 1). William A. Ewing shared the sentiment, describing the positive associations that the Polaroid camera evokes in collective consciousness, resulting from the fact that “so many of us remember one or another Polaroid camera in our lives […] either in front of the lens or behind it” (Ewing 2017, 12). Meanwhile, to people of my generation, born and raised in Central and Eastern Europe, Polaroids seemed an exotic and luxurious product more familiar from Western films rather than daily life. Even if, as a result of the global expansion of the American popular culture,
nearly everyone in Poland knows what an instant photograph is, few of my friends have Polaroids in their family photo albums. Contrary to what Western researchers claim in their generalisations, very few Poles would take photographs or be photographed by any of the Polaroid cameras. In the collective consciousness of the inhabitants of the former Polish People’s Republic, these experiences have been replaced by memories of the general interest aroused by an occasional foreigner taking instant photographs. While the identity of the Polish people and the Western culture are closely linked, Polaroids were not a popular photographic technique applied in Poland by the 1990s. This is why Polaroids have been ignored or marginalised in the national historical and theoretical discourse.

I had been interested in the history and practice of photography for a long time, but it was not until 2011, two years after the Polaroid Corporation’s final declaration of bankruptcy, that I came across an instant camera (Fuji Instax Mini). I was fascinated by the aura of a process that instantly satisfied the curiosity of the audience, the magic of technology that initiated human relations, coupled with the objectivity of photography lost in the expanse of intangible digital photos stored on various types of disordered data carriers. It could not be compared with any previous photographic experience. My fascination with the peculiarity and the magic of the process, which is often mentioned in the literature on the subject,¹ made me reflect on the mode and areas in which instant photographs² function in the history of Polish photography. In my previous research I did not find many references to the use of Polaroids by Polish professional photographers, artists or amateurs. Therefore, at the beginning of my search I did not expect to come across materials that would be important enough to encourage an attempt to reassess the history of Polish photography. What is more, the search seemed even more futile in view of the fact that in the Polish artistic practice, amateur photographic tools, including the Polaroid camera, did not arouse any interest until the first decade of this millennium, i.e. during the deepening crisis of the American producer and the progressive agony of all the traditional, analogue photographic processes.

¹ The notion of magic appears in almost every text on instant photography that I have come across. The general attribution of magical features is confirmed by the book titles; cf. Kaps 2016; P. Sealfon 1983; Altman et al. 2012.

² The word “Polaroid” is commonly used in Poland to refer to any analogue, instant photographic processes, including products competing with the American brand (Fuji, Kodak) or the Impossible brand products launched after Polaroid’s bankruptcy. In this book, in addition of “Polaroid”, I will use synonymous terms such as the aforementioned “instant photograph”, which share the specificity of this type of process.
Figure 2. Wacław Nowak, Untitled, 1975. © Szarota Nowak.
Figure 3. Waclaw Nowak, Untitled, 1975. © Szarota Nowak.
Figure 4. Waclaw Nowak, Untitled, 1975. © Szarota Nowak.
For aesthetic, thematic and political reasons, Polaroid materials are a peculiarity in Polish photography of the mid-1970s. While other local artists from communist Poland who collaborated with Polaroid (Marek Gardulski, Janusz Leśniak and others) typically used professional (negative-positive) monochromatic materials obtained free of charge, the Krakow-based photographer Wacław Nowak decided in 1974 to risk using the SX-70 colour films which were a symbol of the amateur and pop-culture aura of the Polaroid brand. This seemingly irrelevant fact contradicts the prevailing narrative created in the history of Polish photography. Distanced from the experimental, pictorial, humanist and reportage-related trends of the time, Wacław Nowak’s colourful Polaroids were dozens of years ahead of the typically black-and-white trends in Polish photography. The highly saturated colours which failed to fade within four decades, may astonish a contemporary Polish viewer, unaccustomed to seeing colour photographs taken in communist Poland. Even in the global photographic works of the mid-1970s, when Wacław Nowak worked with the Polaroid camera, monochromatic photos still prevailed. His bold choice of subjects and colourful motifs, typical of hyper-realistic painting, were anything but popular in the Polish People’s Republic (see Figures 2–4).

In order to understand the cultural specificity of instant photographic material in the former communist bloc countries, it is worth looking first at one of the events that took place in Poland before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

**Politics of the Instant Photography**

The materials used for artistic expression can carry valuable content, defining the ways in which a work is interpreted. As Daniel Herwitz aptly noted, “Change the material and everything changes with it. The materiality of the finished form is something that cannot be abstracted from visual experience, or from meaning and effect” (2008, 139; cf. Badagliacca 2016). Thus the

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3 The word “Polaroid” is associated with instant and amateur photography alike, a single-step process and the SX-70 film format, in which a white rectangle (107 × 88 mm) hosts a square area of a colour, unique (non-reproducible) photograph (79 × 79 mm). This format, favoured by amateurs, was first introduced in 1972 and brought the producer pop-cultural fame and considerable revenues. The SX-70 materials, which enjoying huge popularity with consumers, later appeared in various areas of popular culture (e.g. films and novels) and became synonymous with the word “Polaroid”. Even contemporary a la Polaroid filters, used in various applications to modify digital pictures, typically imitate the specific colours, aesthetics and proportions of the SX-70 format: the flagship product of Polaroid Corporation.
same shape, carved in local wood, stone imported from distant lands, or gold
could be interpreted in a dramatically different and new way, taking into
account the material’s visual uniqueness or symbolic hallmark. Similarly, in
culture and industry, the material and the production process can impose
political connotations. The technologies and substances used in the process of
creating objects are frequently associated with specific places on earth, social
and cultural strata. It often happens that materials common in one place
are treated as foreign if not exotic in other parts of the world. For example,
common and omnipresent materials such as denim or plastic, which were
rare in Poland several decades ago, were oftentimes perceived as luxury and
associated with Western consumer goods that were unavailable at that time.
In her dissertation on luxury in communist Poland, Aleksandra Boćkowska
mentioned denim and its economic importance (2017, 40, 44, 47, 85, 94,
260, 267). Denim clothes were used to show off or even to stir up political
controversy. They were worn by both the privileged children of party officials
and representatives of the counterculture of the time. One of Boćkowska’s
interlocutors put on jeans with holes for his civil wedding to shock the
officers representing the government (2017, 94). Another person recalled his
Volkswagen Beatle with fashionable denim upholstery (Boćkowska 2017, 85).
Materials from capitalist countries evoked the same associations in the entire
Soviet bloc, even in countries more affluent than Poland. Presenting the
issue in her article on consumption in East Germany, Ina Merkel mentioned
long-haired boys wearing jeans (one of them was the son of a famous
composer) who, exposed to a higher standard of living on a daily basis,
seemed to embody “pure luxury”. By means of their clothes and by showing
off rare objects, they emphasised their “individualism and independence
from the common norms and values” (Merkel 2010, 55). Denim, a symbol of
America, available in communist Poland only in hard currency shops or other
outlets for the politically, professionally or economically privileged citizens
(Boćkowska 2017, 122), was an ideologically branded material. The same was
true of Polaroids: the photographic material, associated with the United States
and the Western culture, was extremely rare in Poland and other Eastern bloc
countries. As such, it took on many additional meanings, which I discuss
below.

It is not just materials that carry political significance. The same goes for
technology itself. For example, colour TV sets, which had been available in
America since the late 1960s, did not become widely available in Poland until
the mid-80s. Before that, overlays brought from the West, placed on TV sets
to imitate a colour screen, enjoyed huge popularity (Boćkowska 2017, 48). While in the 1950s, TV sets were in almost every American household, in communist Poland people would wear their Sunday best to visit their more affluent neighbours, proud owners of TV sets (Boćkowska 2017, 47).

It turns out that the politics of the image creation technology is also related to instant photography. When Waclaw Nowak took pictures with his SX-70 camera, other Polish fans of photography could only have known about this type of equipment from brief and rare mentions in the press or a casual description in a popular manual on photographic technique by Tadeusz Cyprian (1953). The instantaneous nature of the process, the specific colours and the format of the photograph were rare privileges in communist Poland. On the other hand, by the mid-1970s in the USA, where Edwin Land invented and patented his technology, instant photos had been known and popular for a quarter of a century. The first cameras, introduced by the American inventor in the late 1940s, i.e. at a time when hardly anyone in Poland had heard of instant photography, sold in the whopping number of 900,000 units a year (Bonanos 2012, 44; Kaps 2016, 25). The introduction of the SX-70 process sparked great interest in this type of photography, which reached its peaked in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, as interpreted by Peter Buse (Buse 2007, 33). By 1983, 43% of American households already had instant cameras (Chalfen 1987, 14; cf. Buse 2007, 33) whereas in Poland, hardly anyone had the equipment and if they did, they could rarely afford to use it regularly, saving the priceless films for special occasions. As a result of the widespread use of Polaroids and the pop-cultural interest in instant photography in the USA, both this type of photography and the resulting instant photos are mainly associated with America, i.e. a country on the opposite side of the Cold War front.

The political conditioning of the technology is confirmed by the events from the early years of photography, when the newly discovered medium was an object of economic rivalry between France and Great Britain (Badger 2014). The opportunities to compete availed themselves during the numerous world exhibitions that promoted the advantages of each technology. While the calotype, a British invention patented by William Fox Talbot, made it possible to reproduce photographic images (a feature deemed one of the essential

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4 Information about Edwin Land’s inventions were mentioned in the first and the subsequent editions of the manual, reprinted and supplemented many times. In the first editions, a half-page description was included in the chapter on Experimental constructs.
properties of photography), the French daguerreotype soon made it possible to create detailed, sharper pictures of superior quality to those copied from a negative. However, the expiry of the patents and the publication of the photochemical process was a strategic move that put the daguerreotype at the forefront of the photographic race. The democratisation, popularisation, mass nature and low cost (compared to painting) of the daguerreotype can therefore be seen as the opposite of the uniqueness of Talbot’s reserved negative-positive techniques, which were relatively expensive and only used by more affluent amateurs of photography or friends of the British inventor. The capitalist foundation of Talbot’s technology, underpinned by profit maximisation, is in contrast to the generally available daguerreotype. However, if the capitalist or social attribution had been impacted by the essential features of either the processes or the resulting pictures, the above presented polarisation would have been reversed. According to Walter Benjamin’s mechanical reproduction, the uniqueness and originality of images (here daguerreotypes) adds auratic properties, affects the aesthetic experience of an image and is related to the bourgeois culture while mechanical copies (possibly owing to calotype) allow the concept of originality to be suspended, stimulating democratisation, the dissemination of images and, consequently, opening up to a mass audience (Benjamin 1975).

The idea of instant photography, promoted by the Polaroid Corporation, relied on the features of the first photographic processes that gave images a distinctly bourgeois, capitalist or downright consumerist status. While some researchers associate the invention of photography with the bourgeoisie and consumerism (Sontag 1986, 140, 161), due to the exemplary nature and the costs of the pictures, the medium’s bourgeois status is most solidified in the single-use, instant films of Polaroid. On the one hand (just like in Talbot’s discoveries), the American producer meticulously registered its technologies, monopolising the instant photography market. On the other hand, Polaroid’s unique products were often sold in luxurious boutiques, next to expensive and elitist objects. What is more, the inimitable Polaroids are associated with the singularity of modernist works of art, attributed by Walter Benjamin and Peter Burger to the cult of originality, the experience of the magic of an image (emerging), the bourgeois culture and the market in general (Benjamin 1975; Burger 2006). Even the cracks in the photographic emulsion or the smudges on it, typical of Polaroids, contribute to Benjamin’s aura. While the Polaroid Corporation declared its intention to democratise the instant processes, we should bear in mind that due to the prices of the products, the process only
encompassed middle-class photography users from the affluent, capitalist West.

Interestingly, the bridge between the photographic inventions of the late 1830s and Polaroids is also attributed to the international political and economic rivalry. When in 1972 the world was excited by the single-step SX-70 technology, Edwin Land, the inventor of the Polaroid camera, had experience beyond the production of polarising filters and instant films. Land and his company had long been involved in governmental projects dedicated to military, espionage and space technologies used in the multifaceted political rivalry of the Cold War time (McElheny 1999, chapters 15–17). While much remain unknown about the direct and informed involvement of instant photography in the technological rivalry between the two opposing blocs, there is no doubt that it was a tool used in cultural competition. By exposing and promoting the Polaroid technology in the enemy countries, the Americans must have been aware of its allure. The magic of the process enthralled not only the ordinary, oppressed citizens of the communist countries. Land’s biographies repeat the story about six renown economists from the USSR who took a trip to America in 1959, the most memorable part of which was a visit to a Polaroid factory (McElheny 1999, 200). The brand’s promotional efforts in the Eastern Bloc were designed to create strong impressions.

In 1959, Poland hosted *The Family of Man*, an exhibition that toured the world. It was one of the most distinct and interesting examples of the use of photography in the international cultural competition and a clever way of sneaking in cryptopropaganda of the Western values. The exposition, curated by Edward Steichen, promoted American ideals and universalism in the hostile political bloc under the guise of high culture, abundant in peace-related narratives, and had a major impact on the history of photography in countries such as Poland, the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia (Sandeen 2009).

The technologies patented by Land were excellent propagators of the American values, demonstrated in the essence of the process itself and in the immanent features of the Polaroid photographic products: automation, freedom, technological brilliance, excellent quality, entertainment and pop culture. As Ewing aptly noted, Polaroids were in fact a microcosm of the ideal America, combining idea, technology, organisation, business, corporation,
brilliance, speed, colours, candidness, reliability, competitiveness, progress and, last but not least, entertainment (Ewing 2017, 19). The automated use of a camera and the process of developing pictures was meant to turn the instant photographic techniques into a universal and democratic form of photography, useful and easily digestible by anyone, irrespective of their technical skills or knowledge of photochemistry. Therefore, by promoting Polaroids, the Americans also propagated values close to their culture. Like Coca-Cola, Polaroid instant films are products of American culture and technology, coveted by the societies of the former Eastern Bloc.

Coca-Cola, as well as the other American pop culture products such as McDonald’s, to name but one, provide an important point of reference for Polaroids. Although the soda found its way into shops in communist Poland, and was even produced locally from the 1970s (Johnson 2009, 142), its logo still oozed bourgeois capitalism, a tool of economic and political propaganda of the West. Anti-American sentiments, reflected in various areas of the Eastern Bloc culture, were propagated mostly on the threshold of the Cold War. This is why the caption “Coca-Cola” adorns the dress worn by a bourgeois woman who was thus marked in Wojciech Fangor’s Postaci (Figures), one of the most famous pictures of the Polish social realism from 1950. At the same time, propaganda banners placed in public spaces bore slogans demonising the all-American drink with a warning: “The enemy is tempting you with Coca-Cola!” (Antoszek and Delaney 2006, 242). Later on, the extremely negative feelings towards products from the USA subsided. Nevertheless, American industry, culture and the products of Western economies were often perceived as a tangible danger until the system transformation in 1989. At the same time, throughout the communist period, possession of American products and admiration for the products of Western popular culture (e.g. rock music) were perceived as signs of resistance to the authorities and the official cultural policy. In a polarised world divided into two blocs, showing off the products and symbols of the opposing coalition was like a political credo. Wearing jeans was often considered a form of expressing unpopular opinions, inclinations for the West and aversion to communism. However, the official dislike of America was accompanied by a covert but general admiration among citizens. A case in point is a memorable event, President Richard Nixon’s visit to Poland in 1972: he was greeted in the streets by cheering crowds defying the Communist Party’s suggestions to stay at home (Długoleski 2012, 69).
The political expansion of the USA, which consisted of promoting the American lifestyle in Europe, also employed other consumer goods. In works on the economic conquest of the Old Continent, “Coca-Colonisation” is accompanied by “Hollywoodisation”, “Disneyfication” and “McDonaldisation” (Bischof 2006, 164), terms coined on the basis of names of the most famous American mass products and cultural phenomena that flooded Western Europe during the Cold War. Although the countries under the communist regime did not have American fast food bars, the products of American pop culture (such as Disney cartoons and films, Western films and rock and roll) and industry (automobiles, consumer electronics and household equipment) were among rare luxuries, while the awareness of their existence stimulated the imagination of society. In the 1970s and 80s Poles knew the McDonald’s brand, but few had the opportunity to eat at the chain’s restaurants. While in America and the West it was associated with cheap food of poor quality, in Poland it enjoyed the status of an elegant and unavailable restaurant.

Contrary to popular belief, Polaroids have a lot in common with the McDonald’s chain. Apart from the cooperation between the two brands (Kaps 2016, 85), they shared the need for instant consumer appeasement (of hunger or curiosity), made possible by technology and automation. Fast food has an analogy with the Polaroid fast photo process. Moreover, the literature on the subject presents examples of confrontations between the two giants of the American economy. Ewing, for example, compared instant photographs with fast food, pointing to their shared on-the-spot consumption (Ewing 2017, 13). Toshio Shibata, mentioned by Ewing in his book, drew attention to the home consumption of Type 55 negatives, reminiscent of eating food on the go (in Ewing 2017, 13). Although, unlike McDonald’s, the producer of Polaroids initially offered unique and high quality products, in both companies the product technology served to satisfy consumer needs as fast as possible. The two companies shared a democratic operation that encompassed all societies in economically developed countries. Both brands were also involved in global expansion. Over time, Polaroid began to resemble McDonald’s even more, abandoning high quality products and openly flirting with pop culture, shoddy products and cheap entertainment. This is corroborated by the producer’s later cameras, the Tasmanian Devil Cam and Barbie (Buse 2016), whose design was a reference to cartoon characters and toys popular in the

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5 McDonald’s restaurants appeared in Poland in the early 1990s and, for most of the last decade of the 20th century, they enjoyed the status of venues for more affluent customers.
West. Finally, the miniature I-Zone format for taking cheap and small pictures of poor quality confirmed the extreme pop-culture or downright fast-food aspect of the Polaroid brand in the 1990s.

The instant nature of satisfying the photography user’s curiosity makes Polaroids an object of consumption. The co-participation in the process and the use of expensive films reflect the typical consumption of objects. This is topped off by the celebration of the “here and now” so characteristic of the early consumer culture (Retort Collective 2005, 181–183). Quite possibly, the specific “consumption of Polaroids” resulted in a situation where even the archives of Polish amateur photography have so few pictures in store; they have been damaged, lost, dispersed or, first and foremost, handed out once the pictures were developed. According to researchers into instant photography, although Polaroids are often handed over to the individuals participating in the process of creating the picture, their uniqueness adds an extra tangible value. Florian Kaps, an instant photography enthusiast who struggled to reactivate Polaroid brand right after the manufacturer’s bankruptcy, wondered why Polaroids were not more expensive on the market of artistic photography. He also noted that a Polaroid print was both singular and auratic (as Benjamin saw it) and “anointed” by the author’s direct touch (Kaps 2016, 62) or at least his/her active participation in the process. After all, a photographer taking Polaroid pictures marks his/her presence in the entire (albeit short) creative act. Meanwhile, unlike the instant, single-step Polaroids, traditional negative-positive techniques often led to severing of the binds between the author and the work. Many artists would give the negatives to their assistants and would not take part in the process of producing the final picture (Loengard 1994, 5–7).

Instant photographs and fast food, indeed any readily available goods, must have captivated the imagination of people from the former Eastern Bloc who were accustomed to queuing for hours in front of shops that barely stocked the most basic everyday items. Many consumer goods that were considered ordinary and commonly used in the West were known in Poland only from films, or possibly from hard currency shops and parcels sent by

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6 The author’s doubts about the unjustified poor value of instant photography may be attributed to the automation of the development process which typically leads to suspending Benjamin’s aura typical of a modernist work of art. While modernist works are man-made, Polaroids are associated with machine, automated production.

7 The author provides examples of photographers (e.g. Andre Kertesz) who would give the negatives to their assistants, refusing to participate in the production process.
friends and family members from abroad. Enthusiasts of Polaroid cameras in Poland typically received the equipment in parcels from abroad; once the lucky recipient ran out of the integral film, the camera was useless. Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, the official expansion of instant photography was complemented by the unofficial channels of global distribution of the American manufacturer’s products.

Polaroid and fastfood restaurants share another feature associated with all things American: the automation of the goods production process in which the role of humans is minimized. They are replaced by machines and ready-to-use substances. Automation has been associated with the United States at least since the famous Ford factories, which assembled cars through a process of mass, rationalised production. It is hardly a coincidence that the dishwasher was invented in America back in the 19th century (its fully automated versions, closer to the prototypes of the 1920s, became a household name in Poland only in the 21st century). The same can be said of many pieces of equipment that make life easier. Automation, one of the distinguishing features of the American lifestyle, was an important subject of articles in the propaganda monthly Ameryka, published since the late 1950s. It offered the inhabitants of communist Poland a glimpse of the benefits of Western technologies. The very first issue of the magazine, published in 1959, contained an article entitled “The victory of automats”, in which Olga Arnold described a number of devices that produced and sold food, newspapers, cosmetics, post stamps, insurance, coffee or Coca-Cola (Arnold 1959, 15–17). Therefore, automation accelerated the availability of all consumer goods, which in countries like communist Poland could only be obtained by waiting in queues for hours or by paying hard currency.

Automation is also a characteristic feature of photographic inventions. The need to make life easier and to mechanise the process of producing pictures was at the heart of Kodak’s famous advertising slogan from 1888, which promoted the first truly amateur cameras: “You press the button, we do the rest.” It was hardly an accident that the slogan and the camera were invented in the United States, opening a new chapter in the history of amateur photography. Less than forty years later, New York was home to the pioneering, fully automatized photo booths where portrait pictures for various types of documents were produced in a matter of minutes. In this context, the Polaroid camera was yet another American photographic invention that automated the process of producing a photograph, speeding up the delivery
of the final product and guaranteeing instant satisfaction of curiosity and consumer expectations.

Just like the concepts of McDonaldisation or Coca-Colonisation in sociological literature, the term “Polaroidisation” can refer to the broadly defined processes of the USA economic and cultural expansion in Europe, including the promotion of the American photographic technology. Of course, Western Europe was the major area of these efforts; however, the countries behind the Iron Curtain were also directly influenced by the United States. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, corporations such as McDonald’s, Levi’s and Polaroid started to include the post-Soviet markets into their sphere of influence. Before 1989, the economic, cultural and political propaganda of the United States had focused primarily on Western Europe, ricocheting in Poland and other countries.

Problems with the supply of goods in the Polish People’s Republic did not mean that Poles did not own instant cameras. Ironically, despite the official anti-American attitude, the communist officials were frequent and eager users of American inventors. This is why the shops offering Western products in Poland were first available exclusively to members of the Communist Party. After all, they had enough money to buy and easily use luxury goods. Indeed, this was the mode of operation throughout the Communist bloc; Fidel Castro loved American films, cars and Coca-Cola; he also owned a Polaroid camera (Gonzalez 2001, 228) (Figure 5), which he used to photograph Nikita Khrushchev and his family (the irony could not have been lost on them). In Poland, Edward Gierek, First Secretary of the Polish United Workers’ Party, was also a proud owner of an instant camera (Seidler 1983, 260, 262).

The media in communist countries, censored and hostile towards America, could not freely promote products of American culture or industry. For this reason, Polaroids were rarely discussed in the photographic press in communist Poland. “Photography”, the most audacious trade magazine, usually published information about instant technology in short rubrics dedicated to Western technological or economic solutions (Z prasy zagranicznej 1957, 224; Sommer 1957, 275; Z prasy zagranicznej 1958, 461; Sommer 1959, 165–168). Following the rule adopted in many communist

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8 Sommer (1959, 165–168) was the first to cover more comprehensively the various, mostly technical, aspects of the American instant technology.
Figure 5. Alberto Korda, *Fidel Castro taking Polaroid pictures of Nikita Khrushchev with his family during the trip to USSR in 1963*. Reproduction after: steemkr.com, bit.ly/3A0kDBP. © Alberto Corda.
Figure 6. Advertising brochure of Polaroid Corp, late 1960's.
countries, information on Polaroid’s invention was preceded by a mention of the *Moment* camera, a Soviet counterfeit of the first American instant camera; the writer did not devote a single word to the imitative nature of the Soviet product (cf. Aparat Fotograficzny 1953, 14). In addition to the official aversion to America, the undermining the products of Polaroid Corporation probably stemmed from the economic limitations (the prices of Polaroids were high even by Western standards) as well as the widespread, albeit erroneous opinion that the products were for meant for amateurs and therefore not suitable for professional or artistic practices.

The political actions of the Americans were most evident in the promotional materials targeted at photographers from the Eastern Bloc, for whom the Polaroid products were usually financially unavailable. In the late 1960s, an advertising brochure was published with the Eastern market in mind (with texts in Polish, Russian and English) that promoted amateur cameras (the Automatic 250 Land Camera) and professional equipment (the Polaroid MP-3, used for industrial photography, the Polaroid CU-5 system for macrophotography, the Polaroid XR-7 for X-ray crystallography and the ID-2 camera for passport photos) (Figure 6). The brochure’s cover featured a colour photograph of a clown embracing a small boy holding balloons. The photograph is reminiscent of children’s birthday parties organised at McDonald’s restaurants. The clown has become a symbol of the American chain and, according to Kaps, millions of Polaroids were taken every year during children’s parties organised in the outlets of this biggest fast food chain (Kaps 2016, 85). Clowns, which have become one of the recurring themes in American pop culture, could have had negative connotations in communist regimes, whose authorities saw them as a symbol of “the American empire of delights”10. Polaroid also evokes associations with consumer luxury and superficial fun, as suggested by contemporary research into the history of instant photography (Buse 2016).

The brochure in question is not the only indication of the American producer’s expansion into Eastern Europe. *Ameryka*, the propaganda magazine mentioned above, which tempted its readers with highquality colour illustrations (a rarity in the Polish press at the time), published an article on instant photography in the 1960s, glorifying Edwin H. Land, an inventor and

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10 The phrase “the American empire of fun” as in Bischof 2006, 164.
head of the Polaroid Corporation, and presenting him, in line with American fashion, almost as a superhero of science and industry (Bello 1959, 15–17, 18). The context of the magazine’s content is equally important; it focused on promoting the various aspects of American culture, economy and society. The same issue featured articles on American cars, cowboys, basketball, Alfred Hitchcock and Mark Twain as well as modern factories and social and economic issues. The subjects could have been attractive and tempting in the eyes of the average resident of a communist country. High-quality colour photos that were later often published in the magazine seemed to provide a view of a different, richer and happier world. Similar impressions were created during visits to hard currency shops or when unpacking parcels sent by relatives from the West.

Information and propaganda were often accompanied by active promotion of the American technology of instant photography, resulting in public presentations of its capabilities. This promotion confirms the involvement of the American invention in politics. Back in the 1970s, the US Consulate in Poznań, which strongly interested in propagating Western culture, was willing to support exhibitions dedicated to Polaroid. In 1975, Zbigniew Wroblewski, a photographer and then president of the Szczecin Photographic Association, who was fascinated with the instant process, decided to organise one of these exhibitions. According to his account, local party officials tried to sabotage the event by sending out letters forbidding the exhibition to be held in the original location, the Ducal Castle in Szczecin. Thanks to Wroblewski’s determination, the exhibition History of Instant Photography was relocated to the local Maritime Cultural Centre. Not a single political official made an appearance, although they had all been invited. The context of the developments has led to the perception of Polaroid in Poland as a politically incorrect phenomenon, a dangerous technology and persona non grata. However, in an isolated society, anything foreign, especially goods from behind the Iron Curtain, aroused general interest and fascination, attracting crowds of curious spectators.

Aware of the competitive advantages of instant photography, the Americans were also involved in other promotional projects in the Eastern Bloc. As a result, Poles had the opportunity to see Polaroid products at the Poznań

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11 I thank Zbigniew Wroblewski for providing me with materials and information about the exhibition he organised.
International Fair (a brochure was most probably printed for the occasion). The most memorable event in the history of the Cold War was the famous American National Exhibition organized in Moscow’s Sokolniki Park in 1959, during which Vice President Richard Nixon met with USSR Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev. Instant photography technology, meant to confirm the American engineering brilliance, was presented during the exhibition alongside Disney amusement parks (Buse 2016) and many other pop culture tools of economic, political and cultural rivalry. Yet again, Polaroid was employed as an element of American propaganda, drawing on the achievements of industry and culture in the process of expansion and political struggle. Instant photography itself reappeared in the company of American pop culture and entertainment – its twin areas, frequently perpetuated in instant pictures.

The American crypto-propaganda, disguised in the innocent promotion of consumer products and technological achievements, could have affected organisation of meetings dedicated to Polaroids in communist Poland. During these presentations, which took place in big cities, Polish photographers had the opportunity to learn about the functioning, the properties of the materials and the magic of instant processes. On the other hand, the organisers must have been aware that the economic gap between the Polish People’s Republic and the capitalist West made this type of meetings pointless from an economic point of view as it did not generate the consumer interest in the products typical of the more affluent countries. However, the promotional events could have had political repercussions. This was the hidden reason for supporting these events; for example, the International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP) was supported by the United States Information Agency (USIA), which now perceived as a propaganda department of cultural politics, if not of the colonisation of other countries (cf. Cull 2008). The role of the agency, which was established in 1953, was to “tell America’s story to the world” (Cull 2008, 1). The products of the Polaroid Corporation, whose instant nature and relations with pop culture and entertainment reflected the American model of life, could have been a good medium for a typical American story. For this reason, the products worked best as tools of cultural expansion or economic struggle against propaganda in a communist regime that tended to conceal all the temptations of the Western lifestyle from its citizens.

As well as promoting the American instant photography technologies, the promoters also selected artists to cooperate with the Polaroid Collection.
The much coveted invitation came with a free promotional package that typically included a camera and a large set of instant films. The distinguished photographer would send his or her pictures to the producer’s headquarters, where they would be selected and included in a collection for use at promotional events, international trade fairs and exhibitions. The remaining pictures were sent back to the photographer who, if he or she continued to work with the brand, could count on further deliveries of free films. When Polaroid Corporation was advertising the SX-70 technology in Europe at a promotional event organised in Krakow around 1973, Wacław Nowak met Manfred Heiting and was invited to cooperate with Polaroid. The Polish photographer received a new SX-70 camera and at least 200 rolls of film to experiment with as he saw fit. It was then that they began to correspond; in addition to short telegrams on current events, Waclaw Nowak would send many pictures to the European headquarters of Polaroid (some of which were returned to the photographer), and received more films – and perhaps a fee – in return.13

In the political context and the related status of Polaroid’s products (in communist Poland treated as a dangerous and unwanted tool for the expansion of an enemy country), the seemingly innocent gesture of presenting an unknown photographer from a communist country with an instant camera could have been interpreted as installing the “American eye” in an anti-American and pro-Soviet country. Interestingly, the presentation of photographic equipment marked the beginning of two-way migration: free photographic technology was transferred to a country outside the official distribution channel, and the documentary sights registered by the technology were returned to the West. This Polaroid “photographic eye” was able to provide credible (unprocessed) images representing aesthetics untypical of the region (the specific colours, shape, format, optics, quality), sometimes bordering on politically incorrect subjects. Pictures “seen” through the lens of a Polaroid camera are different from the “photographic vision” of residents of a communist country who typically used equipment produced in the Eastern Bloc.

The visual attractiveness of photographs and their instant nature, coupled with the ease of use of Polaroid cameras, incorporated a metaphor of capitalism that tempted with the form, content, simplicity and direct nature

13 In his telegrams to Waclaw Nowak from 1974, Manfred Heiting mentioned the remuneration and the possible problems with the bank. In one of them, he even suggested 200 US dollars for which he intended to purchase 14 of Nowak’s Polaroid photographs.
of individual experiences. Also important is the specific tangibility of instant photographs, which, together with the other features of the pictures and their development process, made Polaroids such as the SX-70 unique among the other types of photography practised in this geographical region. Owing to instant processes, citizens of communist countries sometimes became the owners of unusual photographs: peculiar, almost magical subjects. The fact that they were rare and hard to get came at a high price and had specific aesthetic characteristics clearly added to their cultural value. Unlike in affluent Western countries, where the prevalence of Polaroids made them a common commodity whose specificity was accepted, in Poland taking instant photos still arouses considerable interest. This is due to the peculiar process of developing the photograph and the distinct formal dissimilarity of instant pictures. For the same reasons, Poles who remember foreign tourists using Polaroid cameras in communist Poland recall the fascination, curiosity and uniqueness of the photographic technology. In a country plagued by continuous shortages of products and anticipation of unavailable goods, the instant effect must have confirmed the existence of a different, better world. The mundanity and misery of the visual culture in communist Poland, resulting from the prevalence of monochromatic materials and prints, bland packaging and low quality products, stood in stark contrast to the colourful world known from American films, with its abundance of different types of goods that instantly satisfied consumers’ expectations. This was why the lucky owners of Polaroid cameras could carry them about, creating an illusion of Western luxury, welfare and carefree play with photography. After all, these were the days when youngsters collected “foreign waste” (packaging, cans, crown caps, etc.) whose untypical design and colours were associated in Poland with luxury, the West and a different, free world.

Just like tourists from the West, Polaroids were a culturally foreign phenomenon, while their untypical instant nature, colours, format and even the cameras themselves were very different from the technologies and photographic activity of the Polish society. In order to define the photographic culture of Americans, Richard Chalfen introduced the notions of “Kodak Society” and “Polaroid People”. They had their Eastern equivalents, which
could be labelled “ORWO Society” and “Smena People”,
referring to all the idiosyncrasies of the local photographic practices of amateurs from the former Eastern Bloc. It was no coincidence that here, amateur photographers took far fewer pictures that differed from the most popular genres of photography produced in the affluent West in terms of form, conventions and even development techniques. Economic, political and cultural factors affected the great differences in photographic practices in communist Poland, both among amateurs and professionals.

Despite the opinion of an experimenter, Wacław Nowak’s interest in the single-step photography, which does not allow for manipulation, may have been influenced by several factors. In his works from the early 1970s, subjective experiments gave way to realistic takes, with the picture-maker taking on the role of the picture-taker. The colours of instant films were also extremely attractive and tempting, superior to the ORWO materials that were most popular in that part of the world. Like many other Polish artists of the time, Nowak was also fascinated by the culture behind the Iron Curtain. His friend, the photographer Wojciech Plewiński, remembered Nowak’s studio as a venue where jazz was played, where foreign colour magazines were read, and where “the entire West decomposed with poisonous stench” (Plewiński 2008, 9). This comes as no surprise, given Wacław Nowak’s numerous foreign trips, which allowed him to see the real Western world while at the same time maintaining his distance from life in communist Poland, the local art and the artistic and cultural cliques.

Wacław Nowak and Wojciech Plewiński clearly shared a fascination for the West. Together with another Krakow based photographer, Zbigniew Łagocki, they decided to produce Pierwszy polski western panoramiczny Kobylegrodek story [The first Polish panoramic cowboy picture Kobylegrodek story], published in the Przekroj weekly (Nowak et al. 1964, 10) (Figure 7). The plot of the subsequent episodes of this humorous photo story was inspired by American film productions about the Wild West, so the actors (including the photographers) played cowboys and Indians. Wacław Nowak was a villain, Kim Novak a cowboy. Undoubtedly, the grotesque concealed warm feelings.

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14 I use the terms “ORWO Society” and “Smena People” with reference to the terms “Kodak Society” and “Polaroid People”, used by Richard Chalfen (Chalfen, 1987). The author discusses amateur photography in the USA in detail. The terms I have suggested are intended to emphasise the specific way in which photographs functioned in the former Eastern Bloc, where for various reasons (economic, political, cultural), this medium was used in a very different way.
Figure 8. Waclaw Nowak, Untitled, 1975. © Szarota Nowak.
for American popular culture. Bearing this in mind, Nowak’s later Polaroids and cooperation with the American giant only confirm his acceptance of the Western, capitalist aesthetics and technology.

**In Conclusion**

In summary, Jerzy Dworak’s *Moj polaroid* project, which made it possible to recognise “the Polaroid state of mind”, conceals a considerable political charge. Due to the unavailability of American photographic materials in communist Poland, Dworak decided to imitate their form, perpetuating in his works references to the American popular culture negated in Poland, thus praising the various benefits of the Western invention. Undoubtedly, this political charge also underlies Waclaw Nowak’s works. The use of Polaroids, deemed politically incorrect and culturally foreign technology, involved changes in the way in which the world was observed and in the photographing process. In Poland, the fast-food culture epitomised by McDonald’s was an equivalent of instant photography, unknown in the country. The half-hearted Coca-colonisation of Poland was continued by the marginal Polaroidisation of the Polish society.

One of instant photographs of still life taken by Waclaw Nowak depicted a bottle of Pepsi Cola, a drink with a similar name and origin to Coca Cola ([Figure 8](#)). It is no coincidence that the bodies of foreign cars documented in Nowak’s many instant photographs are reminiscent of the pictures painted by the American hyperrealists, representatives of an artistic style whose essential features defied the culture and artistic practice of the communist regime. An American drink or an American car seem to be ideal (or adequate) subjects of pictures taken using the American photographic process (Polaroid). At the first glance, they look like Western works of art, created in accordance with the aesthetics of pop-art and hyperrealism. Nevertheless, the political involvement of Polaroids used in a communist country adds brand new meanings to the objects and motifs photographed by Waclaw Nowak. The geopolitical context plays a key role here. When a citizen of the Polish People’s Republic came across a Polaroid or a hamburger from McDonald’s, the essence of the products of the Western economy lost its balance and was transformed; the escalation and celebration of the related experiences, the political meaning attributed to them, and the incommensurable high economic value of these products – these are only some of the factors affecting the change.
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Acknowledgement

The article is a compiled, revised and amended version of the selected chapters of the forward to the book: Witold Kanicki, Waclaw Nowak. *Polaroid – fotografia z importu* (Lucowo-Poznań, 2021).

Short Biography

Dr. Witold Kanicki (born 1979) – is an art historian, assistant professor at the Department of Art Education and Curatorial Studies, Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznan (Poland). He worked as a guest lecturer at the Zurich University of the Arts – ZHDK (Switzerland). He is an independent curator and critic. His book about the negative pictures and negativity in the history of photography (*Ujemny biegun fotografii*) was published in 2016 by Słowo/Obraz, Terytoria Publishing House. In 2021 he published a book about Polaroids of Waclaw Nowak from the mid-70s and their significance in the communist Polish People’s Republic. He has written more than 50 articles published in scientific journals, as well as in exhibitions catalogues and magazines on contemporary art and photography. He is interested in the history and theory of photography, contemporary art, new museology and curating. He is currently working on the cultural history of Polaroid processes in Poland.