

POST-WAR CINEMA AND THE TRAPS OF THE POLISH CONSCIOUSNESS

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I treat my article as a statement not so much on history itself – the recent history and the so-called communist, post-war history – as about our consciousness: the consciousness of people brought up in the Polish People's Republic. In my case, one of the key elements of this consciousness, the place of its concentration, next to family tradition, was the cinema. I will recall two films, made at an interval of 50 years, concerning the complex of collective consciousness. The juxtaposition may seem surprising: *Popiół i diament* [*Ashes and Diamonds*] by Andrzej Wajda and *Wszyscy jesteśmy Chrystusami* [*All of Us Are Christs*] by Marek Kotowski.

The complex in question is rooted in a sense of defeat brought about by strangers. This trauma is understandable, but like any illness, it must be treated, since otherwise it will completely poison our public sphere, our imagination and our politics. I am thinking of funereal patriotism, the cult of defeat and attachment to it, of its perverse evocation.

I think of Polish Messianism, deeply rooted if not in Baroque times, then certainly in Romanticism. It seemed that successive generations, working in 1956, 1968, 1976, 1980 and 1989, working effectively for freedom, had weakened this complex. It turned out, however, that it is erupting with a new force.

I shall quote two texts representing different styles – high and low. The first one is a fragment of what constitutes a romantic bible to Poles, the second one is a spontaneous statement by an activist from under the cross at Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, recorded in an étude by Michał Brożonowicz, a student of the Łódź film school, entitled *Mam prawo tu stać* [*I Have the Right to Stand Here*].

Here are the key sentences from Adam Mickiewicz's (1833: 20):

And the Polish nation was crucified and brought into its tomb. And the kings shouted: 'We have killed freedom – we have buried it'. (...) For the Polish nation is not dead! (...) And on the third day, the soul shall return to its body, and the nation shall rise from the dead, and shall free all the nations of Europe from slavery.

This vision of the martyrdom of the nation, associated with the martyrdom of Christ, who brings freedom to the whole world, has been weighing on the Polish consciousness for two hundred years. Twentieth-century critics of this tradition – Czesław Miłosz and Maria Janion – accused it of fostering national idolatry, creating a perverse megalomania of suffering, a cult of deadly sacrifice. Let us add, this means seeing our collective situation always in a worse light than it is. According to this tradition, post-war Poland is presented only in a martyr-like and heroic light, as if the society was composed only of the persecutors and the persecuted.

Here is an authentic voice from the Warsaw street in 2010: 'The Polish nation will block the entrance to the palace, and this traitor, this Russian minion, will not be allowed in at all!' – so called a defender of the cross to a silent man and the camera standing there. The scene resembles a model text, which we can hear today from politicians, and its folk version is represented by the following statement:

Now there will be bloodshed! Now a nation that is divided will spill blood! We will not tolerate murderers who cannot explain the Smolensk catastrophe! You are not a Pole, because you voted for the traitor of the nation! Polish blood will be shed. I am ready to give my life for the President, posthumously, the one who was murdered. Me as a Pole. Who are you? If you're not Polish, you don't belong here!¹

Here is a street caricature of romantic Messianism, functioning in Poland in 2010. However, I would like to recall a year which is extremely important in the post-war history of Poland. It was important for me because it was the first moment when my, then still childish, national consciousness

¹ Statement heard on the streets of Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw in May 2010.

began to crystallize. The year was 1956. At the same time as the Soviet Army crushed Budapest, a self-limiting revolution took place in Poland, similar to the later Prague Spring or the Solidarity movement. Workers' self-governments were established in the factories, censorship was relaxed, public life slipped the tight control of the authorities, various associations and clubs were established. In this atmosphere, post-October art was created. It was the only time when movies such as *Kanał* [*The Sewer*], *Eroica* or *Ashes and Diamonds* could be created. (It happened again in the mid-1970s, when an atmosphere reigned in which *Człowiek z marmuru* [*Man of Marble*] could come into being, after waiting twelve years to be produced).

The trend of freedom changes was arrested shortly after 1956. For fear of Russia, Gomułka 'tightened the screw'. However, the process of emancipation could not be reversed, it could only be stopped, sometimes bloodily. From today's perspective, it is clear that the social convulsions of the following decades were the spans of a single bridge that led to democracy. We were not living in Orwell's world – the communist ideology was a camouflage and the dictatorship full of holes. Over time, there was more and more freedom, not less. The time that has passed – the time of my generation's youth, which entered life in the 1970s, was not a lost time.

Polish People's Republic consisted of many enclaves. One of them was the cinema. The Polish school. I learned on the films of this school – Wajda's *Sewer* and *Ashes and Diamonds* or Munk's *Eroica*. These works proposed a bold attitude towards history.

I have an impression that those characters, such as Maciek Chełmicki, the main character in *Ashes and Diamonds*, are leaning towards the future. This leaning, this dynamism, this hope for change was a fascinating feature of the culture of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Munk, Wajda, Has, Kawalerowicz, Konwicki – the cinema of that time was made by people whose very eyes had witnessed the collapse of the world several times. They were of school age when World War II broke out and the young Polish state collapsed like a house of cards. Next, they saw the defeat of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. In 1945, liberation came, which had the characteristics of a new captivity; the system that promised peace and social justice, hid crimes instead.

It is interesting that when terror lessened, the young intelligentsia reacted in a paradoxical, modern way. It broke with the prevailing cult

of history, which required too much sacrifice. In 1956 in Warsaw, at his home theatre on Tarczyńska Street, Miron Białoszewski staged a grotesque about the Crusades. The performance ended with a parody of Mayakovsky's slogan about the need to 'ruin the old mare of the past'. 'That was not true', the poet said. The 'old mare of history' should to be 'unsaddled', not ridden anymore. At the STS (Students' Theatre of Satire) in Warsaw, people sang couplets about the homeland:

I've finally found a way to handle you,
I don't have to think about it anymore:
always be a pack of cigarettes for me,
a third class ticket to Koluszki.
Be a pumpernickel, be a Polopyrina,
but don't ever be a scar again –
our dear, priceless homeland!
(Agnieszka Osiecka, *Inwokacja* [*Invocation*])

History manifested itself to the artists of this generation as a dangerous deity demanding sacrifice. After the experience of Nazism and Stalinism, they no longer wanted to pay homage to this deity. The blade of criticism was directed, on the one hand, against communism, which called for sacrifices in the name of a bright future, but, on the other hand, the romantic tradition was also revised – it also had its roots in totalitarianism.

Ashes and Diamonds speak of meaningless death and futile sacrifice. 'I can't kill anymore, I can't hide, I want to live, I have to live...', Maciek repeats. There is no point in expecting the film to provide a reliable historical lecture on the situation of the underground, captured by the Polish and Soviet security services. In 1958, it was not possible. But at secret screenings in Russia, Czechoslovakia or Hungary, the film was admired for something else: for showing a boy from the underground, who was sentenced to death in advance, as someone with whom the viewer sympathizes from start to finish, someone who, regardless of what he does, is simply 'ours', while the 'stranger' turns out to be a communist. Another thing is that if the communist theme was developed, it would turn out to be equally tragic and even more offensive than Maciek's plot.

His death at the rubbish dump is absurd, stripped of sublimity. However, Maciek's tragedy acted as praise for life. The viewers of the time wanted

to believe that the story could be arranged in such a way that it was not necessary to pay a tribute in blood. This cinema treated the sense of defeat.

Young people liked Wajda's film not because it was anti-communist. The shooting of a communist falling into Maciek's arms, who had previously aimed at him; in the sky – victory flares, then Maciek throwing the gun away with disgust – all this was a harbinger of the end of the fight. It was moving and it remains moving to this day: the desire to go beyond history.

The second moving image is a scene with a crucifix upside down in a ruined chapel. Maciek and Krysia, the bartender whom he had met, enter there by accident. The inverted cross is associated with an inevitable sacrifice that makes no sense, is in vain. The lovers talk about how beautiful life could be. We see the protagonists from behind the hanging cross, but they do not pay attention to it, just as they do not pay attention to the solemnity of the chapel when Maciek repairs a broken heel on the altar.

The cinema of that time worked to ensure that Poland would not be the Christ of the Nations. For generation '56, hope lay in democracy, social justice, which at that time was still associated with socialism or with something like the 'third way' – not communist and not capitalist. This idea returned to the Solidarity movement years later.

'Solidarity' was also accompanied by a cross, but it took on a new meaning. It did not represent a nation stretched out on the cross, it was a sign of victory. Both Wajda's 'Solidarity' films, *Man of Marble* and *Człowiek z żelaza* [*Man of Iron*], deal with the messianic theme in a new way, cleansed of the perverse cult of suffering.

Tadeusz Konwicki's *Lawa* [*Lava*] from 1989 was a farewell to Romantic Messianism in Polish cinema. Konwicki allowed himself to be bold: he ended the *misterium* with a happy end. Old Konrad still recites Mickiewicz's introduction to *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*]: 'For what are all of the cruelties of those times compared to what the Polish nation is now suffering, and upon which Europe looks with indifferent eye!' (Mickiewicz 2016: 23). The picture, however, says something else: this nation is no longer suffering.

The human lava glides in a giant May Day parade and pours out in front of the Palace of Culture, where instead of a stand with communist leaders there is an altar and a papal mass. It is a short history of the Polish People's Republic, from communism to Solidarity. Because Solidarity is also a part of the history of the Polish People's Republic. After the drama is over, we see

the gate of the film studio and the crew of *Lava*, the director, the actors. A moment ago they were participants of a national ritual, now they are ordinary passers-by. This is the end of the national complex. In 1989, we were not overwhelmed by romantic fever. There was no revolution. Fortunately! Something casual, normal, secular has happened to us and the country. One could think then that Christ would no longer be the mediator between the person and the nation, but simply between people themselves, in their mutual relations.

The Polish Christ returns in Koterski's film. Adaś Miauczyński, a Polish everyman, takes on the role.

Koterski had already created a parody of the Polish tragic hero in his previous films, from *Dom wariatów* [*The House of Fools*] to *Dzień swira* [*The Day of the Whacko*]. Adaś wants to quit smoking, but he puts it off until the next; he wants to make shelves, but cuts the board a centimeter too short; he wants to talk with his wife, but everything she says seems stupid to him; he wants to make love with her, but she is cold. Perhaps the wife really is terrible, the apartment block is ugly, the refuse chute is noisy and there is a vampire stalking the lifts? However, the true vampire is Miauczyński himself, who does not know how to 'love his neighbor as himself', because he does not consider himself to be worth anything. His aggression comes from a sense of humiliation.

Koterski managed to show how religiousness is intertwined with everyday paranoia. Yes, we are all Christs, because we crucify one another, and everyone plays the role of a sacrifice in front of everyone else. Miauczyński, ruining the life of his wife and son, literally sends them to the cross and pierces them with a spear. At the same time, he is pierced, falls under the cross, his face is wiped with a cloth, he is stripped of his clothes in the drunk tank.

It is hard to imagine a blunter presentation of the fact that the sacred story told by religion and art (Miauczyński is a culture studies scholar), takes place inside of us at the same time, in flats with wall units. The knife from Leonardo's *The Last Supper* is the same kitchen knife that Miauczyński's wife threatens her drunk husband with, and the same one with which Adaś, in a rage, massacres a Christmas tree.

The metaphors of language are made visible in the image. Husband and wife literally growl at each other like a dog and cat. The ruin of our life, which we caused ourselves, takes the form of a giant rubbish dump, where Miauczyński – like Maciek Chełmicki from *Ashes and Diamonds* – imagines

his death. But he is not crushed by history like the other protagonist – he is responsible for his own death.

Koterski can have satisfaction: he overtook and interpreted the Poles' crusade of 2010. Adaś Miauczyński conducts a constant inner dialogue with Christ, once identifying with Him, and then bargaining with Him: help! He is like Poland. He allows himself, in His name, to drink a half liter of vodka as a reward. For him, the cross is a kind of a skeleton key, an excuse for his own weakness, a pathetic cry for mercy. In showing Miauczyński's like as a Passion play, does Koterski not cruelly expose the kitsch of our consciousness? But the director gives us a chance to go beyond paranoia in this film. He introduces a figure that Luis Buñuel himself would not be ashamed of: one Christ helps another Christ to carry the cross. One man helps another. According to the sentence by Albert Camus (2013: 72), from which the title of this underestimated film is taken: 'In that case, as we are all judges, we are guilty before each other, all Christs in our lousy way'.

Bibliography

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Summary

The article is a reflection on post-war Polish cinema as a representation of Polish mentality. The analysis is based on the following films: Andrzej Wajda's *Popiół i diament* [*Ashes and Diamonds*] and Marek Koterski's *Wszyscy jesteśmy Chrystusami* [*All of Us Are Christs*], whose juxtaposition allows to visualize a complex characteristic for Polish consciousness – mournful patriotism, which is associated with messianism. Artistic artifacts are treated as a complementary element that comment on the social reality of specific historical moments.

Keywords: messianism, Andrzej Wajda, Marek Koterski, mournful patriotism, post-war cinema, Polishness