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Screening religiosity in contemporary Polish films. The Role of Religious Motifs in Visual Communication.

Abstract

In the paper the Polish contemporary cinema has been explored as a vehicle through which films can reflect and communicate social issues, such as religiosity of Polish society, the character of it, the ways of expression and values promoted by it. The main components of modern Polish religiosity are shown as they are exhibited in film works perceived as part of modern visual culture. The examination also comprises most frequently and typically tools used for communicating or revealing the transcendent sphere in the contemporary Polish films, such as Christ-figures - including apocryphal ones and parables. They are considered as a narrative patterns used in visual artistic communication.

Keywords

religious film, Polish cinema, Christ-figure, parable, visual communication

Author Notes

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Introduction

In 1989 deep political transformations began in Poland, the consequence of which were also various types of transformation processes in the sphere of social life and culture. As a medium-sized country in the center of Europe, opening up more and more to various phenomena of Western culture and gaining increasing access to it, Poland was subject to the same cultural influences as other countries. Certain social and cultural trends came to Poland and penetrated Polish culture with even greater intensity. The most influential in the cultural and social changes in Poland were liberal and postmodern trends, the consequences of which included secularization. These phenomena influenced especially the generation that grew up in the 1990s. Their effects are still visible today, but at the same time we are observing a certain conservative turn, a return to values well-established on the Christian foundations of Polish culture. Krzysztof Kornacki,¹ a Polish film historian who dealt with the relations between the Polish cinema and the institutional Church and manifestations of religiousness in Polish and general cinema, drew attention to the tendency to anthropomorphize God's performances on the screen, which can be treated as a cultural consequence of the above-mentioned phenomena. It is also visible in the newest Polish cinema in the form of specific apocryphal parables and apocryphal figures of Christ in films located in contemporary reality. In the light of the above, I would like to approach Polish cinema of that period as a central element of Polish visual culture, a vehicle through which social issues can be

reflected—such as the religiosity and character of Polish society, and the forms of expression and values promoted by it.

The aim of this paper is twofold. I intend to show the main components of modern Polish religiosity as they are exhibited in film works perceived as part of modern visual culture. The other objective is to examine what tools are most frequently and typically used for communicating or revealing the transcendent sphere in contemporary Polish films. The screen representations of religiosity in contemporary Polish films will be identified by means of analyzing the prevailing visual and narrative religious motifs in Polish films of the last two decades.² In the main analytical part, the Christ-figures (including apocryphal ones) will be explored as the most effective tool used to implement religious meanings.

Preliminary remarks – determinants of the religious film genre

Since my book the *Poetics of the Religious Film* has not been translated into English, it seems necessary to summarize its main assumptions dealing with the religious film as a genre. I differentiated there a broad and narrow notion of the religious film genre. The broad notion comprises all the films referring to any religion or religiosity in any way. In fact it refers to a variety of film productions of different genres, such as for instance biblical films (e.g. *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1977, dir. Franco Zeffirelli; *Samson and Delilah*, 1949, dir. Cecil B. deMille; *The Ten Commandments*, 1923, 1956, dir. Cecil B. deMille), or pseudo-biblical films (*The Robe*, 1953, dir. Henry Koster; *Ben Hur*, 1959, dir.

William Wyler; *Risen*, 2016, dir. Kevin Reynolds), hagiography films (*Francesco, Giullare di Dio*, 1950, dir. Roberto Rossellini; *Francesco*, 1989, dir. Liliana Cavani; *The Seventh Room*, 1996, dir. Márta Mészáros), biopics (*Molokai: The Story of Father Damien*, 1998, dir. Paul Cox; *Kundun*, 1997, dir. Martin Scorsese; *The Little Buddha*, 1993, dir. Bernardo Bertolucci), film apocrypha (*The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988, dir. Martin Scorsese), also film dramas (*The Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951, dir. Robert Bresson; *Agnes of God*, 1985, dir. Norman Jewison; *Priest*, 1994, dir. Antonia Bird; *The Magdalene Sisters*, 2003, dir. Peter Mullan; *Silence*, 2016, dir. M. Scorsese), adventure historical films (such as *The Mission*, 1986, dir. Roland Joffé; *Black Robe*, 1991, dir. Bruce Beresford), anthropological feature films (*Apocalypto*, 2006, dir. Mel Gibson), metaphysical thrillers (*The Last Wave*, 1977, dir. Peter Weir) or hagiography melodramas (such as *The Song of Bernadette*, 1943, dir. Henry King). The broad notion may also encompass metaphysical fables (e.g. *Adam's Apples*, 2005, dir. Anders Thomas Jensen; classified more often as comedy drama or grotesque parable) and so forth. As it can be seen, the broad notion of the religious film genre can include phenomena of different structures and characteristics. However, in the main thread of the *Poetics of the Religious Film* I focused on constructing a model of the religious film genre in the narrow sense. The starting point was “family analogy” described by David Fishelov,³ according to which one can draw a parallel between families and genres. In consequence one can state that there are strict representations of a genre in which we can observe a great deal of typical characteristics and less typical

representations in which only a few characteristics enhance the religious character of a particular film work.

The analysis of basic representative examples of classical religious cinema brought me to a conclusion that constitutive elements of the religious film genre are not characteristics but rules and that the crucial rule deals with evoking the transcendent sphere. The point is how to implement the transcendent sphere within the structure of narration. In the *Poetics of the Religious Film*, I differentiated the most frequent and effective methods of evoking the transcendent sphere from the point of view of film poetics. Methods include a fracture within the structure of narration, certain motivations for film protagonists or of the events, and certain stylizations and devices based on analogies. In my previous studies I was inspired by Amédée Ayfre's, Henri Agel's and Paul Schrader's works.⁴ Among devices implementing the transcendent sphere, one can include two styles named by Amédée Ayfre: the style of incarnation and the style of transcendence.⁵ The style of incarnation is close to *phenomenological realism*.⁶ Its essence is to present human existence in a radical way in order to reach the mystery of being, much as Christ is viewed by Christians as the essence both of humanity and God. In turn the essence of the style of transcendence is stylization of the screened reality to evoke *the invisible* and to exhibit a human being opened to the divine universe.⁷ Summarizing, the ultimate point of the style of incarnation is to deliver on screen such an image of mundane reality and people in which it would be possible to perceive or to guess the mystery of God. In the style of

transcendence, film images become the image of God or the transcendent reality.⁸ I prefer to call the two styles “narrative strategies” because Ayfre used them to characterize the communicative and aesthetic effectiveness of some sort of filmic aesthetic tools. As a matter of fact, Ayfre discussed how some aesthetic tools tended to cause viewers to feel the “touch of sanctity” or at least of “some other world” regardless of the viewers’ beliefs and convictions. Another important conclusion which can be drawn from the French theologian and filmologist’s works is that a solid grounding of reality represented on screen is needed to evoke the transcendent sphere, because it is the necessary basis which can be stylized. Thus the stylization of reality is the effect needed to achieve the impression of transcendence, but it depends also on viewers’ receiving competences.

In my own studies on the religious film genre, I emphasize the analogical character of religious film as similar to the analogical character of symbols and metaphors often used in particular religious movies,⁹ and the fact that constitutive elements of the religious film genre are not characteristics but rules: because there are many films in which there are no common characteristics, and in spite of that, those films are perceived as “religious” or “metaphysical.”

Religiosity in Contemporary Polish Cinema

The above discussion notwithstanding, I do not intend to characterize the contemporary Polish religious film as a genre, because there are too few examples of it within Polish film production of recent years. Nonetheless I will

use the tools of film genre studies. If one looked through Polish film works across the last 20 years, it would be quite clear that religious signals are present regardless of the genre conventions. Further, one cannot observe any pure implementation of Paul Schrader's transcendental style in modern Polish cinema. Elements of it are recognized nowadays by film critics rather as belonging to the tendencies known as *slow cinema* which are sometimes associated with the neo-modernist cinema.¹⁰ Obviously these are aesthetical trends beyond particular film genres, but religious cinema uses them as well. As a representative example I can point to a film titled *Metanoia* (2005, dir. Radosław Markiewicz) which exemplifies these tendencies. It is about a modern Polish eremite, who lives at the bank of a road and is a kind of a rebel from the Church. The hero is filmed with long, slow shots and with many close plans, nearly without music, in a rough way.

If one investigates closely modern Polish films, one is able to find some hints of Ayfre's style of transcendence but only as one of the elements of film's stylistics. As such we can point to a solid grounding of reality represented on screen as a basis for religious stylizations that serve to create a kind of parallel reality, whose harbingers appear in the film *diegesis* as alien elements, which therefore refer to the transcendence (e.g., *Requiem*, 2001, dir. Witold Leszczyński, with the appearance of the Last Supper set up in the technique of an animated picture within rural scenery; *Szabla od komendanta* [*The Commanders Sword*], 1995, dir. Jan Jakub Kolski, with the Heavens, complete with God and Angels, located 'behind the grandpa's barn,' and *Aniol w*

Krakowie [Angel in Cracow], 2002, dir. Artur Więcek, with Angels using lifts to travel to heaven and telephones to communicate).

There are also devices of film poetics and stylistics of modern Polish films that relate to religious aspects. Christ figures (both male and female), parables (including apocryphal ones) and religious symbols (symbolized visual motifs) are found in recent films. They all form an imagery of modern Polish religiosity on the screen. I fully agree with Margaret Miles that “films reveal how a society represents itself”¹¹ and this is also true when it comes to the social role of religion and to the audiences’ sensitivity to religious issues.

Christ-figures

Specifically formed protagonists are a very common and characteristic screen representation of religiosity. This kind of religious motif can be divided into several further groups according to the mechanism (“the active factor”) which generates the bonds to the transcendent. These include a specific type of character called “figure of Christ” or “Christ-figure,” supernatural motivations of characters, external belonging of a person to the Christian church as an institution (saints, church men and church women: priests, monks, nuns, etc.). In this section I will focus on the first.

Figures of Christ belong to the most fruitful film motifs revealing the transcendence within film works, in my opinion, due to the analogical structure of film characters. It is convenient to recall Peter Malone’s short but accurate definition of a Christ-figure. Malone states that a Christ figure is a film character

(Irena Sever may add: male or female¹²) for whom “the significant resemblance to Jesus is essential.”¹³ Adele Reinhartz discusses all the main scholarly approaches to the subject of Christ-figure films and states: “I have found it helpful to look not so much for individual details of characterization and plot but for the convergence of three different types of elements: Bible quotation, both aural (e.g., in dialog) and visual; plot; and characters’ traits.”¹⁴ Reinhartz underlines that it is necessary for viewers to “grasp the presence of the Christ-figure genre” and in order to do this the “savior-protagonist is portrayed through visual and aural images commonly linked with Christ.” I find her suggestion to consider Christ-figure films as a genre quite radical; its conventions seem to be of aesthetical and stylistic nature. But I agree with her final conclusion that “the establishment of the Christ-figure film as a film genre is significant because it opens up a broad range of questions that touch not only on cinema, but also on the ongoing normative role of the foundational narrative of Christianity in the context of North America’s religious and cultural diversity in the twenty first century.”¹⁵ My intention is to examine whether a similar statement would be adequate in confrontation with the specificity of the Polish religiosity mirrored on screen. In my conclusion, I will consider whether the Christian tradition delivers narrative and ethical patterns for modern narrations in Polish cinema to relate to contemporary social problems.

In my analysis, the Christ-figure will be defined as a film character in whom the resemblance or analogy to Christ is clearly noticed. It means that it is possible to identify Jesus Christ’s teaching, personal characteristics and traits or

events in which He participated as well as His salutary mission. These analogies allow a film protagonist to be called a “Christ personage.” Such heroes combine three specific characteristics: there are similarities between the protagonist and Jesus Christ (1), there is fundamental separateness preserved between a Christ figure and the real Christ (2), and the Christ figure significantly affects other characters and their fates, and in film plots they act as redeemers within the structure of events, creating that “salutary thread” in the fictional world, analogous to the salutary mission of Christ with its ordering and dynamics as depicted in the Bible (3).

The most complete and recognizable Christ-figure in modern Polish cinema comes from *Edi* (2002), directed by Paweł Trzaskalski. *Edi*, the main protagonist of the film, played eminently by Henryk Gołębiewski is a poor alcoholic and metal scrap collector who resembles Christ both in personal traits and in his redemptive mission. A man of gentle temper and a lover of books, *Edi* takes care of a mentally disordered simpleton called *Jureczek* who was harmed in his childhood. *Edi* falls in love with “Princess,” a younger sister of “The Brothers,” criminals who terrorize the whole quarter of the town, especially the poor homeless people. She lies that *Edi* is responsible for her pregnancy in order to protect her lover. When *Edi* learns that “the Brothers” are looking for him, he does not try to escape. He experiences his *Gethsemane* in a bar, drinking cheap red wine, the glass overflowing. His face is full of dreadful fear and deep sadness but he looks determined, ready for martyrdom. The scene strictly relates to Christ’s Last Supper, flagellation and crucifixion. The face of

the hero at that moment is an icon of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is lonely in spite of the people at other tables and the wine is the clear sign of blood, thus the themes of Last Supper and Gethsemane combine.

Soon after that, the hero is castrated at night, abandoned by his only friend out of fear. The brutal scene is demonstrated as a crucial experience of suffering, humiliation and symbolic death of Edi as a man. Castration means also rebirth of the hero as a man of soul, and brother in human condition to all other characters, including those who act like enemies. As he deliberately makes the decision to suffer instead of others, Edi's life becomes similar to Christ's redemptive mission. Then he becomes foster father to the baby until the child's real father and mother can live together. He takes the baby and Jureczek to his family home in the country. The rural part of the film story has been filmed as an earthly paradise, beautiful, peaceful, full of light, with heavenly happiness, because, as Jureczek cries, "There is everything here!" Everything a human being needs: bread and home, safety and peace, especially people who love, even if they made mistakes in the past. Everybody finds harmony here and the rural paradise preserves the dichotomous character of the original Eden. It remains a land of innocence before the original sin, before brother betrayed brother, but this is the place where the Fall of Man took place. The countryside scenery is not idealized here but aestheticized.

Edi is often depicted on the screen in the picturesque Polish rural landscape, with the baby in hand, analogously to the icons of Holy Mary, and the close-ups with the aureole over baby's and Edi's heads make the film images

exceptional examples of film icons of God's fatherhood and human participation in it. The countryside with primeval nature and traditional values, where Edi, his friend and the baby found a peaceful shelter, is demonstrated on screen as an earthly paradise – a rest from mundane burdens and a reward for the sacrifice. It seems to be a paradise that God looks after, because in the film there are many high-angle shots as “God's Eye view” in various images of Edi: in his childhood, in everyday trouble, in the moments of torment and finally during the days of happiness in the home village after the act of castration. We can interpret this style of filming as a God-Father's compassionate look at the earthly foster father of the baby for whom he bore appalling torments.

After all those dramatic events everything changes, although in the final scene it seems that everything remains the same, because Edi and his young friend are pulling their cart looking for scrap. The changes they have undergone are not perceptible, but they touched people's interiors, the hearts of all persons who interacted with Edi: the brutal criminals, the lying girl, Edi's brother who stole his family home and married Edi's girl-friend, and eventually his friend Jureczek, a coward who betrayed him but then rescued him. The film is a story rooted both in religion and in cultural myths. It depicts the marginalized of Polish cities, people who could not manage to find their place in the brutal economic transformations following 1989. Secondly, the religious and existential message is built on a pattern of sacrifice and forgiveness with a powerful, constructive and conciliatory impact on the society as a complex of different communities and individuals.

Another example of a Christ-figure comes from a kind of road movie. In *Wszystko będzie dobrze* (*Everything's Gonna Be All Right*, 2007, dir. Wojciech Wiszniewski) a twelve-year-old Paweł (Paul, a meaningful name¹⁶), a son of a deceased raging alcoholic, decides to run over 400 kilometers to the Sanctuary of Holy Mary in Częstochowa. It is the most holy place in Poland and the most popular aim of on-foot pilgrimages so the teenager gets the idea to ask the Holy Mother for health for his mother, who is far from sanctity. In fact he treats his decision as an agreement with Holy Mary and believes in the miracle of recovery on the condition that he accomplishes his aim. The boy is thin, often hungry, because his family (including his mother and his mentally ill older brother) are very poor. His shoes are torn, his shirt is dirty and the only person who may help him is his PE-teacher, a selfish, alcoholic ex-sportsman who destroyed his own career. The run pilgrimage is obviously too tiresome for such a boy without any preparation. Paweł is reasonable, so he forces his teacher, fired from the school, to coach him a little and eventually to accompany him during the run. After this grueling pilgrimage in hot and rainy weather, Paweł reaches Częstochowa. His neglectful mother shows a changed attitude by demonstrating her love for him, but she nonetheless dies.

Childish faith appears much stronger than death. Even after his mother's death Paweł is waiting for a miracle and eagerly urges Holy Mother to act. Only after the funeral does he run away and faint. This is his symbolical death as a Christ-like person who has sacrificed himself for others. After the funeral, as Jesus on the Cross, Paweł seems to be abandoned. This is his moment of

disappointment and doubt. But resurrection soon follows. Holy Mary answered the child's prayer in another way. Paweł and his brother gain a foster father in the ex-alcoholic teacher. Strenuous physical effort undertaken as a sacrifice for the mother's recovery makes the teenage hero another example of a Christ-figure, but first of all the religious motivations of his activities matter. The bond between Paweł and Holy Mary is built on his overwhelming faith and limitless trust in her powerful influence. The hero of *Everything's Gonna Be All Right* became a film icon of the childlike "faith that can move mountains."

Once more the pattern of film narration delivered by the structuring of a Christ-figure delineates important social issues connected with the disenfranchised. Social exclusion caused by poverty, alcoholism, and lack of access to economic centers has been exhibited here, but personal qualities strengthened by supernatural beliefs and motivations can make a difference. The protagonist, a poor neglected child, has not been portrayed as a victim or an object of other people's activities, but as a brave and self-made person. He, as Christ, affects other people's lives quite radically, generating a deep transformation in them. Thus, this kind of narrative focuses on the spiritual grounding of human attitudes, acts and choices which can be of great impact on Polish society. This film story points to Catholicism with the cult of Holy Mary as the main source of the inner power and potential for positive transformation and even radical rebirth. The last is represented by the child Christ-figure.

The most spectacular case of a film parable with religious undertones and also of the Christ-figure in the contemporary Polish cinema is *Chrzest* (*The*

Baptism, 2010, dir. Marcin Wrona¹⁷), which seems to be a crime story. In fact it is a religious drama in line with the way the term was delineated in Hans Urs von Balthasar's theodramatic theology.¹⁸ As it is claimed there, a human being participates in Jesus Christ's mission of salvation, but this experience is very painful.

The title of the film has a symbolic meaning because the plot is both about a sacramental ritual of baptizing a baby, the son of the hero, and about a killing, understood as a sort of symbolic bloody sacrifice. The main character is a young successful businessman with a sinful past, which he wants to cut off because he has started a new, happy life with a charming wife. The story begins when they are preparing for the celebration of baptism of their newborn baby. Simultaneously, criminals from his past demand he pay off an imagined "debt" for collaborating with the police. He must pay a lot for each day of life and for this reason he has only seven days to live. That is why he calls his closest friend, whose life he saved in the early youth, because he wants him to be his successor as a husband and a father. However, in the final scene it appears that he chose him also to be his killer, since it was the only way to save his family and friends from the criminals' revenge. They both realize this is the only way for his wife and his baby to be safe. As in a parable, we have here a story of friends/brothers, one of whom must be a traitor to save the others' life and to look after the family of his friend-victim. The latter decides to die for the baby, its mother and for the killer-brother. Since a religious parable is perceived as an extended symbol,¹⁹ such a behavior is understood as the father's self-sacrifice (the act of accepting

the penance because of “the original sin,” previous crimes and moral chaos) to restore the primordial order, just like Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

The movie is also an example of a film application to von Balthasar’s theodramatic theory. The final sequence has an exceptionally representative quality. Both friends go out of the celebration hall after the baptism of the baby and directly towards the lake. On the bank there is a parked car with the criminals waiting for the scene of killing and for the hero’s death. They are the audience of the performance, while the two friends are actors entering the stage of the religious drama. They both are aware of the deep renewing sense of the act of this real baptism which is just being performed. They both do not want to suffer but they know that it is a must to provide peace and safety to the family and to restore the moral order and harmony. Each of them is obliged to perform his role: one must be a victim, the other a traitor and a killer. According to the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, a religious attitude implies neither pleasant feelings nor a sense of metaphysical safety. Quite the opposite: it requires painful awareness and acting. The younger friend kills the older one by drowning him and it is a hidden reference to the theological sense of sacramental baptism. According to its Roman Catholic symbolic religious meaning, it is an immersion in Christ’s death which eliminates original sin and gives rebirth. The hero accepts and provokes his own death, because he is aware of his blame and understands the need of purification. In distinction from Christ, the guilt is his own, so his death is not a result of the sins of others. But it remains a rescue for others. In the interpretation of Marcin Wrona as the author of the film, they both

make a sacrifice: the older one makes a sacrifice out of his life, the younger one out of his innocence and honesty. One becomes a victim deliberately, the other agrees to be a killer against his will through feelings of friendship and loyalty. Regardless of the hidden religious meaning of this story, at the outer level this narrative addresses everyday lives and social environments of the young generation of contemporary Poland. Here we have the combination of religious patterns of film narrative as well as of social and moral issues. It conveys a message that even in a modern secularized society apparently deprived of moral sense and superficial in its rituals and customs, there still exists the sense of ultimate responsibility for oneself and for others before God. The theme of self-sacrifice, so typical for Christian tradition and western culture, is still vivid and productive as a vehicle for building the essential narratives of our times. This appears extremely useful for relating the contemporary state of Polish society in central Europe after 25 years of political transformation which involved a lot of abusive and pathological attitudes and phenomena.²⁰

Apocryphal Christ-figures

Aside from straightforward Christ-figures, there are a noticeable number of cinematic apocryphal Christ-figures. I understand an apocryphal Christ-figure as one that can stray from the biblical message and from the preaching of the Church. It can even be in contradiction with them. Therefore its functions are similar to those of the literary apocrypha: from conveying deep religious beliefs to iconoclasm and heresy on the one hand, to fabulous pop-cultural

narrations on the other hand. Thus, contrary to the Christ-figures, the apocryphal Christ-figures can act as Jesus would never do, although they simultaneously could resemble Him in a significant way. In any case, similar to the ancient Christian apocrypha, the contemporary cinematic apocrypha including apocryphal Christ-figures mirror to a great extent the religiosity of the age. I suggest that the apocryphal depictions of Jesus Christ in pop-cultural narrations become an image of Christ, resulting from the audiences' desires.

Południe-północ (*South by North*, 2007, dir. Łukasz Karwowski) provides such an example of the apocryphal Christ-figure. Jakub (Borys Szyc), a young monk dying of cancer, on his last journey to the sea meets Julia, an ex-prostitute in deep depression. She is another depiction of a victim of Poland in transformation in which the poor and uneducated lacked support from the state. For a girl from a small, remote village who moved to the capital city to help her family, the leap from unemployment to prostitution appeared very easy, with a little "help" from wicked people on her life path. This film can be also seen as an apocryphal parable about a "saint" and a warm-hearted prostitute. It is a very typical road-movie, in which protagonists travel all the time and they change their attitudes under the influence of each other and through the circumstances of the trip. As the girl joins father Jakub and follows him, she begins to change from a vulgar person into a gentle empathetic one and her depression subsides step by step.

On his way to the sea (in fact, the way to death), we can see the dying monk tormented, scratched and tired. The more the monk suffers because of the

illness, the more the girl changes her attitude and even her outlook. In this movie there are visual references to the Passion of Christ. The journey becomes the Way of the Cross which takes away the sins of the world and saves one fallen young woman. Eventually, after a fall from a cliff, Jakub becomes temporarily blind and he is walking through a deep forest in complete darkness. In Christian culture, since Dante's *Divine Comedy*, both the forest and the darkness symbolize human sins. It is demonstrated as his symbolic death for the ex-prostitute's new life and as descending into hell like Jesus did after His martyrdom and death²¹ to deliver sinners from hell. Finally, the monk decides to sacrifice his innocence to give the girl a new life and to restore her self-respect and dignity. It is a paradox, because a Roman Catholic priest giving up celibacy is perceived as blameworthy and a violation of his vows. Nonetheless in the logic of the film's narration, the decision of making love to Julia is demonstrated as a gift of love.

It is worth focusing here on the double-layered storyline as characteristic of the parable narrative structure. The contrition of the ex-prostitute who changes her life while accompanying the dying monk on his journey and under his influence symbolizes the power of religiously-rooted love which saves sinners, however, understood literally (*caritas=eros*). The erotic love has been sacrificed here and thus this film story can be recognized as an example of an anthropomorphic representation of Christian love and mercy. Yet simultaneously, the anthropomorphic interpretation of Christianity is combined with the orthodox religious view: the journey towards death contributes to a

metaphor of life understood as the Way of the Cross which takes away the sins of others and saves. Furthermore, the concept of one actor in all supporting roles underlines the conventional and typical character of the demonstrated events and occurrences and serves to strengthen the parabolic aesthetics.

In Jan Jakub Kolski's *Jasminum* (2006), we have both an example of another apocryphal Christ-figure and a rare example of female Christ-figure. The heroine, a conservator of listed paintings, comes to a monastery in a small village in which she was raised to restore an icon of Holy Mary. Natasza is also a passionate composer of scents: she is especially keen on inventing aphrodisiacs. She treats her passion as a selfless gift of love to others, who need it, because she lost her own love. She is a warmhearted person, as Christ was, but she operates in the sphere of *eros* to make people happy, hence she enriches the sphere of *caritas* and *agape* as well. She as well as the majority of inhabitants of the village where the monastery is located also represent an anthropomorphic approach to Christian love. The women believe in the magnetic power of scents, since the monks who live in the monastery emanate beautiful scents as do the bodies of a pair of lovers buried there. The viewers observe the real results of Natasza's scents in successful love affairs, so she functions as a modern witch who is able to restore beauty to a piece of religious art and to force an indifferent person into a deeply involved close relationship. But she cannot and could have not forced her loved one to stay with her. She can affect others and make them happy but she is lonely and does not receive

love in return, except from her small daughter. She does not use her aphrodisiacs for herself. Rejection of love is her sacrifice.

This apocryphal parable is different from the previous examples and not only because the similarity to Christ is rather distant and inexact. It is because this figure underlines the subjectivity of the main character, her active role in her own life and in the lives of others. She brings love, but also empowerment. Next, she stands up for the weak, especially for the abused and badly treated women and children. Thus she is a figure of secularist savior, since she uses both her “witch craft” and her fists to settle the hurt persons’ accounts. Christ-figures in the film storylines usually function as saviors acting for others, but Natasza is a woman who struggles first of all for her own love and dignity. She wants her loved one to love her with his own will and therefore she tries to understand the mystery of love.

Parables

Parables make a fruitful device to represent the transcendent sphere because of the comprehensive and meaningfully extended form. They often appear together with Christ-figures, because Christ-figure films are very often simultaneously film parables that carry religious or theological meaning.

The first example to analyse in greater detail comes from the film *Biała sukienka. Opowieść na Boże Ciało*. (*The White Dress: The Story for Corpus Christi*, 2003, dir. Michał Kwieciński). It is an episode from a television series called *Święta polskie* (*Polish Holidays*) produced by public television between

2000 and 2006. Different directors took up topics which in their opinions characterized best one particular Polish holy day, which are numerous in Poland. Many of them, but not all, have religious character.

The main hero of *The White Dress*, a young priest hitch-hiking to get to Corpus Christi celebrations, meets a rich young man who is angry with God because of the untimely death of his fiancée. The priest travels *incognito* and does not try to convert him, but he is very assertive in the discussion on faith. He also disapproves of his companion's inappropriate attitude towards two girls hitch-hiking with them. At random, an arguing couple driving to the same celebration cause an accident. Only after the accident, when the driver is paralysed and is going to die, does the priest take out his stole to give absolution and starts to pray eagerly. The prayer appears extremely effective because a miracle occurs and the protagonist recovers.

The only casualty of the accident is a statue of Christ, standing at the crossroads. This statue functions here not only as an evident sign of Christian faith but also as an element of Polish traditional culture and moral values. The broken statue of Christ connects the Catholic priest without a cassock and a disappointed ex-believer. Such statues as well as statues of Holy Mary, wooden crosses, and small chaplets on the side of the road, especially near countryside crossroads, are characteristic elements of Polish landscapes which express the strong attachment of Poles to Christian emblems and rituals. Sometimes intellectuals argue that these are only signs of superficial faith deprived of a deeper meaning and attachment, but they persist as significant in Polish films.

The main thread of *The White Dress* may be perceived as a story about the real miracle of resurrection in contemporary Poland. But the film contains also the quintessence of the so called Polish folk Catholicism, because of the side story of an arguing couple and a rural family who are co-participants in the car accident. They seem to be superficial believers who pay attention only to the appearances of religion and mere rituals, seemingly far from deeper concerns and religious awareness. During preparations for the solemn, festive Holy Mass they are preoccupied first of all with the white dress for their daughter to show off in front of their neighbours. They quarrel all the time and seem to be far from religious values. But when the time of test comes and the husband tries to hang himself at the tree close to the road out of guilt over causing the accident, his wife supports him and stops him from committing the ultimate act. She spontaneously expresses her love toward her husband. It appears that love as the basic grounding of Christian faith is something intrinsic. Thus the outer signs of religion combine with the deeply rooted values. After all the dramatic events we can see the couple driving in peace and the two young men smiling and sitting in a wagon symmetrically on both sides of the damaged statue of Christ. The damaged statue may be perceived as the symbol of destroyed faith of the young wealthy man as well as of the damaged yet restored love of the rural couple. It appears that it was easier to bring back the deadly wounded man to life than to restore his faith, because after the miracle of recovery he remains an unbeliever who rationalizes that irrational event. At the same time, the apparently superficial faith of the simple, ordinary people turned out to be well-rooted in

love and other Christian values such as mercy and loyalty. Folk Catholicism, which is used very often as a negative qualifier, here has been positively evaluated.

This is a happy ending, as it should be in a television-play and in an optimistic parable, but it is not naive. The ex-believer remains an atheist in spite of the miracle, but before saying good bye the priest provides a punch line: “You may not believe in God yet, but you are not sure anymore....”

In this parable about a disappointed ex-devotee and traditional pious rural family – both very far from Christian perfection - all the protagonists are placed within a liminal experience caused by the inevitable threat. In the realistic surroundings of modern society a genuine miracle is performed and in the film *diegesis* it is persuasive because of the power of faith of the young priest. But the atheist’s scepticism is in fact a typical attitude for contemporary Poles: even a miracle is not a strong enough factor to change his views, but it may be a beginning of some dynamic transformation. This is one deeper meaning of this parable. The other refers to the rural couple and Polish folk Catholicism: it appears not as shallow as it is believed to be.

Also visual symbols matter in this film. Faith emblems are here strictly connected with the way of presenting Christian religion as a social and cultural fact. An apparent division emerges from such storytelling between the traditional folk Catholicism (identified as typical for countryside and village communities) and secularist tendencies (characteristic for cities and especially for the generation of the 90s). The secularism is delineated here as resulting

from personal experiences. The contradicting attitudes are interestingly intermediated and linked by the young priest, a Church official, who belongs to one position because of his age and to the other because of his function, service, and beliefs. For both young characters, the priest and the yuppie, the journey is a return to their origins, because they both grew up in the countryside within the same tradition. For one, the values identified with conservative rural community became the grounding for his spiritual growth, and for the other they resulted in disappointment and existential loss. But in the logic of the film storyline, the atheist has turned around and he may have a chance for another beginning thanks to the Christian values represented by the priest, his peer companion of the homecoming journey – which is also a metaphor of the existential path.

Visual symbols as screen representations of religiosity

Visual motifs making religious references are quite numerous in the Polish cinema of recent years. Iconic representations evoke imagery of the Christian religion as represented in contemporary Polish visual culture. As deeply rooted in the cultural past, they still appear in the variety of film works, regardless of their genres' conventions, film aesthetics and directors' approaches and views. In contemporary Polish cinema there appear rather frequent visual quotations from the *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, but I would like to focus on only one spectacular example which was vividly discussed and caused divisions among both critics and ordinary viewers. Such a response occurred because many images from *Wszyscy jesteśmy Chrystusami*

(*We all are Christs*, 2006, dir. Marek Koterski) were thought to be blasphemous. In this film we see a reference to the iconography of the Last Supper, but in the place of the Apostles we can see buddies of an alcoholic (Adaś Miauczyński), the hero of the film, who has started drinking once again. Many other visual references seemed blasphemous as well, because in this film the sufferings of an alcoholic and his son addicted to drugs were compared to the Passion of Christ, both in visual and narrative aspects. The most shocking shots were two: one in which the main protagonist is an alcoholic on the cross, and the other one with his son with the crown of thorns on his head. Thus sufferings of an alcoholic and his son (an addict like his father) are in a way equated to the torments of the Son of God by the will of God the Father. In my opinion this comparison is provocative but the director had an honest recognizable purpose for using such controversial images and narrative associations, since they can be explained by deep religious and theological reasons. We can see in the film an interpretation of Christ's Passion and death as "a scandal" and as His descending to the lowest position of the most humiliated and totally fallen person — a human being who can be lifted by the power of Christ's sacrifice.

Conclusion

The analyses of several representative examples from recent Polish films evoking religious meanings or references allow us to state that religious iconography is an intrinsic part of Polish visual culture. The most effective devices used to portray the religious sphere in recent years are those based on

analogies, especially Christ-figures, parables and visual symbols. One can perceive an element of secularist tendencies in distortions of Christian symbols, because the figurative meanings differ from those of orthodox Christian theology, especially its Roman Catholic version.

Another conclusion deals with the way in which those structures serve for the society to manifest itself. In addition to elements of cultural religious traditions, social problems of the last twenty years are portrayed in recent Polish cinema. Since the transition from socialism to capitalism that was initiated in 1989, various social phenomena characteristic of those times are shown in films and linked to essential Christian motifs such as the way of the Cross, Christ-figures, and sacrifice. Meaning structures taken from Christian imagery are connected to the subject of social exclusion caused by weakness or inability to adapt to the society built on economic competition. The Christian values in film narratives, sometimes rejected, sometimes recovering again, function at the same time as the basic grounding of the culture and society: the element of tradition, but also as a vivid element of a renewing power, at least in the moral and spiritual aspect which therefore affect human attitudes and relationships. Thus Adele Reinhartz's comments about "the paradigmatic role of the Christ story in shaping the way our society tells its stories"²² appears true in Polish cinema as well.

Further studies could deal with social functions of other elements of Christian imagery in audio-visual arts and the mechanisms used to manifest religion through films. It seems useful to examine the same subject in other post-

communist countries as well. We should search for the answer to the question: what is the role of religion in various countries after political transformation? Has this role been imprinted in the screen images? Finally, are cultural and social problems and “costs” mirrored on screens in the same manner?

¹ Krzysztof Kornacki, “Wizerunek Boga i zaświatów w kinie współczesnym” 1 (2010) *Ethos*,: 67-84 ; idem, “Bóg i zaświaty w kinie postmodernistycznym”, in *Sacrum w kinie. Dekadę później. Szkice, eseje, rozprawy*, eds. S.J. Konefał, M. Zelent, K. Kornacki , Gdańsk: Wyd. U. Gd, 2013 , s. 358-363.

² Because of limited space, the humorous and grotesque representations of religiosity on Polish screens were left out.

³ David Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre. The Role of Analogies in Genre Theory* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

⁴ Amédée Ayfre, *Conversion aux images?* (Paris: Edition du Cerf, 1964), Amédée Ayfre, *Cinéma et mystère*, (Paris: Edition du Cerf, 1969), Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre, *Le cinéma et le sacré* (Paris: Edition du Cerf, 1954) [for new edition see: Amédée Ayfre, *Un cinéma spiritualiste, textes réunis par R. Prédal* (Paris-Condé Noireau: Ed. Du Cerf, 2004), Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: the University of California Press, 1972).

⁵ Ayfre, *Cinéma et mystère* , 42, 70-75 .

⁶ Ayfre, *Cinéma et mystère*, 17, see: Marczak, *Poetyka filmu religijnego*(Kraków: Arkana, 2000) 29.

⁷ Ayfre, *Cinéma et mystère*, 70-75.

⁸ Marczak, *Poetyka filmu religijnego*, 28-29.

⁹ See Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre*. Obviously I refer also to the classical notions of Paul Ricoeur who perceives myth as extended symbol and points out two levels of these meaning structures as well as its rooting in the mysterious experience of power (similar to the *tremendum* of Rudolf Otto). Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde, transl. Willis Domingo et al. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

¹⁰ Outside religious cinema, directors Anna and Wilhelm Sasnal would be typical; original in aesthetic film form, but they fail sometimes in the artistic quality of their movies. They very often engage metaphysics within the structuring of film narration and use tools of the slow cinema.

¹¹ Quoted in Adele Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 155.

¹² Irena Sever, "Cinematographic Christ Figures", in *Cinematic Transformations of the Gospel*, 99-112, Irena Sever, *La rappresentazione metaforica di Gesù Cristo nel cinema. Le figure cristiche femminili* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Salesiana, 2011).

¹³ Peter Malone, *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 158. There is a vast research on this theme in Marek Lis, *Figury Chrystusa w "Dekalogu" Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego* (Opole: Wydział Teologiczny UO, 2013).

¹⁴ Adele Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 152.

¹⁵ Reinhartz, 172.

¹⁶ It refers to Saint Paul and his metaphor of the lifetime as a run, see especially: 2nd Tm 4:6-9

¹⁷ One of the most talented Polish contemporary directors, he committed suicide in 2015.

¹⁸ The concept has been applied to the film studies by Michał Legan for the first time in: Michał Legan, *Balthasar/Tarkowski. Teodramat w filmie. Koncepcja teodramatu w myśli teologicznej Hansa Ursy von Balthasara i twórczości filmowej Andrieja Tarkowskiego* (Częstochowa: Paulinianum, 2012). Unfortunately it has not been translated into English. The same theologian and filmologist presented the analysis and interpretation of Marcin Wrona's *Baptism* as theodrama during the 2nd Meeting of Polish Society for Film and Media Studies: 8-10.12.2016 in Cracow. I am relating some of his ideas in the several following sentences.

¹⁹ Ricoeur refers the idea to the myth, but this has to do also with the parable because the essence is the narrative character of both and their two-leveled meaning structures; Paul Ricoeur, "Symbol daje do myślenia", trans. S. Cichowicz, in Paul Ricoeur, *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka. Rozprawy o metodzie*, trans. Ewa Bieńkowska et al (Warszawa: PAX, 1985), 58-75. For English edition see Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*.

²⁰ Economic transformations in Poland resulted in enormous unemployment and excessive growth of poverty esp. in villages located far from economic centers and in the whole regions, where plants collapsed. This caused negative social phenomena as for example spreading of domestic violence, prostitution, including among teenagers, disintegration of families, the increasing number of suicides and of homeless persons and even hunger.

²¹ For further and deeper analyses of Jakub as an apocryphal Christ-Figure see: Mariola Marczak, "Apokryficzne figury Chrystusa we współczesnym polskim kinie," *Studia Kulturoznawcze* 6:2 (2014), 149-170.

²² Reinhartz, 172.

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