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Title

Palaceology, or Palace-as-Methodology: Ethnographic Conceptualism, Total Urbanism and a Stalinist Skyscraper in Warsaw

Abstract

This paper describes some experiments with fieldwork methodology, which I carried out while researching the relationship between a Stalinist skyscraper (the Palace of Culture and Science) and the social life of contemporary Warsaw. Making use of three concepts of totality taken from social and art theory (the Maussian 'total social fact', the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk and anthropological holism), I show how the provocative style and public scale of Palaceological 'ethnographic conceptualism' – which 'triangulates' participant observation, artlike public ethnographic 'interventions' and a quantitative survey – mirrors the bombastic manner and pervasive scope of the Palace's presence in the social life of the city.

My intention is not to argue that a 'total social fact', an urban Gesamtkunstwerk, a piece of Stalinist city planning or an experiment with ethnographic methodology-as-conceptual art can actually 'achieve' (descriptive or normative) totality. Rather, I put together an illustration of how something like what Hannerz (1980) calls an 'urban portrait' – the product of an aspiration to approximate and to measure the totality of an urban environment, rather than to embrace partiality as an end in itself – can be attempted.

Biography

Michal Murawski is writing about the relationship between the Palace of Culture and Science, a 231-metre high Stalinist skyscraper which dominates central Warsaw, and the contemporary city. He is particularly interested in examining whether and how non-human, material entities like buildings and streets, as well as allegedly abstract, intangible entities like history, memory and the economy, possess the capacity to exert an autonomous impact on the field of relations between Warsaw and the Palace.