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Our own courtyard: Post-traumatic Polish cinema

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Abstract

This article probes contemporary Polish cinema, examining it through the sociological theory of cultural trauma. The majority of post-1989 Polish films correlate with national 'tragic narratives' that emphasize the negative social effects of the fairly recent systemic transformation. The author chooses to analyse two films (The Wedding (2004) and The Debt (1999)) as her case studies. Both productions received many awards in the home country. To Polish critics, the two films demonstrated a significant achievement of the country's film industry that should be capable of exporting and promoting Polish culture in the international arena. Yet, the worldwide success proved to be beyond the reach of the directors and with only a few honourable mentions and special jury awards, they won no major trophies outside Poland. Going straight to DVD, The Debt has never been widely released in the cinemas either in the United Kingdom or in the United States, while The Wedding opened with a three-year delay in the United Kingdom in a few cinemas only, but there has not been an international DVD release as yet.

Made at crucial moments for the political and social history of the country, both films depict ethically dislocated and confused post-traumatic characters and both reverberate the post-1989 collective Polish experience. For the domestic audience the two films cumulate and amplify post-traumatic syndromes, emblemizing a larger thematic tendency of the Polish contemporary cinema. This new inclination distinguishes current developments in the Polish cinematic culture from the country's past productions. The author argues that the thematic reliance on the post-traumatic becomes the main facet of the national Polish film production, which by adhering to its own social reality celebrates its cultural 'otherness' and thus limits its appeal to domestic audiences and a handful of international experts who specialize in the subject of Eastern European cinema.

This work applies the sociological theory of cultural trauma to the analysis of the Polish film production after the systemic transformation from socialism to capitalism, which went hand in hand with the change from communism to democracy. While on the individual level, political and economic changes had deep psychological consequences evolving around people's adjustments to the new reality, on the social scale the young democratic nation faced new problems that came with the fresh and long-expected breeze of capitalism, which affected its ideology, its ethics and its whole

Keywords

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system of social norms and dominant values. For many, the rapid social change developed into a traumatic experience. The post-1989 Polish narrative cinema dwells on ethical dislocation and confused notions of national traditions. With an ensuing sense of distrust, disillusion, pessimism and political apathy, it represents and sustains mostly the negative results of the change. Given that many of its diegetic worlds are also infused with corruption and crime, unequivocally its primary designation relates to the post-traumatic that can only be recognized in the course of social and cultural contextualization of recent film productions.

With a few general examples of Polish contemporary productions and a limited discussion of historical facts, the intention here is to focus on the analyses of two films. *Dług/The Debt* (Krzysztof Krauze 1998) presents the impact of the change from socialism to capitalism on morally confused characters, who driven by an urge to succeed in financial terms disregard capitalist work ethics. While Krauze's protagonists epitomize individual struggles and dilemmas, the half nostalgic-lethargic half greedy-anxious community featured in the other critically acclaimed film – *Wesele/The Wedding* (Wojtek Smarzowski 2004) – serves as a metaphor for the Polish post-traumatic society at large. For the domestic audience the two films cumulate and amplify the post-traumatic syndromes, emblematising a larger thematic inclination of contemporary Polish cinema. Both productions approach post-communist society critically, which the liminal viewers who are trapped between the old and the new, can easily identify; therefore, many spectators in the country perceive the films as accurately representing the problems of contemporary Poland.

Given that they were not intended as typical entertainment films, after their cinematic release *The Debt* and *The Wedding* proved to be fairly successful in terms of the domestic box office. Both ranked among the top-ten grossing films in the first few weeks after opening. In the year 2000, *The Debt* was also twenty-first on the list of the most popular films (Box Office). Later, the DVD release of both titles also attracted many viewers. To give an example, the chain of DVD rental stores Beverly Hills classified *The Wedding* as a hit in March, April and May 2005 (Box Office). The popularity of the films was accompanied by even more vibrant critical acclaim. *The Debt* won the Grand Prix at the Gdynia Film Festival in 1999 and was then awarded six Polish Eagles by the Polish Film Academy in 2000. Five years later the same Academy gave seven Eagles to *The Wedding*. The critical applause for both productions reached its peak, when the directors were awarded 'Passports', the prestigious prizes honouring contributions to national culture presented by the Polish weekly *Polityka*. As the name of the award indicates, the critics assumed that both films in their respective years should be capable of promoting Polish cinema abroad. Yet, the hype in the country was not followed by international success. Even though the films were shown across many festival circuits, not too many awards followed. *The Debt* received a few honourable mentions, but only one award for direction in Philadelphia, while *The Wedding* got only two special prizes in Locarno and Cottbus. None of the two productions was immediately picked up by international distributors. Apart from festival screenings, *The Debt* did not get a cinematic release either in the United Kingdom or in the

United States and finally went straight into DVD distribution in 2004. Smarzowski's film opened in the United Kingdom as late as 2007 and prior to this it was not widely released in any foreign country. Both productions appeared to be too culture specific to attract many international viewers.

In titling her monograph *Cinema of the Other Europe*, Iordanova (2003) signifies not only Central Europe's location geographically, but also the imaginary order that classifies the citizens of Eastern European societies into a separate or divergent category. The main reason for such a common imaginary or stereotypical division stems from the difference between historical and cultural experiences of Western and Eastern Europe. More than 60 years ago, Yalta sealed the political order that forever changed societies on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Today, with communism in Europe long gone and the European Union in place, many tend to think the differences between the East and the West will disappear shortly. However, the divide between post-communist countries and the rest of the democratic European societies – and between their respective cinematic cultures – persists, and presumably it will take generations to be erased. As a result of being indebted to the socialist value system and its own national tradition, in their marriage to capitalism and democracy, the Poles yearn to acquire wealth and freedom, but as yet they have never quite reached the status of their Western counterparts. Highly aware of their own obstacles and the European disparities, Polish filmmakers erect 'otherness' as the main characteristic of their national cinema. As much as to the critics inside the country this probably unintentionally employed strategy seems to be the one that would appeal to the audience abroad: the minimal popularity of even the most acclaimed Polish films in English-speaking countries suggests that the emphasis on the post-traumatic domestic culture separates Polish cinema rather than integrates it with the rest of Europe.

In Poland, the arrival of free democracy and capitalism fostered the crisis of values and attitudes that resonates across the national cinematic output. In general, critics agree that after 1989, apart from socially concerned films like *Edi* (2002), *Cześć Tereska/Hi Tereska* (2001), *The Wedding* and others, Polish cinema has mostly produced popular movies and national historical epics. The latter category is represented by films similar to *Quo Vadis* (2001) and *Ogniem i mieczem/With Fire and Sword* (1999). Following Iordanova (2003: 149), who assessed that when compared to the earlier pre-1989 period one can observe a certain thematic and generic continuity within contemporary Polish national cinema, Ostrowska and Radkiewicz (2007: 118) assert that 'the critics do not offer any explanation as to why the film production in Poland did not change artistically, if the production structures have been altered so dramatically'. Potentially, the lack of any elucidation in this matter arises due to the fact that the thematic continuity is more of an impression of the scholar from outside the country than an actual characteristic of the post-1989 Polish film. The continuity in terms of genre proves to be misleading, as now even the films that at first glance seem to persist along their old generic lines tend to relate to the transformed and ultimately incongruent ideological paradigm. Clearly, for the domestic audience the topics of contemporary films do not resemble the

pre-1989 film subjects, since they mostly refer to the previously absent post-traumatic condition of the society in transition. For the past twenty years, the Polish cinematic scene has been dominated by films that strongly rely on the problematization of the newly formed social reality with many questions around identity issues and existentially trapped characters pursuing new ways of living that are distorted by the burden of old ideals and norms. Therefore, by no means straightforward or definite, an application of the concept of cultural trauma presents academic investigations into Polish cinema with a new insight – an evidence for the thematic change that occurred after 1989 – and provokes a constructive critical revision of the views mentioned above.

Looking at the Polish screen, it becomes apparent that while adapting to the changes that came with the first free election in June 1989, the citizens of Poland faced unforeseen problems. As official ideology and political and economic systems transformed almost overnight, so the axionormative scheme of the nation was also supposed to evolve. However, the sudden social change found many of the Poles degraded and/or in financial despair. Piotr Sztompka (2004: 155–95) argues that the systemic change triggered the cultural trauma that still shapes the mentality, the attitudes and the behaviour of most people in the country. According to Sztompka and Alexander (Alexander 2004), since 1989 Polish culture deals with the effects of the social trauma and its cinema echoes the anxieties related to the systemic transformations across the other Europe.

Trauma has been much discussed by scholars of various fields. The prevailing body of work in culture and social studies analyses the phenomenon in reference to Holocaust and its narratives (Hirsch 2004; LaCapra 2001). More recently Ann E. Kaplan, who coined the term ‘trauma culture’, has employed the concept more extensively in relation to film and media studies (Kaplan 2005). Having applied a new meaning to the critical concept, Kaplan discusses trauma in relation to terror and loss in the postcolonial world. Her work offers invaluable commentary that allows for recontextualization of traumatic events in the global perspective. However, here for the purpose of analysing the national Polish cinema in the new social and political context, another theory of cultural trauma is being utilized. Jeffrey C. Alexander theorizes rapid social change as a traumatogenic factor. For him and his co-authors, trauma does not solely follow a horrendous real-life event,

For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity. Collective actors ‘decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go.

(Alexander 2004: 10)

Within this approach, the real event that produces post-traumatic syndromes does not have to be ghastly; in a culture that has been subject to some rapid change, trauma may be equally induced through the imaginary.

In fact, as Sztompka points out, the effects of the change may not be seen as traumatic by the society at large until the subject becomes dispersed in the course of a social debate. Existential problems need to be discussed en masse in order to be experienced as socially valid and this happens once there occurs 'intellectual, moral, and artistic mobilization of a society' (Sztompka 2000: 455). In other words, some even rapid social changes are not seen as traumatic until the culture attaches a meaning to them. Here lies the main difference between trauma instigated by painful events, loss or terror (that is grounded psychologically), and the socially constructed collective cultural trauma the Poles experienced following systemic change. In Poland, at the beginning, there were no perpetrators and mostly no responsibilities attached. In fact, the trauma that perturbed the identity of the nation resulted from what at first was willingly accepted by the majority without a second thought or an anticipation of any prospective negative consequences. Most societies that underwent swift changes from authoritarian rule to democracy or from one economic system to the other experienced similar traumas. Despite many differences between them, the Chinese, the Russians and other Eastern European societies are the best examples of the most recent post-traumatic cultures.

In 1989, just after long-expected democracy came to Poland, it was by all means a welcomed and joyous event. Soon, however, it turned out that the values and the attitudes of the West were not fully compatible with Polish mentality inherited after 50 years of the communist rule. The visible material goods that served as the main bait and the lure of the capitalist culture proved to be difficult to acquire. With growing poverty levels and unemployment, the disparity between previously high expectations and the harsh everyday reality of systemic transition produced many conflicts, disappointments and also deviances. As these were not individual but ubiquitous, shortly they started to be debated in the national media, including film. At this point the cultural trauma was realized and its origins ascribed to the systemic change. The trauma resulted from the fact that the final product of a strong economy seemed quite appealing, but the ways of obtaining it clashed with Polish mentality rooted not only in Catholicism, patriarchalism and nationalism, but also in the egalitarian ideals (and their abuses) of the past era. Documenting social effects of the post-1989 cultural trauma, Polish cinema offers a unique vision of intra-cultural tensions and conflicts, thus cultural trauma enters the sublime and becomes an aesthetic category.

Almost twenty years after democracy and capitalism first appeared in the country, its cinematic culture still portrays the society in transition. Back in 1991, Polish film critic Tadeusz Sobolewski contended, 'It seems as if we have started to believe in freedom and immediately felt disappointed with it' (Quoted in Haltof 1995: 15). Initially discontentment swept the Polish film community due to the move from the government subsidized system of production and distribution to one driven by the market economy. Suddenly, filmmakers had to worry about the audience in a way that they never had before. This explains the arrival of the wave of commercial and Hollywood-esque entertainment films – *Samowolka/Lawlessness* (1993), *Kroll* (1991), *Psy/The Pigs* (1993), *Psy 2-Ostatnia krew/Pigs 2-The Last Blood* (1994) and

others. Even though there had not been a solid or long tradition of a popular cinema in the country (Haltof 1995: 19), most of the productions were widely watched and proved quite successful with local audiences. The viewers enjoyed the crime stories, because for the first time in the post-war history organized crime became a part of everyday Polish experience and it turned into both a syndrome and a traumatizing factor in the new reality. Strangely enough, for Polish viewers, the fictional, almost Americanized, narratives offered parallel visions to their own social surroundings. The organized crime (that also appears in *The Debt* and in *The Wedding*) was just one symptom of the cultural trauma the nation suffered from – the first visible symbol of the disappointment with freedom that turned out to be too difficult for most people to handle at ease.

Today, unlike in the pre-1989 era, Polish filmmakers attempt to deal with the embryonic capitalist reality around them. Although the victims of the social change are mainly incorporated as main characters in the narratives of socially concerned and artistic films (*Edi, Hi Tereska, The Wedding, Ode to Joy/Oda do radości* (2005)), consciously or not, many other productions also follow the traumatic experience. The popular cinema very often relies on the portrayal of domestic crime stories (*The Pigs*) and disillusioned characters – *Plac Zbawiciela/Saviour Square* (2006), *Komornik/The Collector* (2005), *Wszyscy jesteŝmy Chrystusami/We're All Christs* (2006), *Dzień Świra/The Day of the Freak* (2002); hence the blurring of the line between the commercial and the socially engaged. Even the fact that the national epics with the most popular examples of *With Fire and Sword, The Last Foray in Lithuania (Pan Tadeusz, 1999)* are being made and remade on a large scale, can be easily ascribed to the collective traumatic experience. On the whole, capturing either heroic events or great historical moments, when the national spirit was being shaped, they manifest nostalgia for the glorious past. Going back to history to find an inspiration for the shaky national morale has always been an integral part of Polish culture. As much as before, the recent upsurge of epic productions after 1989 can also be seen as a symptom of the search for a stable moral foundation of troubled contemporary Poles. (Deltcheva 2005: 207).

Piotr Sztompka discriminates between two ways the Poles deal with the social change that occurred after 1989. The first one resulted in the joyous and accepting 'progressivist narrative', within which the new regained national independence, the return to the Western Christendom and the themes evolving around rejoining Europe took the lead (Sztompka 2004: 176). Although this politically reinforced and enhanced progressivist discourse of the transition was designed to insulate the nation against the shocks of the aftermath of the transformation, Polish filmmakers rarely, if at all, follow a similar rhetoric.

What dominates the post-1989 Polish film is the other type of narrative, namely 'the tragic narrative' (Sztompka 2004: 177) that addresses the adverse and unexpected outcomes of the systemic transformation. Despite many critical claims to thematic continuity, for the most part contemporary Polish cinema frames the experience of the social change around the dilemmas associated with the grand national ideology that has been uncontrollably disturbed (historic epics), or the predicaments of

everyday transitional routines. Apart from the epic, most films, either popular or socially engaged, depict perplexed protagonists (individual or collective) forced to contend with the challenges posed by the fusion of Western and inherited lifestyles, to symbolically comment on the traumatic experience, in which the egalitarianism and the social security of the past clash with the success based on an accumulation of capital much valued by all meritocratic cultures.

To many, the positive aspects of the systemic change seem to be taken for granted and too obvious to be dealt with in the films, and thus dilemmas and gloomy realities prevail. It is quite apparent that in most cases Polish cinema is deeply bound to its own troubled culture. The Polish would say that their scriptwriters and directors stay strongly attached to their own 'podwórko' meaning 'courtyard'. In Poland 'podwórko' is the space in front of a tenement house, very often fenced or surrounded by walls. Polish language utilizes the phrase 'nasze podwórko', 'our courtyard' to signify anything known, familiar and domestic. 'Our courtyard' mentality shining through the contemporary Polish cinema is specifically the reason why international audiences face difficulties empathizing with the characters, hence the lack of its global popularity or international appeal. With its greatly limited claims to any universality, the Polish film industry clearly continues along its past routes and thus for a critic from outside of the country not much change can be discerned.

In 1995 Marek Haltof argued,

The current situation in Polish cinema indicates that after a brief period of "freedom shock," the problem facing new cinema, not only in Poland but in all of East Central Europe, is to find a new voice to adequately express the "national" while incorporating other cinematic discourses.

(Haltof 1995: 25)

While for the industry the freedom shock passed, as it underwent restructuring in the new millennium, the nation is still dealing with the traumatic syndromes that have become the core of its film culture. New production modes and new cinematic styles from the West have not erased local issues, and on many occasions Hollywood-like narratives even serve as a red herring when dealing with the outcomes of the social change. It is clear that after 1989 new themes with new justifications entered Polish cinema and now it mostly provides an arena for a symbolic representation of the cultural trauma. The following discussion of *The Wedding* and *The Debt* illustrates the heavy reliance of the Polish narrative film on representing the traumatic experience of the nation that truly emphasizes its otherness. In both films, the post-traumatic symbolic dominates the narratives and the mise-en-scene.

Given their release dates, *The Debt* and *The Wedding* provoke contextual readings. Both opened at crucial moments for the political and social history of the country, marked respectively by joining NATO in 1999 and entering the European Union in 2004. For the nation, the events were accompanied by official celebrations predominated by politically instigated progressivist narratives. According to the officials and the mainstream

- 1 All quotations from Polish sources were translated by the author of this article.

media of the time, society was on its way to prosperity in both the domestic and the international arenas. When compared to the supportive political speeches and the pro-NATO and pro-EU propagandist discourses, the two narrative films display quite an austere vision. They indicate the post-traumatic reality of the country with some of its nationals pushed to their moral extremes. Far from questioning the positive alternations of the political and macro-economic situation, both directors encourage questions regarding the struggles of an average citizen, whose well-being was dismantled by the sudden systemic transformation. Hence, the films subscribe to the tragic narrative.

Relying strongly on the individual and the small group experience, *The Debt* and *The Wedding* allude to the collective trauma that has been marked by the radicalization of attitudes, the reinforcement of nationalism and the revived religiousness that have further paired with greed, passivity and hypocrisy, resulting in the partial dystrophy of the moral tissue of society. Just as both film endings are far from optimistic – the directors do not offer definite resolutions – the cultural trauma seems to be an ongoing phenomenon. The stories and the characters of both films epitomize Polish society permeated by cultural dislocation and infused with ambivalent mindsets and a sense of all-pervading uncertainty.

Having examined various sociological surveys and opinion polls, Piotr Sztompka suggests that five syndromes of the cultural trauma prevail in contemporary Polish society. These include distrust, the bleak picture of the future, the nostalgic image of the past, political apathy and the re-evaluation of the communist past (Sztompka 2004: 178–81). What the sociologist discusses on the basis of quantitative data and collective behaviour, *The Debt* and *The Wedding* turn into narrative structures that mirror scientific findings. Allowing for a variety of interpretations, Krauze and Smarzowski translate the trauma for their viewers. In addition, the moral ambiguity of the films follows ambivalent attitudes present among their post-traumatic audiences.

Widely watched in the country upon their releases, both productions brought a particular sense of gratification to their Polish viewers, who welcomed the screen vision of their own reality with much enthusiasm. After conducting audience research on the Polish reception of *The Debt*, Malgorzata Kozubek concludes, 'Most of all it [*The Debt*] still influences the audience and public opinion' (Kozubek 2004: 39).¹ Nationwide popularity of both films resulted from the fact that their storylines were deeply embedded in the social issues and conflicts that swept the country in the transitional period.

At the time of making the films, Krauze and Smarzowski were fairly experienced directors of the younger generation. The first had already successfully completed a few films (*New York czwarta rano* (1988), *Gry uliczne* (1996)), while the latter had been known as the author of music videos and TV series (*Na Wspólnej*). However, to the public eye they had not appeared as popular figures until they touched a chord with their post-traumatic audiences. Ultimately, the depressing portrayal of society and the tragic characters appealed to viewers who projected their own dilemmas on the screen and, through analogies, identified with the post-traumatic issues

correspondingly. It was not a matter of indulging the viewer: the films allowed for an unusual kind of catharsis and a critical reassessment of their reality.

The story of *The Debt* is based on real-life events, which gives the film a para-documentary touch. In March 1994, two young Polish businessmen, Slawomir Sikora and Artur Brylinski, murdered their tormentor, seemingly in cold blood. The documentary *Egzekucja* (2000) that appeared almost at the same time as the film follows the fate of the real-life characters, who ended up in prison – sentenced for 25 years. Soon after both films were released, they prompted a national debate revolving around the potential chance of the two men being pardoned by the President of the country, which definitely contributed to the reputation of the *The Debt*.

In the fictionalized version of the facts that Krauze offers to his viewers, two ambitious entrepreneurs, Adam and Stefan, presumably in their early 30s, accept help in starting their new business from a shady individual named Gerard, who not only brings the excitement and the threat of gangsterism to the story, but in the context he also embodies the viciousness and the monstrosity of the domestic capitalism quite familiar to the Polish audience. Instead of getting the assistance they were promised, the two main characters end up being chased and threatened to pay a non-existent debt. In the face of no aid from the police and afraid to share their troubles with their relatives, tortured and frightened, they decide to resolve their obscure condition on their own. In an attempt that goes wrong, they end up beheading the perpetrator.

As Krzysztof Krauze admits, while constructing the plot he kept his prospective viewers in mind, relying on their interest in ‘the serious treatment of reality’ (Maciejewski 1999: 11). The strategy proved to work, just like it had done twenty years earlier for the authors of the Polish Cinema of Moral Anxiety whose characters – facing unusual moral dilemmas and choices – paralleled the consternations and trepidations of an average citizen. In Polish cinema, the unusual combination of the similarity to the viewers’ situation and the abnormality of the circumstances the characters encounter was firmly established as a viable narrative tool by Agnieszka Holland and Krzysztof Kieslowski, whom Krauze recalls to be his foremost inspirations (Maciejewski 1999: 11). However, as the social circumstances altered and there is no longer a common enemy (communism) that haunts the society in their moral choices, *The Debt* rings a more contemporary bell.

One of the first scenes of the film, which symbolically introduces the viewer to the trajectory of the characters’ destiny, features Adam and Stefan climbing an artificially constructed wall with grips for hands and feet. There is no pinnacle to reach on the wall; it is solely the action of climbing that matters and that the camera mostly captures from a frog perspective, so that the top is not visible. As they complete their exercise, Stefan is offered the chance to go on a climbing trip, but he declines the proposition. His refusal highlights the direction in which both the story and the post-traumatic Polish society head. The goal of the new capitalistic culture is beyond the grasp or even the vision of the Poles who keep climbing the structure built of hopes and promises without any realistically

foreseen apexes. Wealth and values lie elsewhere, somewhere where the characters – who are representative of the whole nation – do not have time to visit. Busy coping with their traumatic world with no established core of clear-cut values or sharp norms, every time they come close to the top they have to go back down again. Eventually, the story of Adam and Stefan leaves the viewer with a feeling of apathy or even doom. Hence, along with the pessimistic ending, the climbing scene reverberates the bleak picture of the future the Poles shared at the turn of the millennium.

The anxieties and the ambitions of Adam and Stefan are triggered by a set of incompatible norms and values of the post-traumatic reality. Caught up in the classic no-way-out plot, they signify Polish struggles to adopt Western models of capitalist culture. The tagline on the film advert reads, 'Nobody wants to help you', which is a direct reference to the fact that the newborn capitalist culture was seen to have compromised or even jettisoned the old community and family cooperation. Once tormented, the characters are left alone, as the traditional reliance on the collective – much promoted by both the Catholic Church and the communist government of the past – has now been long forgotten. The civil society is yet to be built and loneliness becomes a part of the everyday struggle on the road to financial prosperity.

The tragic fate of the lonesome post-traumatic characters of *The Debt* signifies the destiny of the whole society. Interestingly, it was not only the lower classes or the underdogs that experienced solitude when pursuing their newly established collective goals. When the nationalized economy was being reorganized, many previously well-established people lost their jobs. Forced to survive on very low social security benefits, they found themselves left behind with no help from the government and often on the verge of poverty. The trauma cut across the whole class hierarchy. Even though Krauze's characters are fairly young and there is no implication of them losing their previous social status, *The Debt* touches upon the cross-class feeling of perplexity arising due to the revolving social structure with its yet-to-be-defined system of values.

Adam and Stefan represent the young middle class, who ignore traditional norms or see them as a shameful and redundant burden. Two scenes become quite noteworthy when it comes to the national axionormative confusion. Małgorzata Szpakowska brings to the critical attention one of the initial scenes in the film, in which before the twist of the plot the two main protagonists still look with admiration at their future perpetrator. In the scene, Gerard mentions someone who paid one-third of the national average for a glass of cognac and declares: 'Soon, you will be able to afford it.' As Gerard laughs aloud, a sparkle of respect can be found in the eyes of Adam and Stefan (Szpakowska 2000: 108). For them, the only value worth pursuing is money, the money thrown away that allows them to impress others and to keep up with the Western Joneses. It is the same decoy of money that eventually leads to the final disaster. For the two characters, what was initially meant to echo a Western lifestyle develops into an emulation of Western genre-like justice.

As Adam and Stefan turn into carnivorous money-hungry individuals, the older generation stays nostalgic for the past. In contrast to the two

main characters, their parents still cherish the old community, family and national values. The attachment to tradition is signalled in the scene at the family dinner, where Adam's father declaims a fragment from the national epic *Pan Tadeusz* – coincidentally adapted to the screen by Andrzej Wajda as *The Last Foray in Lithuania* the same year *The Debt* was released. Adam is desperate to stop the recitation and interrupts his father in a disapproving manner. To him, as Tadeusz Lubelski (2002: 35) discerns, believing in the traditional values seems absurd and embarrassing. At the same time, the older generation appreciates tradition presumably without understanding the anxieties of the young, who without much criticism relish the new capitalist culture. Later, when Adam and Stefan have to tackle the abuse, Krauze implies that the gap between their ambitions and those of their parents funnels the actions of the two protagonists into secrecy, pre-empting distrust in their closest relatives. Even though initially Adam's father is quite supportive, to the young he is too idealistic and eventually of no use in the face of anarchic capitalism. *The Debt* confirms that despite the Catholic promotion of family values, the traditional multi-generational Polish family confronts a crisis, accompanied by an agitation within more intimate relationships of men and women.

The women in the film, Basia and Jola, operate as the background characters, whose main role is to provide support for their men. From the scene when the viewer first encounters the girls in the cafe, their chat unveils their self-perceptions and reveals that both subscribe to patriarchal society. Basia announces her pregnancy, which simply implies the significance of motherhood – the defining feature of mature femininity in Polish culture; in response, in a sympathetic manner, Jola pokes fun at her: 'You will be so fat!' thus expressing the importance of the sexually attractive female look. For the rest of the film, both women mostly stand behind their men denoting female weakness, passivity and submissiveness. The only act of female rebellion comes with Basia's threat to leave her husband. However, her revolt is a result of the suspicions regarding a presumed betrayal by her husband, which further confirms the prevailing belief in the loyalty within a relationship that Polish women rely upon. Once the faithfulness of Adam becomes obvious again, Basia admits her mistake and returns to him. The patriarchalism that the women pay a regular contribution to is the only value system that matches the new wild capitalism, which following its Western bourgeois predecessor involves male-dominated business and domestic surroundings. Nevertheless, Krauze rattles an old-fashioned stable marriage.

As Polish culture has been disconcerted by family crisis, the values of patriarchalism and traditional social roles turn into an illusion. In the face of their business and private life failures, post-traumatic men (symbolically portrayed as Adam and Stefan) demonstrate that they are not fit to run their families. Not only does the film maintain both its literal and symbolic meanings through its depiction of social gatherings and encounters in post-1989 Poland, but also, as Stevenson affirms, it does so through 'a parallelism between the private lives of the male characters and the conditions of a new entrepreneurial economics' (Stevenson 2005). The failure of the enterprise of the characters mirrors the dystrophy within the

nuclear families of the young men, in which there are no children. The happy long expected birth of new capitalism is either purposely delayed like the conception in the relationship of Stefan and Jola, or hindered by a miscarriage that is experienced by Adam's wife Basia.

The apparent pretentious and melodramatic crime story of *The Debt* conveys a new meaning when the circumstances of the systemic transformation are taken into consideration. As Tadeusz Lubelski (2002: 35) stated, 'In 1999 we became part of NATO, but our lives do not go smoothly'. The year was marked by the wave of strikes and overwhelming discontent with the government under Jerzy Buzek. Growing unemployment and homelessness were the most visible symptoms of the lost dreams and hopes. It became quite evident that the country was still a long way from attaining the capitalist prosperity of the West. Against this background, the two protagonists of *The Debt* emerge as almost symbolic incarnations of the private hopes that were collectively hampered by the difficulties of the transformation period. For the Polish audience, the film became the Everyman story.

A similar but larger spectacle of symbolic characters whose actions denote an immense spectrum of post-traumatic attitudes has been orchestrated by Smarzowski in *The Wedding*. The film follows the strategies exercised in the past by Miloš Forman (Figielski 2004: 73), whose widely acclaimed *Firemen Ball* (1967) farcically depicted a local village party only to point to political corruption and stagnation. More of a serious social commentary, *The Wedding*, with its uncompromising vision of the celebrating Poles – emphasizing all the negative characteristics of their confused mentalities – was widely seen as poignant but truthful. As one reviewer comments, 'Still, watching *The Wedding* I had a feeling that finally Polish cinema registered some upsetting truth about us, about our society' (Maciejewski 2004: 88). Despite the fact that again there is no class mixture and most of the characters come from a similar social origin, the film comments on society at large. In the face of the new voracious capitalism, everyone is equally greedy and blind to its negative side effects.

The film opens at the church where the actual wedding is to take place. As the viewer observes the newly weds and their families, it becomes palpable that the religious character of the ceremony is not being really contemplated and in fact as the camera follows the guests to the reception, the whole wedding turns out to be just a smokescreen for an unexpected pregnancy of the bride. As the story of the reception unfolds, the women have to navigate their way through decomposed leftovers of past patriarchalism; the bride (Kaśka) gets married because in all probability she has no other choice to get away from the ostracism of her local community, while her father (Wojnar) avoids the shame by not only throwing a huge wedding he cannot afford, but also by bribing the groom with what turns out to be a stolen car. The catholic character of the wedding serves as a cover for hypocrisy and the initially sacred ceremony develops into the highly profane. In fact, there is not a single 'decent' guest at the wedding; the majority are dishonest, corrupted and most of all drunk. The wedding reception closes down with a disaster, which is metaphorically preceded by the scenes with the broken toilet in the background, where the guests

wade in excrement – a symbol of moral decay of the stick-in-the-mud community portrayed.

The trifling characters in Smarzowski's film indicate a larger-scale tragic condition of Polish society that is trapped between its tradition, religion, old ways of getting by and new promises of capitalist culture. The small-mindedness, boorishness and lack of common sense are taken to their extremes to highlight the point. The director confirms, 'Every generation have the wedding they deserve' (Spór and Wójtowicz 2004). And certainly, a highly critical and bitterly ironic vision of contemporary Poles shines through the whole narrative world of *The Wedding*.

By the same token as Krauze, Smarzowski presents the patriarchal family on the verge of degeneration. Except for three short scenes in which the female characters play more decisive roles, the men mostly lead them by hand. Having become an object of the male power game (deeply enrooted in the tradition of Polish patriarchy and Catholicism), the bride is forced into a marriage without love. As her short speech in the storage room indicates, an abortion is out of question, not only due to the fact that the termination of pregnancy is illegal in Poland (outlawed by the Catholic government in the 1990s), but mostly because of the guilty conscience she would have to deal with afterwards. The way the character of the bride is incorporated into the story foregrounds a more general comment on the position of women in the post-traumatic Polish family. While Wojnar looks through pornographic magazines and cheats on his wife at the very same wedding, he expects both his female relatives to be tolerant and submissive. The way he approaches women clearly illustrates that in Polish culture, despite the communist heritage, they are mostly destined to be either mothers and daughters, or sexual objects (which is a separate category), and not real social or sexual actors. Following the majority of the country's films that 'result in its [female sexuality] objectification and commodification, typical of popular culture' (Ostrowska 2005), Smarzowski presents his story from the habitual Polish male perspective.

In *The Wedding* the bride is a beautiful object to be looked at and she is only able to determine her own needs thanks to her former male lover. Even towards the end, when she decides to run away from her father, who is also coincidentally being left by her mother, both women are guided into their newly discovered freedom from the fraudulent patriarch by other recently encountered men. Although the male characters are rather wretched, due to the long-lived catholic tradition, the traumatized women cannot or are not able to act on their own. Again here, the family values, which each of the post-1989 right-wing governments widely promoted in the country, are discredited, but the patriarchal culture stays unresolved; Polish femininity is held in a tight grip between the new aspirations and the traditional dependence on men as the foremost social players.

Just like the two protagonists of *The Debt*, the father of the bride, Wojnar, clearly an anti-hero, is overwhelmingly enticed by the wealth associated with Western capitalism. Intending to become a part of the new Polish bourgeoisie, he disregards capitalist work ethics. Quick wealth appeals to him, as he attempts to show off in front of his company. From the traditional Polish perspective, the notion of hospitality urges him to

treat his guests the best he can. Despite his lack of resources, he rents the venue in the village, calls in a local band, buys the most expensive wedding dress and finally gives the groom a brand new Audi. The visible signs of his status seem quite appealing to the viewer, until it is revealed that all through the film Wojnar is being chased by his greedy creditors, and at several points he complains about the cost of the wedding. In addition, the revelation regarding the origin of the car (the wedding gift) sheds new light on the main *nouveau riche* protagonist. Instead of returning the car to its proper owner, in an attempt to save face Wojnar makes a deal with the local police to change the engine numbers and to get fake papers for the car. The policemen, similarly to many other characters throughout the film, are willing to accept his bribes. Even the local priest does not stay away from the omnipresent dishonesty. The desired objects and status can only be obtained through corrupted ways.

According to Jadwiga Staniszkis (1989, 2005) and Zygmunt Bauman, to a certain degree, Polish mentality approves of corruption on the individual level. Supposedly, this is due to the communist heritage. Before 1989, in many cases stealing from different institutions provided not only the means to get by, but sometimes was also perceived as symptomatic of a rebellion against the nationalized economy. Zygmunt Bauman comments,

They say that the corruption in the country is a leftover from the socialist times, and as soon as capitalism wins over its predecessor . . . , people will become honest, and their behaviour will be ethical. . . . People are smarter than that. . . . They look around, look what others do, and they come to their own conclusions.

(Bauman 2005: 8)

The communist tradition is therefore just one reason for the widespread corruption. As implied by Bauman, the corruption-related habits will be difficult to eradicate from the new capitalist society. Similar is the message of the film, as nobody on Smarzowski's screen expresses any moral hesitation as regards their own corrupted activities. The sole emotion shared by the corrupted is distrust in their crime partners. The filmic atmosphere of corruption, accompanied by disbelief in the good intentions of others, runs parallel to the ubiquitous lack of trust among Polish citizens in their own democratically elected governments that have been proven to be corrupted on many occasions. As the attempts to bribe politicians (such as the Rywin affair) were publicly displayed by the opposition, many Poles turned apolitical in response, just like the dancers at *The Wedding* who do not express much interest in the events taking place around them.

For most of the guests at *The Wedding* the harsh and chaotic reality lies beyond their perceptions. The drinks and the music blind them to see even their closest surroundings. Politically indifferent, the guests do not act against the wrongdoings. They are simply lulled to their ignominious alcoholic dance guided by the tunes of disco polo music – the contemporary folk music, quite popular among the present-day Polish working class. The lyrics of the songs discuss inelegant and clumsy love stories with many tasteless sexual implications. Similar are the games played by the guests

throughout the ceremony. Barbara Giza (2005: 17) suggests, 'For Smarzowski folklore becomes an empty custom, in which the ritualistic value is virtually dead'. Unequivocally, as one watches Smarzowski's wedding reception, there is nothing splendid or evocative of the beauty of Polish folk customs.

Folkloristic dancing motives in the film dwell upon the Polish literary tradition of presenting of what at first glance appears to be a charming idyllic wedding procession as a micro-scale society with all its troubles and malaises. More than a century ago, in 1901, Stanisław Wyspiański published his now almost legendary play under the same title. (In 1972 Andrzej Wajda produced a hallucinatory filmic adaptation of it.) Representative of Young Poland, Wyspiański's work emanated heavy criticism of his time's predominant flaws that had led the nation to a failure on its own way to sovereignty. Michael Brooke (2008: 88) declares 'Smazowski's film doesn't so much update Wyspiański as offer an ultra-cynical riff on his themes just over a century later'. Indeed, the director sets his film in contemporary rural Poland, yet he never fully abandons his inspiring original; in fact to a competent Polish viewer his intertextuality becomes rather evident. To some the film even functions as a pastiche of Wyspiański's work, as it aims at catalyzing the post-traumatic nation.

The most conspicuous references to Wyspiański include some exact quotes from the play spoken by the film characters on several occasions. Having been discredited, completely drunk Wojnar comes back to the wedding reception and mumbles: 'You should wear shoes at the wedding'. In the original play the sentence was pronounced by the bride who found barefoot dancing a shameful peasant-like custom that one ought to drop in order to become civilized. In a comparable manner, Wojnar detaches himself from his guests, because in his self-invented hierarchy he positions himself above his fellow countrymen. The repetition of the exact sentence ironically comments on the pride and faulty ambitions of not only Wojnar himself, but also of some blind-to-reality, proud and conservative Poles who disregard the complexity of their post-traumatic condition and stress the fact that 'their way is the best way'.

In another scene, the characters refer to 'the golden horn'. While historically the national symbol of calling for unity in the fight for freedom against a common enemy, in relation to Wyspiański's heritage it conveys a new meaning. One of the 1901 dejected characters hallucinated about the golden horn that he had lost forever. Therefore the golden horn, when mentioned by Smarzowski's wedding guests, symbolizes a lost and failed opportunity that eventually leads to political apathy. To Wojnar and his company, the new capitalism offered an opportunity to improve their lives. However, they destroyed their chance to do so not only because of their pride, but also due to the fact that they had stayed attached to the old ways of handling financial and legal problems through bribery and corruption.

As the wedding slowly approaches its end, Wojnar throws out his guests screaming in anguish, 'Get the fuck out of here.' As suggested by Łukasz Figielski (2004: 73), in this final sequence Wojnar's acts are reminiscent of an eccentric imaginary character from Wyspiański's play known as *Chochół* (Straw Man), who back then served as the voice

attempting at awakening the guests from their alcoholic dream. Chochoł intended to halt the celebration, so that the characters would not have dissipated their chance for national freedom again. When Wojnar expels his guests, he acts in despair, but his action may be also interpreted as the voice of experience calling the Poles to abandon their old habits such as drinking and corruption and start anew.

Fifteen years after the traumatic national experience was first triggered, in 2004, Poland joined the European Union. Under the circumstances, Smarzowski asks some key questions that are symbolically posed in the final credit sequence, in which the gate is being closed after all the guests have left the traumatic wedding space to start their new day somewhere else. The climax of the film is ambiguous. While on the one hand the closed gate may be seen as an optimistic symbol of cutting away from the past, on the other at the dawn of the country's EU membership the characters lock the traumatic night's experience behind and go back to their old routines. Regarding the values and attitudes, the culmination of the post-traumatic tragedy at the wedding has not fostered much change in terms of attitudes and neither has the fact that the country became a full member of the new united Europe.

When the enlargement of the European Union coincided with the premiere of *The Wedding*, the demand for a change in Polish attitudes was especially viable. However, in contrast to the mainstream cheerfulness related to the event of 2004, Smarzowski puts forward quite a bleak vision of the future. His lack of optimism finds several symbolic visual manifestations in the film. Wojnar and his crooked solicitor sign an annulment of a fake land-selling contract in the storage room against the flags of the European Union and Poland hanging on the wall. Despite the provisional setting, the mise-en-scene recalls the photographs of politicians signing official international treaties. While the corrupted and illegal nature of the characters' actions may designate the distrust in the European Union that was widespread in the country, at the same time it also poses questions around the Poles being adequate partners for the EU, not to mention citizens of the new Europe. The film does not offer any straightforward answers to such reservations; it just points to the obstacles that potentially could always keep the nation away from Western ideals.

Several scenes expand on the issues of domestic nationalism. Displayed only within a few frames, on the wall of the storage room, one can spot the painting (by Artur Grottger) featuring the nineteenth-century figures of national freedom fighters. Making it a part of the background for the wedding reception that is nothing more than a shameful display of drunkenness is in itself symbolic. It intensifies the scope of the film's numerous profane uses of national symbols that produce a cynical and ironic criticism of Polish nationalism. In this respect, the culminating scene comes with the first notes of the anthem titled *Rota*. The wedding guests sing together: 'We will not abandon the land whence our folk come./We will not allow our language to be buried./We are the Polish nation, the Polish people./From the royal line of Piast./We will not allow the foe to hold us down./So help us God!' In their alcoholic choir, they stand for a collective feeling of nostalgia for the heroic past of the nation. The song represents a

mixture of nationalism and Catholicism and usually is sung to express national pride. As the drunken villagers at the wedding arrogantly follow the tune, while their host plans his next illegal deed, the picture of Polish flaws grows to be absolute. From the perspective of the Polish audience, Bożena Janicka (2004: 10) comments on the scene, 'And so we are embarrassed, not to mention, we are disgusted and we dream for that "line" to stop being "royal" and to become civilised'. Indeed, as the film ends, the spectator is overwhelmed with 'national sins' (Dowgiel 2005: 15) of pride, greed and envy.

The on-screen post-traumatic Poles embody a certain radicalization of attitudes regarding their nationalism, their capitalist spirit and their hypocritical attachment to religion; having set their ultimate Western-modelled objectives, they forget to verify the means of accomplishing them. Therefore, the goals of the systemic transition appear to be beyond their reach; still, to their own conscience their post-traumatic circumstances absolve them of the blame for their behaviour. As in the case of *The Debt*, the general message behind Smarzowski's film is deeply pessimistic and the emerging vision of his nation's future quite disheartening. Indisputably, the film exaggerates many of the post-traumatic syndromes and takes moral confusion and cultural dislocation to their extremes. Nonetheless, within its unusually intense contextual grounds, it provides quite a powerful commentary on society in transition.

With their quite symbolic titles, *The Debt* and *The Wedding* dwell upon the anxieties and impediments to the Polish path to capitalism. The nation indebted to tradition (Catholicism and patriarchalism) as well as to the communist era walks down the aisle with the desired Western-like prosperity. The two films correspond to the tragic narrative, as with their inscribed irony they do not conceal their rather pessimistic prospects for the sudden marriage of the Poles with democracy and the meritocratic system of values. While their characters hunt the merits of capitalism, both pictures present a bleak picture of the future. Overwhelming corruption looms through the actions of Adam and Stefan as well as through the undertakings of Wojnar. For both directors the quick and easy way to obtain wealth and status leads to an eventual failure; the post-traumatic confusions related to the value system prove to be catastrophic.

However, both Krauze and Smarzowski leave an emergency exit for their microscopic sparkles of optimism. For the directors, the post-traumatic condition separates Polish generations. In *The Debt*, it is the older generation with its traditional values that carries the potential for reducing the pains of the post-traumatic nation. In contrast, Smarzowski finds a bit of hope in the young, epitomized by the bride and her lover jumping on the train, which in relation to the release date can also be read as a symbol of emigration that should allow for some detachment from the old corrupted world. It does not matter where the train is heading; to the Polish viewer it is significant that the road to a plausible change stays open. However, the optimistic accent is only a minor one, and for most of the wedding guests the future is almost as dreary as for the protagonists of *The Debt* who are to spend years in prison. On the symbolic level, the Poles are imprisoned in their own flaws; thus the post-traumatic tragedy continues.

The ubiquitous syndromes of the cultural trauma that Piotr Sztompka studied from the sociological perspective find a profound display across the output of Polish film directors. Most of the films emphasize their unique origins; without any claims to cosmopolitanism, they largely stay within their own confines. By no means singular on the Polish cinematic scene, *The Debt* and *The Wedding* quite often refer to their specific national traditions (*Pan Tadeusz*, *Rota*, *Wyspiański*, *Grottger*, etc.) to generate a new meaning or to discuss the ways of dealing with the new reality. The films do not tune in to universal notes and in most cases they require quite a specific cultural capital at the disposition of the viewer to be fully comprehended. Their mainstream international reception is further disrupted due to their thematic preoccupation with the issues related to the collective post-traumatic experience. By commenting on the local outcomes of the systemic transition, Polish film production willingly constitutes a part of the cinema of 'the other Europe' and while this way it compromises on its appeal to the Western viewer, at the same time it strongly contributes to the national post-traumatic discourse.

By and large, the contemporary Polish cinema suggests that the only outcome of the current combination of values, beliefs and attitudes is the downfall into political apathy, distrust and nostalgia. While the filmmakers stay attached to their reflection on the post-traumatic struggles, they do not aim to appease the syndromes. Andrzej Werner (2005: 77) comments on Smarzewski's stance in *The Wedding*, 'The author with some gloomy satisfaction multiplies situations that highlight the monstrosity'. Incidentally, Werner's words pertain to the majority of Polish film. The modern-day tragic discourse around the problematic of cultural trauma towers above the national film production in such an overwhelming manner that it becomes the main axis of its categorization. Therefore, as exemplified by the analysis of *The Debt* and *The Wedding* the application of the theory of cultural trauma to the (con)textual readings offers new prospects of classifying the majority of Polish contemporary film as a separate cinematic development, in which post-traumatic symbols are turned into a sublime.

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