

## *Filmic Reevaluation of Political Rituals' Conflict: Hear My Cry by Maciej Drygas*

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**Abstract:** During an annual state propaganda event, the harvest festival, on the 8th September 1968 a man set himself on fire at the 10th-Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw. Ryszard Siwiec's self-immolation was a protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact military troops (together with Polish troops). Although there were 100 000 people at the stadium, including the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party as well as most notable party members, representatives from all regions of Poland and diplomatic corpuses, this fact has remained "unnoticed". The Radio Free Europe broadcasted information about it only a few months later.

In 1991 Maciej Drygas made *Hear My Cry* (*Usłyszycie mój krzyk*). This film creates/recreates social memory about Siwiec and his tragic death. Drygas used archival material, of which the most important scene is a 7-seconds film footage showing the very moment of Siwiec's self-immolation: a burning figure of a man on stadium tribunes. The Director used rhetorical devices (e.g. reframing, slow motion, a change of scale, repetition) that undone of official state ceremony (a bit like in a magic ritual), that has dominated the perception of people gathered on stadium's tribunes, and diminish its role and meaning. What was marginalized in 1968 and, in fact, unnoticed, becomes the main focus and a very special ritual; not without hesitation, I would say it becomes a performance (with reference to R. Schechner terms). I juxtapose it with a national drama *Wesele* (*Wedding*) by Stanisław Wyspiański (1901) and especially a filmic adaptation of it by Andrzej Wajda (1972).

The paper aims to discuss rhetorical devices used by Drygas in his documentary. It will also suggest that film can act as a ritual in itself and as a tool to recreate memory.

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*"...success for political theatre also depends on converting the audience into the play itself."*

David W. Apter

*"That protest which ended so tragically was, to me, unsuccessful. It got lost amid those Polish folk dances."*

A radio reporter, witness (from film's soundtrack)

"The past is a foreign country" – L. P. Hartley once noted in a sentence popularised by David Lowenthal in the title of his book about memory.<sup>2</sup> The film *Ustyszcie mój krzyk* (Hear My Cry, 1991), directed by Maciej Drygas, which I would like to discuss here, is an excellent example. It tells the story of an event that took place half a century ago and today appears to be incomprehensible. This is a description of a phenomenon of "refusing to acknowledge" an incident, which occurred in front of the eyes of almost 100 000 persons. Actually, the film deals with two events, albeit transpiring at one and the same time and, for all practical purposes, in a single place, but simultaneously remaining "non-transparent and incomprehensible" in relation to each other. A film is a specific medium of the memory<sup>3</sup> enabling the revalorisation of history. In his film Drygas juxtaposes those two events and attempts to re-evaluate them.

## History

The event (events) described in the Drygas film took place on 8 September 1968 at the 10th-Anniversary Stadium (Polish: Stadion Dziesięciolecia) in Warsaw. The Stadium was packed with 100 000 spectators and was the site of

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2. David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

3. David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, ed. L. Taylor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), chap. XII.

one of the prime performances manifesting national unity: the so-called Harvest Festival (Polish: Dożynki), a state holiday during which highest state authorities headed by the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party Władysław Gomułka, accepted the "homage" of the nation personified predominantly by representatives of the people (Polish peasants). The celebrations were elevated almost to the rank of a national holiday, and one of its prominent elements was the presentation of a loaf of bread to the Party First Secretary, the "host of the games", who subsequently, assisted by notables and representatives of the people, placed it on a specially decorated table (altar). A mythical image of the state conceived as a farmstead, with pride of place given to its husbandman (the First Secretary). An emblematic demonstration of national unity. In such rituals foremost rank was assigned to folksiness even if the subtext contained a worker-peasant alliance. It must be added that this folksiness was constructed by referring to native qualities, naturalness, and perpetuity.<sup>4</sup> Harvest wreaths from assorted regions of Poland were offered alongside other products of peasant toil. One of the foremost elements of the spectacle was the speech given by the Party First Secretary<sup>5</sup>, while the entertainment was accompanied by, i.a. folk dances, an element of folksiness indispensable in socialist Poland. The account by a radio commentator outright included the remark that the people dance

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4. The question of using "folksiness" is an extensive and multi-motif topic. The beginnings of ethnography were strongly linked with a quest for native qualities in the people: it is worth recalling that although this was an all-European trend certain Enlightenment-era ideas were connected with Romantic motifs, and in Poland were additionally overlapped by the search for securing our culture in native qualities and distinctness – after all, for over a hundred years Poland became a nation without a land (state), although some carried the motherland in their hearts. The ambiguity of this issue was brilliantly and symbolically depicted by, i.a. *Wesele*, a play by Stanisław Wyspiański (see: further part of this text) containing an important figure of memory, oblivion and fraternizing with the people (peasants) but also recollections of the latter's anti-gentry outbreaks. Cf. e.g. Ewa Klekot, "The Gentry Masters, Folklore and the People," in *Pani Chłopy Chłopy Pany (Masters Peasants Peasants Masters)*, ed. W. Szymański and M. Ujma (Nowy Sącz: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej BWA Sokół, 2016). Naturally, references to the idea of folksiness and native qualities were made also by the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland.
5. In this respect listening to the "ode to folksiness", naturally including critical remarks by the "concerned" and "troubled" husbandman, delivered by Comrade Gomułka during the 1968 Harvest Festival, is highly instructive; see: <http://www.polskieradio.pl/68/2461/Audio/332420,Centralne-Dozynki-wWarszawie> (access: 18.03.2018).

even while working. Naturally, the scenario of those rituals was precisely defined, although each year certain modifications were introduced.

This was the day chosen by Ryszard Siwiec, an accountant from Przemyśl – but at the same time a philosopher, a book lover, a former Home Army soldier<sup>6</sup> and an ardent patriot – for his equally well-planned and conceived “performance”, in which he wished to protest against the policy pursued by the state, the March events (the film mentions students of University of Warsaw being attacked by the militia<sup>7</sup>), and, in particular, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact armies, including Polish forces, bringing “fraternal assistance” aimed at stifling the Prague Spring. It would seem that the time and place for such a protest were the best possible: a huge stadium filled with delegations from the whole of Poland, representatives of the state authorities, journalists, and the media (the Harvest Festival was transmitted live by Polish Radio). Nonetheless, Siwiec’s tragic protest went unnoticed<sup>8</sup>, and for years remained undisclosed and concealed behind a wall of silence. Only several months after the event did the French press

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6. Conspiracy armed forces of the Polish Underground State active at the time of the Second World War. After the war members of the Home Army were persecuted by the new state authorities.

7. Essentially, the range of the “March events” was wider and did not come down only to student protests. One of the direct causes of the events in question were protests against banning the performance of the national drama *Dziady* (Forefather’s’ Eve) by Adam Mickiewicz, staged by Kazimierz Dejmek (Teatr Narodowy in Warsaw, 1967) and regarded by the then Polish authorities as directed against the Soviet Union. One of the consequences of those events was anti-Semitic propaganda unleashed by the authorities, which resulted in a large-scale forced emigration of Jewish citizens from Poland. An interesting view of this problem is to be found in the film by Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz: *Zwyczajny marzec* (Ordinary March, 2008), in which a special commentator is Adam Michnik, at the time a student, participant, and victim of the events (Michnik was imprisoned), i.e. participant, witness, historian, and political commentator all in one.

8. Historian Jerzy Eisler (at the time a secondary school pupil) maintains that he came across – “it was said” – two versions of the event. One mentioned that Siwiec committed his act “in opposition to Gomułka”. Filmed lecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80lrELtPhhY&t=425> (access: 6.11.2017). Similarly, Krzysztof Kąkolewski recalled that he heard about the incident from his housekeeper, whose nephew worked in the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party. K. Kąkolewski, *Pierwsze samospalenie*, “Kwartalnik Filmowy” 1993, no. 1. These were evident examples that the event was at least sporadically “talked about all over town”.

publish pertinent information (upon the occasion of the self-immolation of Jan Palach in Prague), an example followed by Radio Free Europe.<sup>9</sup> For the wider public the incident came into being basically together with the screening of the film directed by Drygas.

### Performance and ritual

I would like to treat both events as two performances. I use the word: "performance" in relation to the deed committed by Siwiec with a certain apprehension although the term appears to be justified. When it refers only to the act carried out by Siwiec I place it in inverted commas to mark certain distance to this term. Richard Schechner – one of the co-authors of performance studies<sup>10</sup> – maintains that every activity may become a performance, which denotes performing something according to a plan or a scenario.<sup>11</sup> At this stage I would like to refer to this wide definition. Without doubt, political events are considered precisely within the categories of a performance.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, for years head of the Polish Service of Radio Free Europe, claimed that although information about the self-immolation was conveyed by some Party journalist almost immediately after the event, owing to the absence of any sort of confirmation it was considered false and not broadcast until March 1969 when Radio Free Europe editors received an anonymous letter describing in detail (and naming names) what had taken place at Stadion Dziesięciolecia. J. Nowak-Jeziorański, "Dlaczego Dramat Został Nie Zauważony?," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 1 (1993).

10. "Performance studies adherents explore a wide array of subjects and use many methodologies to deal with this contradictory and turbulent world. But unlike more traditional academic disciplines, performance studies is not organized into a unitary system. These days, many artists and intellectuals know that knowledge cannot be easily, if at all, reduced to a singular coherence. In fact, a hallmark of performance studies is the exposition of the tensions and contradictions driving today's world. No one in performance studies is able to profess the whole field." Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 4. Cf. primarily chapter I.

11. Ibid. "From the vantage of the kind of performance theory I am propounding, every action is a performance." (p. 38) "One of the meanings of 'to perform' is to get things done according to a particular plan or scenario." (p. 42).

12. Cf. e.g. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Jason L. Mast, *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), or Vikki Bell, *Culture and Performance: The Challenge of Ethics, Politics and Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007).

While applying this abbreviated definition it could be said that both events were performances although incommensurate ones. The official Harvest Festival can be recognised as a structure, but then the act performed by Siwiec becomes an element of an anti-structure (with a reference to the terminology proposed by Victor Turner<sup>13</sup>). Participation both in the performance and in the ritual do not have to be connected with belief<sup>14</sup>, as is stressed also by specialists. Pertti Alasuutari noted: “Cognitively – at least at some level of cognition – people know that rituals are invented traditions, whose contents can be developed and modified, and even that totally new rituals can be constructed. People do not even need to really believe in the values or ideologies that the rituals sanctify. Still, there is an air of solemnity around well-organized rituals, and that seriousness which creates the feeling of the ritual being a special occasion amongst the participants can best be achieved by making use of references to official authoritative ideologies or to sacred symbolism.”<sup>15</sup> Schechner maintains a distance towards the division into religious and secular performances.<sup>16</sup> Upon numerous occasions attention was drawn to the political nature of rituals and their importance not only in authoritarian and totalitarian states, although in the latter they were significantly expanded. While writing that rituals (or social dramas) are a response to crisis situations in society Victor Turner distinguished their four phases: (1) breach, (2) crisis, (3) “redressive action”, (4) “either of the reintegration of the disturbed social group, or of the social recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism between the contesting parties”.<sup>17</sup> I believe that cyclically recurring state rituals – such as Dożynki – have a slightly simplified construction. They lack distinguished

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13. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

14. I write interchangeably about ritual and performance, at the same time recognising that “performance” is the more suitable and extensive term. This is also the path pursued by Turner. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Jason L. Mast noted: “When Turner turned explicitly to theorizing about highly differentiated societies, he moved from an analytical model based on ritual to one based on performance.” J. C. Alexander, J. L. Mast, *Introduction: symbolic action in theory and practice: the cultural pragmatics of symbolic action*, in: J. C. Alexander, B. Giesen, J. L. Mast (ed.), *Social Performance*, p. 11.

15. Pertti Alasuutari, *Social Theory and Human Reality* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 98–99.

16. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 53–56.

17. Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), 74–75.

phases, including that of “redress”, and (re)integration is not so much restored as symbolically manifested. The very existence of the ritual is more of a confirmation of the “state of things”, a guarantee of durability, and does not necessarily have to be associated with redress. Although perhaps this is not exactly what happens. In 1968 Władysław Gomułka (aka Comrade Wiesław) mentioned, e.g. certain shortcomings, which should be set right.<sup>18</sup> Important elements of the ritual in question include reminding about the necessity of waging a battle against the enemies of the system and indicating the progressing construction of “the new”. It is form that is important. This was the purpose served by the ritualised speeches given by authoritarian and totalitarian leaders. The Harvest Festival perfectly continues this tradition in its capacity as a folk holiday (cyclical rebirth) and, simultaneously, a state festivity (a ritual confirmation of the state of things). At the time of the ritual it is simply impossible to stand to the side, and the absence of belief, or incomplete belief, is by no means an obstacle rendering active participation impossible. “Ritual is like a train: once you decide to get on board, it is very difficult to step off midway. Rituals make people – even untrained outsiders who decide to participate – act according to the script. (...) we just have to play by the rules imposed on us. That is how power works.”<sup>19</sup>

The act performed by Siwiec can be by all means regarded as a ritual: a sacrificial ritual, a voluntary sacrifice made of one’s life, whose purpose is to reform society and incline others to “come to their senses”: “People, people! Come to your senses! Youths of the nation’s future, it is not worth murdering, every twenty years, so that one ‘-ism’ or another may dominate or not dominate the world. It is not worth murdering, so that this or that group of people takes complete power. (...) Hear my cry, the cry of a grey and common man, a son of the nation who loves his and everybody else’s freedom more than anything, more than his own life. Come to your senses! It isn’t too late!”<sup>20</sup>

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18. Cf. a record of the speech by Gomułka:

<http://www.polskieradio.pl/68/2461/Audio/332420,Centralne-Dozynki-w-Warszawie> (access: 18.03.2018).

19. Alasuutari, *Social Theory and Human Reality*, 102–3.

20. From the message recorded by Ryszard Siwiec two days before the self-immolation (film soundtrack). I cite all quotes from the soundtrack without further references.

## The performative film

It is worth noting that the Drygas film can be also described as a performance or a performative film; this holds true in particular for its second part, in which the director approached existing material in a highly creative manner and just as creatively combined archival material with obtained contemporary material. In this instance that, which is usually described as found footage possesses a literal meaning. Apart from film records of the Harvest Festival, the filmmaker, known for his enthusiasm for archive research, was able to discover a seven seconds long fragment of a film record of the self-immolation, and the way in which he proved capable of using it and including it into the film appears to be exceptionally interesting and inventive. But this will be discussed further on.

Bill Nichols regards the performative document to be one of the categories of the documentary film. The characteristic features of this genre include, i.a. suspending the traditional reference approach and abandoning interest exclusively in the "historical world". "This shift blurs yet more dramatically the already imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction. It also makes the viewer rather than the historical world a primary referent. (These films address us not with commands or imperatives necessarily, but with a sense of emphatic engagement that overshadows their reference to the historical world.) (...) The Referents R Us."<sup>21</sup> Nichols does not claim that the performative document excludes interest in the historical world. This type of document "embodies a paradox: it generates a distinct tension between performance and document, between the personal and the typical, the embodied and disembodied, between in short history and science."<sup>22</sup> It is the construction of the message that becomes supreme. Interpreted in a milder version this postulate says: it is worth drawing attention to the way of constructing the content and to think about the recipient – the film can be not solely a transmitter of information but also of, e.g. experience.

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21. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries. Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, Bloomington University Press, 1994), 94, 97.

22. Nichols, 97.



### Some more history

The act carried out by Siwiec did not meet with understanding. By referring to the Actor-Network Theory launched by Bruno Latour<sup>23</sup> one could say that Siwiec did not manage to find allies who would first want to consciously and reflectively notice his act and then foster its dissemination and publicise its message. The reverse was true. The militia confiscated Siwiec's briefcase containing material explaining the motives of his act, intercepted a letter written to his wife, the heavily-burnt Siwiec was quickly taken to hospital where he soon died, and a rumour maintaining that "vodka set a man on fire" and that the victim was mentally unstable was spread. Stigmatisation was simultaneously an act of exclusion. Constructed alienness prevailed, but the majority of the contents, which Siwiec intended to communicate, proved to be "alien" to the public. It could appear that it was totally natural for the incident not to get to social awareness or to find itself within the domain of the "mass imagination" of the period. Information was not given by any media, including Radio Free Europe.<sup>24</sup>

An awareness blockade, however, is also not to be underestimated and is mentioned by, i.a. a young woman, who witnessed the events. Although she knew the reasons for Siwiec's self-immolation since secret police agents examined his briefcase near the site where she found herself, the significance of the event transcended her *imaginarium*<sup>25</sup>: "The Siwiec incident was on a par with [a train] accident. It did not register in my mind. (...) Maybe because in our culture suicide is considered as something alien. I don't know. (...) I didn't know about exterminations, about Katyn<sup>26</sup>, about what the system did

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23. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

24. Cf. note 3.

25. Here I refer loosely to the term used by Charles Taylor: "The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society." Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

26. In 1940 over 20 000 Polish citizens, including more than 10 000 Polish Army and police officers, whose considerable number had been arrested already during the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939, were shot in Katyn upon the orders of the Soviet authorities (NKVD). This fact was carefully concealed by the authorities of socialist Poland, although it was also rather universally known.

to people. I found out about that later. (...) Perhaps one of the reasons why I thought his death was so futile, was that we subconsciously accepted the horrors of that system." It was not easy to get off this train (state ritual) – to evoke the metaphor conceived by Alasuutari – and to board a different train, to understand this different dramatic and authentic ritual.

### **The Drygas film**

This situation is finally reversed by the Drygas film composed as if of two parts. While remaining within the range of the Latour theory it could be said that it was the film, which called those missing allies into being. The first part of the film is to a considerable extent linked with statements made by family members and close friends. Within this reconstruction there emerges a portrait of Siwec, a man at times painfully righteous.

Drygas conducts as it were a two-track narration: the statements made by relatives and witnesses are intermingled with archival footage of the state holiday by recreating fragments of folk dances performed upon this occasion but also, e.g. with footage showing Władysław Gomułka making his way down a row of people and carrying a loaf of bread, which he then placed on a table – “altar” – embellished with wreaths. The parareligious sources of this state ritual are conspicuous.

In a similar fashion, albeit simultaneously totally differently, almost the entire second part of the film takes place at the stadium, the difference being two time levels. Now, Drygas allows direct witnesses of the incident to speak: a radio reporter, a filmmaker, a photographer, a fireman, a man (militiaman) who took part in an attempt at putting out the fire engulfing Siwec, an elderly woman in charge of one of the groups of children dancing at the stadium, a medic, a nurse, and a young woman (Grażyna Niezgoda), who found herself at the stadium by chance but, it so happened, close to the event. Drygas filmed all those persons at the then still existing although already closed stadium. The fireman is in uniform, the doctor and nurse are wearing suitable white coats, the reporter holds a microphone, and the filmmaker – a camera... This interesting procedure “emblematises” the narratives and, at the same time, identifies the persons involved. It is also an illusion of returning to the past.

The split up stories told by the above-mentioned protagonists are rendered rhythmic and contextualised by shots of folk dances and fragments of the radio account, except that the context itself starts being de-contextualised. Those essential interferences in the documentary records start exactly in the second, "stadium" part of the film. Persons taking part in the ceremonial processions and dancing on grass are rendered hieratic (a vertical extension of the image with the help of a wide angle converter), the shots of the dances are now accompanied by changed music (*Partita III* by Paweł Szymański), in those further sequences the movements of the dancers are rendered slower, and finally the "camera"<sup>27</sup> shows a close-up of the almost still faces of several young female dancers as if tensely "waiting" – we see only micro-movements of the face and the head. Excellently chosen music creates meaning: the motionlessness of waiting. The delicate, single sounds of the harpsichord resemble breath-holding, which indicates *numinosum*.<sup>28</sup>

### Digression

When some time ago I watched the Drygas film together with students I thought that it is connected with *Wesele* (The Wedding) by Stanisław Wyspiański (1901), and perhaps to an even greater degree with Andrzej Wajda's film *Wesele* (1972) regarded as masterly.<sup>29</sup> Wyspiański wrote *Wesele* at a time when Poland was as if an imaginary being, submerged in non-existence by the partitions, albeit carried in the heads and hearts of numerous Poles<sup>30</sup>. The titular event refers to the wedding of a poet (a representative of

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27. When I use the words: "camera" and "frame" in quotes I refer to the operation of cropping the archival material (cropping the original frame) – we deal not with the actual motion of the camera but precisely with a special "focusing" of our perception in post-production.

28. I refer here to reflections by Rudolf Otto, who regarded the loftiest moment, closest to the sacrum, in *The Mass in B minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach to be that of the greatest cessation of sound. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. J. W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 72–73.

29. Wiesław Juszczak, "Splot Symboliczny ("Wesele" a Film Wajdy)," in *Fakty i Wyobraźnia* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1979).

30. Between 1795 and 1918 Poland vanished from the map of the world and its lands were divided by neighbouring powers: Russia, Austria and Prussia. Naturally, a significant number of Poles did not come to terms with this state of things.

the intelligentsia and the upper strata) and a local peasant girl, held in a village near Cracow. The drama takes place upon numerous levels, one of which (the realistic level) is connected with a boisterous wedding reception, vibrating, colourful and “powerful” (excellently staged in Wajda’s film), with entwined important political and social dialogues between representatives of assorted social estates. Many resound with fragile rapport (merrymaking, fraternization) by no means devoid of multiple grievances between representatives of the peasantry and the gentry/intelligentsia. This joyful night (merrymaking) is, however, imbued also by elements of a forefathers’ eve and the presence of characters from the netherworld/memories with a strong political and patriotic hue. It is they who predominantly introduce an atmosphere of yet another patriotic upsurge, which supposedly will free Poland. One of the scenes crowning the drama/Wajda’s film is that of a straw-man dance performed by armed protagonists who freeze motionless by succumbing to lethargy and ultimately abandon their prepared weapons – all because a messenger had lost the golden horn that was to give a signal to embark upon a patriotic rising. The supra-estate and supra-division rapport does not take place. Poland sinks into lethargy.

The fact that the Wyspiański drama appears to be constantly topical in Poland, and even that its topicality grows once again, could be testified by the recent publication of *Wyspiański / Zbudź się, Polaku*<sup>31</sup>... (Wyspiański / Wake up, Pole...), a collection of interviews and essays. Naturally, this is not the sole example of the relevance of the Wyspiański drama...

### **Back to the film...**

By means of his film *Drygas* tore the veil of silence and brings back events that took place on that day at the stadium and that, for all practical purposes, for the next 23 years vanished from social awareness. In doing so he extracted from social (and political) oblivion that, which must have been seen (and heard) but which did not reach the realm of the visible (and heard),

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31. Piotr Augustyniak, ed., *Wyspiański / Zbudź się, Polaku* (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2017).

i.e. the consciously noticed.<sup>32</sup> This is essentially an act of re-evaluation, a degradation of an official performance for the sake of ennobling the heroic act of an individual. That, which at the time was essential now becomes a background, while that, which was marginalised is now elevated. This is an act of revalorisation, which as such is a special rite of enhancement, a political act of “undoing oblivion”, similarly as in magic or a ritual. “Performativity” – wrote Viki Bell – “is not an explanatory concept so much as itself part of an intervention, and, in this context, its promise is that in making such an intervention, it will bespeak possibilities without itself becoming a moralism; in other words, that it will imagine and articulate the possibility of things being ‘otherwise’ while not itself becoming so enamoured of power (even such a seemingly flaccid power as that of ‘explanation’) as to forget to question the terms and directions of its own interventions in the socio-political world. (...) The promise of performativity therefore must also be that those who utilize it reflect upon how their interventions themselves perform within a contemporary context of power relations. The political question does not come after the analytic therefore; they are entwined at the outset. Thus if the way in which one is invited or obliged to partake in the lines of power within which one emerges is always a political question, it is also necessary to consider the sense in which the attempt to comprehend the operations of power are themselves a ‘cutting’, an intervention that, like film editing, makes a story tell-able. This is not of course to say that this story is untrue. But it is to say that its own possibility and its framing need to be continually reconsidered.”<sup>33</sup>

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32. This is a rather controversial statement in the light of further parts of my text and of that, which had been partially shown in the discussed film. By introducing this opposition, I had in mind a differentiation proposed by, i.a. Judith Okely, who, by referring to Jacques Prévert, distinguished looking/regarder and seeing/voir. In the second case the comprehension element (I see) steps in to a greater degree (Judith Okely, “Visualism and Landscape: Looking and Seeing in Normandy,” *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology* 66, no. 1 (2001)). I do not consider this opposition to be strong; cf. Sławomir Sikora, “O Problematyczności Wizualności w Antropologii,” in *Kultura Profesjonalna Etnologów w Polsce*, ed. M. Brocki, K. Górny, and W. Kuligowski (Wrocław: KEiAK, Uniwersytet Wrocławski, 2006), 184–85. One way or another, it is impossible to abstract from the political aura with which this “non-seeing” is connected.

33. Bell, *Culture and Performance: The Challenge of Ethics, Politics and Feminist Theory*, 5.

Quite possibly a considerable number of people present at the stadium – perhaps even a majority of those 100 000 gathered members of the public – must have seen the event taking place in the stand in the lower part of the sector near the tunnel-entry to the stadium.<sup>34</sup> An overwhelming majority were unable to hear the voice of Siwec, who even though on fire still cried out what he was protesting against – the music completely drowned out his voice.<sup>35</sup> But had really none of those nearby heard nothing?

Although the declarations made (in the film) by witnesses do not create a single narrative line they do construe a new account of the event. It follows from their statements that they were all aware, although to various degrees, of what had happened. At times their voices resound with a considerable aloofness and reservations: “We’d been trained what to do and what not to do” (p. 52) notes a photographer speaking about his lack of “interest” in the event. This is a disguised indication of the oppressive nature of the system, admittance to functioning and living in a system of a decidedly determined and restricted freedom. The same holds true for the statement made by the radio reporter: “Later, after the broadcast, we wondered, why the man chose to burn himself during the dances and the show and not when Gomulka was there. If he’d done it during Gomulka’s speech the commotion would have thrown him off balance, as it did us. (...) The speech would have been interrupted and the whole world would have heard about it.” Slightly earlier the same witness said: “If the orchestra had immediately stopped playing, as reporters, we would have had to react and explain why the music had stopped. We would have had a point of reference and reported it. (...) We were dumbstruck. We wouldn’t have been able to describe it. Sorry but would you be able to describe the death of a burning man.” Both the rhetorical question capping the reporter’s declaration and the rhetoric of the earlier sentences shift the responsibility of making a decision onto others.

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34. My colleague, at the time a ten-year old girl, recalled that on that day she was at the stadium together with her grandfather. Today she finds it difficult to separate that, which she saw at the time from later knowledge, but she certainly took notice of the fact itself, the commotion that it produced, and remembers that her grandfather wanted at all costs to draw her attention away from the incident. On the other hand, the folk dances were extremely spectacular and colourful...

35. Part of the film made by the Security Service and disclosed already after the making of the Drygas film, shows the extinguishing of the fire as well as Siwec, no longer on fire, who stands partly naked and for some time continues to shout.

And this already recalls the dialectics of power and powerlessness with which we deal in *Wesele*.

Apparently, the deed performed by Siwiec, envisaged as a conscious act and a communiqué, transgressed beyond the sphere of the imagined (at least in universal reception). And although a great number of people must have observed the event, it clearly had not been “noticed” and did not fit into their “imaginary” (here I once again refer to Charles Taylor).

### Seven preserved seconds

The last more than ten minutes of the film – actually, almost one-third of its duration – are a true masterpiece. The director intertwined the brief statements made by assorted persons with fragments of a discovered seven seconds long sequence recreated in considerable slow motion and showing a man burning alive. Thanks to the reproduction of successive fragments of the original frame (as if “diachronic shots”) Drygas extracted the extraordinary choreography of human movements, which enlarged, slowed down, and in a close-up often appear to be incomprehensible and disjointed, while the people captured in the “frame” seem to be “lost”: gathered in a tightknit group they persistently watch something taking place next to them, a woman covers her mouth as though horrified, a man pats his hair as if in response to a uncomfortable situation, someone opens an umbrella, and another woman climbs onto a bench. Successive shots – other fragments of the same frame – show persons attempting to come closer to something: they run up and then retreat. All these movements produce the impression of being chaotic and uncoordinated, and assume a meaning only when we know what sort of event they respond to and what *all the people* are looking at. For a long time, the *punctum* remains outside the actual frame of the film.<sup>36</sup> The director stalls and, at the same time, deconstructs the sequences of the enacted tragedy.

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36. In his fascinating book about photography Roland Barthes did not define *punctum* unambiguously. *Punctum* is a wound, a cut, a constant trauma, but also time stopped/arrested (in a photograph); according to Barthes the detail does not have to come down to a point (etymology) – it is a place that “hides”, leads away, guides towards beyond the frame. It is in a sense a secret and strongly personified place that can pierce the viewer in the manner of an arrow. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). My use of the term probably transcends Barthes’ comprehension.

Consecutive sequences thus show fragments of the dance performed on grass. Slow motion, fragmentation, and changed music (!) are the reasons why sometime the movements appear to be disjointed, as if the figures were seeking each other in the somnambular dance. The dancers on the grass perform incomprehensible movements, with their heads leaning backwards (and looking at the figure ablaze, invisible to us). Due to slow motion and sound de-contextualisation the dance assumes a hypnotic (im)potency and at certain moments becomes a truly straw-man dance, close to the one envisaged by Wyspiański and Wajda in *Wesele*. In this slow motion and certain awkwardness (the altered soundtrack) it becomes equivalent to the described “chaotic” behaviour of the public on the stand. Only in subsequent approaches to the discovered seven seconds long shot did Drygas slowly change the “frame” – it’s an operation within the original frame – and as if in a vertical panorama he guides our gaze from the persons dancing on the grass once again to the stand – this time a man wearing a beret and standing in the midst of flames appears in its centre. A fireman and a militiaman attempt to put the fire down. The man burning alive waves his arms and continues to cry out – successive “shots” bring us closer to him. The appalled people who formed an empty circle around him must have heard what he tried to tell them. This had to be a terrifying and traumatic view: a man ablaze who cries not with pain but shouts his message addressed to the somnolent nation: “Hear my cry, the cry of a grey and common man, a son of the nation who loves his and everybody else’s freedom more than anything, more than his own life. Come to your senses! It isn’t too late!”<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

Among assorted opinions and commentaries, one may come across also those claiming that suicide, death in flames, is foreign to (Catholic) Polish culture, as recalled by the earlier mentioned Grażyna Niezgodna. It is also indirectly remarked on by a medic in the hospital to which the burnt Siwiec was taken. The doctor describes how routine questions asked whenever a patient arrives at the hospital include those concerning the circumstances of

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37. The preserved message to the nation, recorded two days before the self-immolation, is recreated in the film – one of witnesses (a fireman) declares that Siwiec cried out his slogans: “he was screaming ‘Down with communism, down with Gomułka’ and other things against the Soviets. It’s difficult now to repeat exactly what he was saying.”



the origin of the injuries: "When we found out why he'd torched himself people branded him a mad man and a psychopath. When one of my colleagues heard this he burst out that this was an example of how indoctrinated the Poles were. That when Buddhist monks burn themselves as a sign of protest, we see them as saints, but when someone burns himself here for political reasons he must be mad or a psychopathic." The reconstruction or perhaps rather the restoration of the meaning carried out in Drygas' film concerns also this problem. Twice the film cites the distinctive opinion of Rev. Professor Józef Tischner commenting on the significance of the deaths of Buddhist monks in an act of self-immolation but also speaking about conscience in a declaration already pertaining by all means to (Catholic) Polish culture: "Conscience is the ultimate judge of man's actions. And if I saw that his actions were dictated by the voice of his conscience, I would have to accept his choice." The film begins with scenes of documents carried out and set on fire by the militia, and ends with a real image of a man burning to death. The image of obliterating traces changes into the slow and laborious task of their reconstruction. In this manner, the film becomes an important medium for undoing social oblivion. Here, the statement made by Clifford Geertz: "In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world"<sup>38</sup> meets a declaration concerning the cinema, formulated by Gilles Deleuze, who recognised that in the cinema of our times description "was already reaching the indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary"<sup>39</sup>. It is probably possible to draw different conclusions from a confrontation of those opinions, including the one that the cinema/film can be the ritual of our times and thus can certainly serve the repetition and recreation of events, and possesses a power similar to the one granted to the traditional festivity. Leszek Kołakowski diagnosed this power as a paralysis of time (p. 33)<sup>40</sup>. In my opinion he

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38. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 112.

39. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, transl. by H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press), 1997, p. 131.

40. In an introduction to *Treatise on the History of Religion* Kołakowski – "formalising" the conception formulated by the Romanian historian of religion – recognised religion or rather its interpretation proposed by Eliade to be a paralysis of time. Leszek Kołakowski, "Słowo Wstępne – Mircea Eliade: Religia Jako Paraliż Czasu," in *Mircea Eliade, Traktat o Historii Religii* (Warsaw: Warsaw, Książka i Wiedza, 1966).

underestimated the restoring and refurbishing potency of the festivity, and perceived above all the power of “mechanical” repetition – a paralysis of time indeed, as in *Groundhog Day* directed by Harold Ramis (1993). At this stage I compared opinions expressed by Geertz and Deleuze also to accentuate the imagined, the element that is not merely imitative but also creative. To evoke the words of Victor Turner: “*poesis* rather than *mimesis*: making not faking”<sup>41</sup>. This new ritual – the film and the cinema – can undo history and sometimes makes it possible to see it anew, in a different and fuller light.

### Post scriptum. Copy-past?

Almost fifty years later, on 19 October 2017, another person (Piotr Szczęsny) set himself on fire in the very centre of Warsaw, next to the Palace of Culture and Science, to protest against the policies of the ruling Law and Justice government. It follows clearly from the left-behind and distributed material – containing unambiguously critical references to the present government (the author formulated a catalogue of postulates and urged the Poles to “wake up”) – that the deed was committed consciously. By calling himself a Grey and Common Man, Piotr Szczęsny evidently referred to Siwec, and by carrying out the act close to the Palace of Culture and Science (a post-war “gift from the Soviet people” /1955/, in the past bearing the name of Joseph Stalin) he as if became part of a book by the prominent author Tadeusz Konwicki, who in 1979 (i.e. already prior to the “Solidarity epoch”) wrote *Mata Apokalipsa* (A Minor Apocalypse, issued by an underground publishing house). In the book the Palace of Culture is called the Statue of Non-Liberty, and the leading protagonist roams the reality of the period while planning self-immolation... In an English-language article discussing and contextualising the event, Sławomir Sierakowski, one of the important Polish leftist publicists and a representative of the middle generation, recalls only Buddhist monks and Jan Palach<sup>42</sup>... “The Guardian” does the

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41. Victor Turner, *No Title From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 93.

42. Sławomir Sierakowski, “Mourning Poland’s Anti-Populist Martyr,” Project Syndicate, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/poland-self-immolation-by-slawomir-sierakowski-2017-10>.

same<sup>43</sup>. Siwiec's deed once again fell into oblivion... Does history really repeat itself?

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