

## POLAND! WHITE-AND-RED!

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I have already expressed my regret several times that I did not discuss the subject of sporting events in the book *Teatra polskie. Historie* (Kosiński 2010; English version: 2019), in which, for 500 pages, I did not deal with anything other than Poland as a performance. This was partly because of the lack of space (the book is nearly monstrous anyway), and also because of the composition, which – as I thought – did not create a convenient space for the presentation of this complex and multi-faceted subject matter. In retrospect, I see that this is one of the most serious mistakes I have made. First, this lack continues and maintains the tradition of the disregard of sporting events by cultural and artistic researchers, who devote their time and energy to analyzing the smallest nuances of prestigious and ‘high’ works and phenomena, easily and lightly omitting popular culture and its products, which effectively influence the world view, habits and cultural ideas of millions. Personally, I believe a false sense of superiority is behind it, and I am very uncomfortable with the fact that I may be suspected of it myself. Second, having already written the book, I came to the conclusion that it was sport events, and more specifically the drama and performances created by fans during the events, that are nowadays an important tool for the performative establishment of a national community, that, in other words, sport spectators are the most mass contemporary national theatre. In this article, I would like to make up for this lack, at least in part.

For someone representing the theatre studies or, as I would prefer to affiliate myself, a drama and performance studies, sport events are a truly fascinating area for many reasons, including theoretical ones. To a large extent they allow, for example, to question the sense of one of the basic theatrical questions: who is the spectator and who is the actor, where is the stage, and where is the audience, at the same time (and in this simultaneity

I see a very important aspect) abolishing the overly simplistic division into spectators (as in theatre) and participants (as in ritual and play). Sport fans are of course spectators (they don't bounce the ball, score goals or jump on skis), but they are also participants and co-creators of the show, sometimes even stealing the show from the alleged main performers.

In Poland, Zbigniew Raszewski once drew attention to the complexity of sporting events. He classified them as 'competitions' and precisely described them as 'seemingly closed' – the participants of the competition are focused on competition and in principle could do without spectators (after all, there are matches that take place with empty stands), but at the same time they do a lot to attract their attention and arouse admiration for their skills. Since Raszewski's time, much has changed in this area, especially in connection with the development of mass sport events governed and organized by television, such as the football league. The appearance of a mass television audience and a real flood of competition transmissions led to a fundamental change in the location, role and function of spectators present in the stands of stadiums, halls or ski jumps. The relations between the different groups of actors in a sport show are much more complex and dynamic today. It is not that athletes are always the most important: sometimes the bigger stars are the coaches (as in the case of José Mourinho), and in many cases, the events in the audience are more important than what happens in the sport arena. It is not only about various excesses, but also about planned performative actions, such as those organized by the Polish champions of football fans, i.e. fans of Lech Poznań. From the perspective of a television spectacle, everything that happens in and around the sport arena creates the material from which the final product is assembled and displayed on TV screens. However, it would be a mistake to think that a television viewer, who is a 'habitat for montage' (to use the term coined by Jerzy Grotowski), resembles theatre audiences of old and their passive attitudes. After all, we all know that this is not the case, and every true supporter has been outraged many times by the incomprehensible complaints of their family and the admonishments to 'behave normally'. The normal state of a spectator-fan is not to watch and admire, but to be in constant activity, which is usually defined by a very theatrical term: experiencing.

This short outline of a very complex and rich theory of the contemporary sport spectacle, waiting for a researcher to take it up, seems to me to be

a necessary introduction to the fundamental topic I want to address, namely the description and analysis of the performances of fans of the Polish national team. For them, the theoretical starting point is the conviction that the activities of supporters are not an addition or background for the athletes' performances, but form an almost autonomous whole, having its own goals and realizing its own meanings and values, to some extent independent of the goals, meanings and values of the competitions. In short, while athletes are keen to win and to show their extraordinary skills, fans are above all striving to establish and at the same time display a community with a special power.

Before I take a closer look at these actions, I have to explain that the primary subjects of my description and analysis in this article are the actions of volleyball fans. Of course, I know that football remains the most popular sport in Poland, but volleyball also enjoys great popularity, and is a clear enough example of this that the phenomenon of mass support for the Polish national team, although relatively new, has almost immediately developed very clear and expressive performative forms, which are a kind of total national theatre. This is related to many factors, among which the specificity of the competition itself plays an important role, leaving the fans a relatively large amount of time at their disposal and taking place in closed halls. These conditions force participants to behave more domestic and civilized, instead of the way that is allowed by open football stadiums. An important feature of volleyball is also the fact that it is a technical and tactical sport, precisely planned in space and basically completely contact-free (if not counting accidental collisions between players, knocks, etc.). As a result, the sport is relatively non-aggressive, furthest from the analogy of war among popular team sports that use a ball. Volleyball is closer to a chessboard than to the battlefield, which also translates into the behavior of fans who show their commitment to good fun rather than actually competing against each other.

As in the case of football, the development of fan performances was also significantly influenced by the development of mass television shows with the Nations League at the forefront. Matches increasingly taking place at a high level give us more opportunities to cheer, and the images of enjoyment in the volleyball halls effectively convince people to join in the fun. Of course, the fact that the Polish volleyball teams have been very successful

on the international arena in recent years is not without significance, but personally I do not think that this is a *sine qua non* condition.

It is probably high time to look into the hall and see what the fans are doing. This is the most important Polish arena of volleyball performances – the Katowice ‘Spodek’ during the Poland-France match. A real demonstration of Polishness – a crowd of thousands of people in national colors singing, what exactly? The repeated chant of ‘Polska! Biało-czerwoni!’ [‘Poland! White-and-red!’] (sung to the well-known melody of *Go West* by the American disco group of 1970s, The Village People) does not carry any meaning or content. It is a kind of oxymoronic addition to a staged view. Here are thousands of Poles dressed in white-and-red clothes and lifting up white-and-red scarves, flags and boards singing words which are a performative self-determination establishing a community of white-and-red: Poland. In a sense, it is an equivalent of another performative performance: the call ‘Tu jest Polska!’ [‘This is Poland!’], known from nationalistic demonstrations, but the fans’ version of it does not have any signs of exclusion, the default response of ‘a tam jej nie ma!’ [‘and it’s not there!’]. On the contrary: Poland is a white-and-red community – a community devoid of any other signs, anything that could introduce diversity. A significant and fruitful shift takes place here: the sign of national affiliation, an element of the invented tradition – white-and-red colors – becomes the core of the process of building identity, around which a radically inclusive community is formed. The placement of the sign at the core means that the national identification established by the mass performance shown above is created in action and through action around a void covered by the sign. The white and red colors that play the function of the hard core of the national community, which according to its followers is both innate and natural, obscure and reveal the fact that it is still something constructed and reconstructed, and thus in fact reveal the lack of supposedly ‘natural’ ethnic roots as the foundation of the traditional understanding of patriotism. The national theatre of the fans is a mass celebration of the nation as a community established in action, i.e. not a pre-legislative and ‘eternal’ community, but a community emerging here and now. As this community, based on current action, it is capable of welcoming anyone who meets the basic condition: to join in the action. Everyone who stands up and sings with the choir ‘Poland! White-and-red!’ becomes a part of the community: the white-and-red, Poland.

The adoption of this preliminary thesis points to the need to look at the action and thus see ‘what people do in the activity of doing it’ (Schechner 2013: 1). By referring to this fundamental task of performance studies I would like to stress strongly that it is precisely the performative methodology that allows, in my opinion, to go beyond the false understanding of performances, representations, dramatization and celebrations related to national identity as an expression of the pre-existing real community. National identity is created in a series of activities that are not its expression, its sign, but a way of existence. Therefore, when investigating actions, we do not analyze the signifier pointing to the signified that exists elsewhere (e.g. in eternity or nature), but we examine the way of existence of elements of reality, which has a dramatic and representative character and exists as a demonstrated action.

The dominant and at the same time fundamental way of establishing a national community of supporters of a national team is, as I have already mentioned, the use of nationality marks as the core function. Particularly important here are the white and red colors dominating in the spectators’ outfits, used also in make-up and even hairstyles. The total domination of these two basic colors is also ensured by the match organizers, who place A4 sheets in white (top rows) and red (bottom rows) on the chairs. At the appropriate moments, on the signal given by the cheer leader (I will say more about this person in a moment), the fans raise the sheets of paper, turning the hall into a great white-and-red whole – the metonymy of Poland made visible.

The second, besides national colors, sign organizing the community is the anthem, recently sung in the same, very characteristic way at volleyball matches. Instead of using a tape recording, an orchestra or a popular singer, *Dąbrowski’s Mazurka* is sung in the volleyball halls by the gathered fans themselves, with an accompanist providing them the appropriate key at the start. As a result, the often painful domination of a professional performance amplified through the sound system over community singing is eliminated. Choral singing of the anthem becomes a total action, activating all those present, linking athletes and fans into one, turning to a third something, which encompasses and subordinates them at the same time. This something is, of course, Poland. Here, it is not marked by a symbolic song, but physically and sensually experienced through participation in a mass choir with a huge, direct, physiological force of influence. Choral

singing transforms the sign placed in the position of the core into a direct experience of Poland as a power created by us – the white-and-red.

In order to strengthen this sense of power, volleyball matches of the Polish national team also created specific permanent performative actions of a quasi-ritual or quasi-magical character. As we have known for a long time, cheering is not only an expression of support for one of the teams, but also a whole series of performative activities aimed at directly influencing the course of events. Rationally speaking, it provides a psychological impact, but from an anthropological point of view, it is hard to doubt that the fans perform the function of sorcerers and shamans, ensuring the favor of the heavens. This element is particularly visible in the case of volleyball – a game in which irrational and random elements play a significant role. As such, volleyball is particularly susceptible to ‘ordering’ reality, which in the case of the Polish national team and its supporters has the character of evoking the power of ancestors, i.e. something that could be considered equivalent to the rituals of possession, in which the spirits of ancestors joining the followers give them special power. This is the character of the next fixed point of the Polish volleyball fans’ performances, namely the choral performance of the song *W stepie szerokim...* [*In the Wide Steppe...*] from the film *Pan Wołodyjowski* [*Fire in the Steppe*], which always takes place when the Polish team is going through hard times, when it loses its spirit and begins to lose. The song started to be sung in slightly different circumstances, initially referring directly to the former coach of the national team – Raul Lozano, who was seen as someone similar to the main hero of the film: Michał Wołodyjowski called ‘a small knight’, because he was brave and noble though not very tall. Quite quickly, however, it gained a pseudo-magical character and became associated with crisis moments in the national team’s play.

A slightly different example of activities from the same group is a chant performed at particularly important moments, with decisive plays. It has a simple text, repeated several times: ‘W górę serca, Polska wygra mecz!’ [‘Lift up your hearts, Poland will win the match’]. The combination of cultural signs is truly breakneck here: a chant using words from a Church text *Sursum Corda* is sung to the tune of *Yellow Submarine* as a sport chant. Perhaps I am pushing the limits of religious sensitivity in this case; however, the call is undoubtedly used in gun, but it is still a reference to the conviction

of the special protection of the unearthly forces, which can ensure Poland's victory.

And it is fun that is a fundamental force in the performance of volleyball fans (and not only). It should be noted that according to the theses of many anthropologists and performers, fun borders on ritual. The fans are certainly having fun, but at the same time, their fun should equally be considered a ritual: repeated according to a certain pattern of action to realize values belonging to 'serious life', in this case: a ritual that confirms and strengthens the values that are important to the community.

Cheering, not ceasing to be fun, has – like a ritual – clear structural patterns and has its own 'priests'. These are the cheer leaders, acting as *didaskalos* and *coryphaeus*, i.e. artists teaching and leading the choir. I consciously use names taken from the tradition of the theatre of ancient Greece, because I am convinced that it is necessary to think about it in this way – as something similar to our sport competitions. Although the means used by modern *coryphaeuses* are not sophisticated (electronic keyboard and drums, simple melodies and gestures), working with the crowd does not allow for the use of complicated and subtle ways of interaction – which does not mean that it is easy. After all, the *coryphaeuses* have to react to the events taking place on the court and in the audience: they have to activate the constant elements of the program, expected by the fans at certain moments, but also keep up with the changing rhythm of the match, and even create tension where it is lacking, providing the fans with stimulus for play when the players deal with weak opponents too easily.

As can be seen, the fan play described here briefly has a carnival character. Here in the separated space and in the separated time, people abandon their everyday roles, transform into so-called liminal figures, with distorted faces and hypertrophic bodies, in order to experience an undifferentiated community. This community can be best described using a term borrowed from Victor Turner – *communitas* – which describes the community experience of being together in a completely egalitarian way, based on a direct and spontaneous relationship of human individuals with each other, linked to an experience of a flow and related to the suspension of the structural human relationships governing everyday life. 'Communitas is a spontaneously generated relationship between equated and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes' (Turner

1975: 202) and as such linked it in a special way to liminality. Carnivalised *communitas* has the character of a world that reverses the values and relations dominating in everyday life, in a sphere extending beyond the distinguished, festive time and place.

Seen from this perspective, the *communitas* of fans of the national team seem to be a reversal of the model of patriotism prevailing in Polish collective life: solemn, sad and suffering patriotism, associated with sacrifice, infected with death, which is considered necessary for victory in the afterlife. The performances of this heavy political patriotism are conflicting, definitely exclusive, based on the 'us' – 'them' opposition and the phantasm of real Poles. They are soaked in aggression and completely devoid of any sense of humor. What is interesting, especially recently, they do not reach for national colors at all, but rather for a messianic reinterpretation of the cross, replacing the happy *Dąbrowski's Mazurka* with the ponderous religious hymn *Boże, coś Polskę*, with the last stanza ('our free homeland, bless it, O Lord!') being, of course, altered into 'our free homeland, give it back to us, O Lord!', as a sign of present Poland not being 'really' free.

In the closed space of the sport hall during the carnival-like fun time, a completely different Poland is established and experienced: joyful and self-confident, turned to the future rather than to the past, a Poland, which does not remember the disasters, but expects victory, responding to a lost with the song 'Nic się nie stało, Polacy, nic się nie stało' ['Nothing really happened, Poles, nothing happened'], which of course can be ridiculed, but which means nothing more than a decisive deletion of the tendency, so typical for our national character, to take on the picturesque figure of an innocent victim suffering for the world. What seems very important to me is that this experience is shared by thousands of people in the halls, by millions sitting in front of the TVs, and that it provides the necessary balance for social health.

It should be strongly emphasized that in the performances of fans, Poland is experienced as a power regardless of the course of events on the pitch, because Poland remains great thanks to the fans and their actions. The singing crowd 'Polska wygra mecz!' ['Poland will win the match!'] establishes this victory regardless of the actual course of the game. 'Poland will win the match', because it is made up of fans – the 'White-and-Red' – and they never give up and deny even the most obvious failures.

What seems very interesting to me is the fact that Polish fans themselves are aware of their role in collective life and that their actions are more important and are often considered at a higher level than the athletes' achievements. This is proven by the unofficial anthem of Polish representative fans circulating on the Internet under the clearly formulated title *Biało-czerwoni (W jedności Polska)* [*The White-and-Red (Poland in Unity)*]. It is at the same time a kind of synthesis of what I have been talking about so far and an example of popular national art, sometimes very clumsy in terms of technique, sometimes even grotesque in this clumsiness, but capturing the changes taking place in the ways of constructing national identity much more precisely than the offerings of high art. Below are the lyrics of this song by Zuzanna Szreder, as translated into English:

After the fights, we know the taste of defeat  
 In sadness, we will survive the absence of the cup  
 With an eagle on our chests, we support you  
 Eventually, the time will come to win

A white-and-red volcano erupts  
 And Poland believes and trusts  
 Let's show the world our claws  
 Let's hear the Polish Mazurka  
 Your fans from the west, north, south and east  
 In unity, they keep watch and watch you together with pride

For Polish dreams, feelings and hearts  
 With an attack of faith, victory is easier  
 There will be days of glory, joy, tears  
 We'll have a swinging ball to celebrate the game<sup>1</sup>.

With all the naivety of these lyrics, it is easy to see that it contains all the elements I have spoken about so far, but in a specific whole, a kind of passage from the present to the future. Today we 'know the taste of defeat'

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<sup>1</sup> Source of the text: [https://www.tekstowo.pl/piosenka,zuzanna\\_szreder,bialo\\_czerwoni.html](https://www.tekstowo.pl/piosenka,zuzanna_szreder,bialo_czerwoni.html) (accessed: 20.05.2019); the corresponding video illustration can also be viewed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOCJD7Rt4UE> (accessed: 20.05.2019).

and we lack a cup, but thanks to the faith of the fans, their unity and pride, in the future it will be possible to have a 'swinging ball' celebrating the days of glory. If this messianic message is juxtaposed with the previously discussed activities of fans (the cinematic effect of such a juxtaposition can be easily found on YouTube), then we can conclude that their carnival-like fun is a performative fulfillment of prophecies and ensuring days of glory already in the here and now. If – as the constantly repeated beliefs state – 'Polish fans are the best in the world', this is a clear sign that the announced and promised eruption of the Polish volcano is already taking place, as confirmed by the present time used in the chorus. Who provides this eruption and tears of joy? Polish fans. The White-and-Red.

What I was able to present here is, of course, only the tip of the iceberg. For a deeper examination, one should first deal with the phenomenon of ski-jumper Adam Małysz – a Polish hero who combines into an extraordinary conglomerate religious elements, the romantic myth of flight and a simple man of the people with all the grotesque of his body and the carnival setting of the discipline he practices. It would also be necessary to deal with much more dangerous behavior of football fans, who consistently build communities organized around conflicts and who increasingly draw on nationalist traditions. It would also be worthwhile to take a closer look at the national performances described above, paying attention to their family aspect (recurring shots of families and parents with children cheering together for 'our team'), as well as the patriarchal background, as even at the matches of the women's representation, the chant is sung as 'Polska. Biało-czerwoni' (masculine plural), and not 'Polska. Biało-czerwone' (feminine plural). All this and many other topics are waiting for their researchers, so perhaps it is worth it to leave the libraries and theatres, and examine what people are doing?

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## Summary

The article attempts to analyze sport performances as the space and tool of producing and establishing national identity. From this perspective the author interprets the performances by the fans of Polish national volleyball team. They are seen as the effective creations of open and joyful patriotism, opposite to the grave, sacrificial and nationalistic patriotism growing out of the paraitualistic postromantic traditions.

**Keywords:** sport performances, national identity, patriotism, sport fans, volleyball matches