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**Eagle and Cross**

**Ethnography of Historicity**

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### **Abstract**

In 2007, on the market square of Murowana Goślina, a town of ten thousand residents located half an hour from Poznań, a historical performance was staged for the first time—created and performed voluntarily by local residents. The then mayor of the town and municipality, Tomasz Łęcki, inspired by the French amusement park Puy du Fou and the historical show *La Ciné-scénie*, proposed importing this kind of storytelling about the past and celebration of national history into Poland. Initially, the content of the performances changed frequently, with scenarios built around different themes referencing the region's specific character. However, the shows quickly began to diverge from the model of a one-time, festive attraction, evolving into a recurring, large-scale spectacle that increasingly resembled the Puy du Fou concept. Ambitions soon emerged to create a historical theme park with a projected capacity of 1.5 million visitors annually.

In 2013, the performance was moved to a new location: a vast, 40-hectare meadow surrounded by forests and wild wetlands. This new space made it possible to use more ambitious stage techniques. The scenography began to expand across the entire valley, shaping and subordinating the landscape. The natural surrounding became the backdrop against which around 300 volunteer actors created massive, spatial tableaux. Spotlights directed the audience's attention to specific storylines unfolding after dusk. Smoke, projection mapping, fountains, stunt work, pyrotechnics, and large-scale choreographies observed from the audience stands came together to form dynamic compositions inspired by 19th-century historical paintings. The

hour-and-a-half-long narrative of Polish history—from the legend of Lech, Czech, and Rus, through the baptism of Mieszko I and the defense of Jasna Góra (...) to the pontificate of John Paul II—emphasizes military and Catholic values.

Treating this situation as a case study in the practices of engaging with the past, this work poses the question: do we indeed live in a culture in which historical time has acquired new meanings, and we ourselves have begun to define our relationship with the past according to a new logic? Can the reality that Marcin Napiórkowski (2019) calls *turbo-patriotic*, Zygmunt Bauman (2017) refers to as a *retrotopia*, and François Hartog (2019) defines as a *presentist regime of historicity* be identified as an operative model at the ethnographic level? What is the depth of the impact of such historicity? If during a commemorative ritual, a performance, or a historical reenactment the past can in some way be experienced, or if the ideas and modes of thinking associated with national heroes seem graspable in their full essence—through what mechanisms does this become possible? And if one is among those engaged in reenacting history in the context of the Murowana Goślina performance, is one truly participating in a parallel temporal regime?

Even if the political and discursive order we inhabit can be described as turbo-patriotic, the local realities of individuals involved in the staging of a performance aimed at recreating events from the nation's past may provide answers to a range of anthropological questions—questions that are only outlined in broader theories of contemporary historicity in Western societies. This, however, requires a different mode of reasoning and a focus on a narrower slice of reality. If, in the directly observed social context, the past begins to influence the present and time appears to change its linear course, what mechanisms are responsible? The fundamental question—how, under specific conditions, we organize time and through which practices we establish the relationship between an imagined past, the present, and the future—is the core concern of the ethnography of historicity. Following this theoretical stance (Hirsch and Stewart 2005; Palmié and Stewart 2016, 2019; Stewart 2016, 2017), the dissertation presents anthropological research conducted among people involved in the production of the show *The Eagle and the Cross*. The aim, therefore, is an anthropological case study and an attempt to show how, under these specific conditions, a form of connection is produced between the past, the present, and the future. The question of how the studied social practice



bends time—a question fundamental also to the discipline of reenactment studies (Agnew 2004, 2007)—finds its answer independently from analogous situations in historical reenactment:

- Among reenactors involved in reconstructing specific battles or historical episodes, a focus on material details of reality leads to a sense that fragments of the experiences once felt by people in the past are now being shared by those in the present (Schneider 2020: 113–124).
- The mechanism is also different from that found in quasi-religious practices. In a creationist theme park studied by James Bielo (2018: 90), Noah's Ark is recreated at a 1:1 scale. In such settings, the immersive quality of the all-encompassing experience can provoke even the faintest doubt: if I experience this story so intensely, perhaps the creationist idea behind it is worth considering?

In Murowana Goślina, a third mechanism of updating the past appears, though the spectacle, its scale, participatory nature, and immersive quality are similar. The relationships that volunteers participate in and construct, the lack of boundaries between the social context of Murowana Goślina and the performance itself, and years of involvement in staging the show make the elements of the national historical narrative—its props, symbols, stage events, and associated experiences—an integral part of individual temporal experience. History and memory intertwine, becoming equally real when national history becomes a reference point for events significant on a biographical scale. Marriages, funerals, children growing up, mayoral elections, national political developments, or job changes intertwine with the Baptism of Poland or the Battle of Vienna. When I hear, *"I was a teacher, but only briefly, because I have many children. One son is Rejtan, the other Stańczyk"*—this is more than just a catchy phrase or a journalistic detail. In this limited sphere of influence, among the volunteers involved, the performance may become a reference point in the process of organizing the time in which one is situated. Canonical events, figures, and visual representations drawn from Polish history, interwoven with the romantic mythology of the nation, cease to be narratives and become part of everyday life, thereby losing their constructed character. History becomes *the past* while simultaneously intertwining with the domain of individual memory through events and personal experiences that are not directly related to the show itself, but to its social context.

This relational way of thinking about the mechanism of producing historicity, however, requires grounding in other, parallel research perspectives, whose limitations become evident only in the course of analysis. Therefore, in this work, the spectacle is also treated as a mechanism that establishes the category of historicity through performative practices (chapter: *Historicity in the Performative Perspective*). It is also analyzed through contemporary, post-secular reinterpretations of Victor Turner's classic concept of *communitas* (chapter: *Historicity and Communitas*). The conclusions drawn from these analyses construct parallel images of local historicity, which serve as the background for the most significant relational perspective (chapter: *The Art of Participation: Historicity in the Anthropological Perspective*). These three segments form the core of the dissertation and its central part. The entire argument also includes an introduction and an epilogue.

#### **Introduction:**

comments on the concept of the anthropological field and the decision to focus on the relationships among people involved in producing the spectacle;

organizes findings regarding the medium in which the performance is realized—thus treating it as a cultural product subject to formal analysis and interpretation. It points out analogies to the French theme park Puy du Fou, which *The Eagle and the Cross* is modeled on; it also compares the Goślina spectacle with British pageants and problematizes references to the canon of historical painting from which the script draws;

the next part defines the notion of *historicity*, central to this work, and discusses its place within the humanities;

the introduction concludes with comments on methodology, particularly the grounding of the author's research practice in the tradition of processual anthropology (Buliński 2014, Hastrup 2018). Key here are issues related to the specificity of researching performative actions. The logic of moving between disciplines draws on Mieke Bal's concept of interdisciplinarity (2012, Sendyka 2016). Methodological issues concerning the use of artistic procedures in research are also outlined—this topic is developed further in the conclusions.



**The main analytical part**, examining ethnographic material, is divided into the following three chapters, each of which provides a different theoretical foundation for viewing the performance:

**Historicity in the Performative Perspective** – This chapter offers a concise overview of foundational concepts in performance studies and an attempt to outline the implications of using these tools and this research sensitivity for understanding how the spectacle exerts its influence. After examining the work of Judith Butler and briefly commenting on her key concepts, the main argument draws on Rebecca Schneider's 2020 book, which analyzes Civil War reenactments in performative terms. In this context, events and experiences from behind the scenes of the Goślina performance are also analyzed. The chapter concludes with remarks on critical heritage studies and the implications of shifting the canonical history told in Murowana Goślina into the realm of performativity.

**Historicity and Communitas** – This chapter revisits the classical texts of Victor Turner, focusing primarily on critical remarks by contemporary scholars (Sajewska 2021). The central question is: can Turner's model of cultural transformation—based on faith and a nostalgic search for origins—be helpful in explaining the construction of the participatory situation in Goślina? This chapter also incorporates the concepts of James Bielo (2016, 2018) and Rebecca Schneider (2020), regarding analogous mechanisms of bending time, creating its discontinuity, and forming relationships with entities situated in imagined pasts.

**The Art of Participation; Historicity in the Anthropological Perspective** – This chapter treats the performance as a participatory situation and analyzes it in a way akin to artistic practices carried out within an expanded social field of artistic influence. It begins with a review of critical theories of participation in art, particularly those of Claire Bishop (2015) and Nicolas Bourriaud (2012), and contrasts them with an anthropological perspective grounded in two foundations: Marilyn Strathern's concept of *relationality* and its adaptation to the anthropology of art (Sansi 2015).

The aim here is to explain ethnographic events and situations—extensively presented in these chapters—using three different sets of analytical tools. The central question concerning the mechanisms of producing historicity finds parallel answers within these approaches.

The final part of the text is the **epilogue**, which comments on the type of agency that seems to be held by those involved in producing the spectacle, within the specific organizational and political situation in which they operate. This section also presents methodological conclusions regarding the relationships that emerged during the research between anthropological and artistic practice. It also serves as a summary of the proposed interdisciplinary journey, inspired by the methodological approach of Mieke Bal (2012).

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