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# Without One Tree, a Forest Will Stay a Forest by *Dagmara Drzazga as a Religious and Historical Documentary*

The film *Without One Tree, a Forest Will Stay a Forest* by Dagmara Drzazga tells the story of Father Jan Macha, a curate in St. Joseph's Parish in Ruda Śląska. In the years of the Nazi occupation, Father Macha was a cofounder and active member of a secret scout organization named *Konwalia (Lily of the Valley)* and a publisher of the underground newspaper *Świt (Dawn)* in which he wrote that the war would end soon and the Germans would certainly be defeated. He also managed welfare work in Silesia, providing assistance to the families of people arrested or persecuted by the Nazis. The aid he organized in the form of food and other necessities reached about 4,000 residents of Upper Silesia.

Jan Macha was denounced to the Gestapo and subsequently arrested in July 1942. He was betrayed by an alcoholic who had demanded financial assistance but had been turned away. For his underground activity to the detriment of the Third Reich, Jan Macha was sentenced to death by guillotining. The sentence was carried out on December 3, 1942. On the day of his death, Father Macha was 28 years old. From the day he was ordained to the time he was executed, he served as a priest for only 1,257 days.

Dagmara Drzazga's film shows the short but heroic life of Jan Macha, illustrating it with archival family photographs, school certificates, seminary and curia documents, and those found in historical archives. The hero is remembered by his family members, historians and priests, including a columnist and relative of his, Jan Cofałka, Fr. Dr. Henryk Olszar – historian, Theological Faculty, Silesian University, Monsignor Stanisław Puchała, parish priest of Christ the King's Parish in Katowice, and Prof. Ryszard Kaczmarek, a historian at the Silesian University. The stories they tell build up an image of a clergyman devoted utterly to his work, ready to serve God and the Church until the very end, and to suffer martyrdom. Its omen, a sign given by God, runs through the story of the film. One of those remembering Father Macha – Kazimierz Trojan, his nephew – says that his uncle when celebrating his first Holy Mass let his relatives know that he had had a premonition that he would not die a natural death. The premonition soon came true. When he heard the death sentence, Father Macha wrote a farewell letter to his parents asking them not cry over him but to pray, because: “without

one tree a forest will stay a forest, without one swallow spring will come anyway, and without one man the world will not come apart.”[1]

Father Jan Macha is honoured only by a cenotaph in a cemetery. After he was executed, his body was not given to his family despite requests being made to do so; instead, it was taken to Auschwitz and burned in a crematorium. This was the usual Nazi practice with the bodies of executed convicts. In total, in 1941–1945, the Germans executed over 500 people in the prison at Katowice. One of them was a close associate of Father Macha, a seminarian, Joachim Gürtler.

Father Macha’s sentence was carried out using a guillotine. The Nazi’s use of this instrument for decapitating condemned people in Poland during the occupation is little known to the general public even today. During the Second World War, 30 guillotines were produced in Berlin; three were sent to Poland: to Wrocław, Poznań and Katowice, in 1941. When the war was close to an end, a guillotine was installed in Gdańsk as well.

Dagmara Drzazga’s film touches upon another poorly known subject, too, one that has not been carefully studied by historians working on the victims of the Nazi occupation of Poland, namely the martyrdom of the priests who suffered death at the hands of the German invaders for being Poles and performing their usual pastoral duties. It is not known how many Catholic and Orthodox priests or Protestant ministers lost their lives in Poland in World War *Przygoda myśli. Rozmowy obok filmu* II. Only recently, have the first studies been made on the fate of Catholic priests. One of such major research projects is being carried out by the Drohiczyn Learned Society, the Catholic Youth Association of the Drohiczyn Diocese and the U.S. bishops’ Subcommittee on Aid to the Church in Central and Eastern Europe. So far, the researchers working on the project have documented the murdering of 150 Catholic priests. This number, however, does not include the priests who perished in concentration camps but only those who were executed in prisons. The work of collecting information on priests who were killed by the Nazis continues, with researchers continually supplying new evidence.

The documentary by Dagmara Drzazga fits into the category of a religious film. The category, however, is a fuzzy one. Even the very term “religious cinema” is not clearly defined by cinema experts. This is evident from, for instance, Marek Sokołowski’s book *Kościół, kino, sacrum. W poszukiwaniu filmów o tematyce religijnej*. [2] In it, the author encourages researchers to search together for characteristic traits and to make an attempt to comprehensively define films devoted to the sacred. [3]

[1] Quotation from Dagmara Drzazga’s film *Without One Tree, a Forest Will Stay a Forest* (2011).

[2] M. Sokołowski, *Kościół, kino, sacrum. W poszukiwaniu filmów o tematyce religijnej* [*The Church, Cin-*

*ema, and the Sacred. In Search of Films on Religious Subjects*], Kastalia, Olsztyn 2002.

[3] Ibidem, p. 9.

Edited with great care by Marek Lis and Adam Garbicz, *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*[4] does not carry the entry “religious film”. Undoubtedly, this is not, however, an omission by the authors, who in the editors’ note declare: “To understand what the film image of God is, belongs to the reader”.[5] Instead of giving a simplified definition, they explain the criteria used to qualify specific works, whether feature, documentary, photographic, animated, or musical, as religious films. As a result, the following kinds of films found their way into the encyclopaedia:

[...] (1) films on religious subjects, (2) film versions of literary works widely considered religious, (3) hagiographic films or biographies of people important for individual religions or denominations, (4) films about people who devoted their lives to God or service to others, (5) films whose makers struggle against the precepts of morality grounded in faith, (6) films of “hidden religiousness” the study of which reveals deep spiritual or metaphysical meanings, and (7) selected films which, although they treat religious subjects superficially (death, afterlife, hell, etc.), many viewers identify them religious.[6]

Mariola Marczak in her book *Poetyka filmu religijnego* also attempts to describe the phenomenon of religious film, but relying on the studies by Amédée Ayfre[7] and Paul Schrader.[8] Her attempt is interesting in that it does not refer to a film’s contents, but to the concept of its transcendental style, developed by Schrader.[9] The latter claims that the sacred shown on a screen is expressed as a rule by precisely defined, universal and supra-cultural means of film expression. They include a peculiar make-up of the characters and a related type of acting, rejecting psychological profoundness, and presenting a departure from the superficiality of events shown distorting the spiritual aspect of the world, that is from all conventions meant only as ornaments. Next, dramatic tension is dispensed with as it emotionally ties the viewer to the story and characters. This type of cinema, as Schrader claims, makes viewers feel a special kind of spiritual thrall, to experience transcendence, far from the sentimental thrills usually offered by mainstream films.

In recent years, several collective works have been published in Poland, too, on this issue such as *Poszukiwanie i degradowanie sacrum w kinie*[10] and *Ukryta religijność kina*.<sup>[11]</sup> In addition, film study periodicals – “Kwartalnik Filmowy” and “Studia Filmoznawcze” – have

[4] *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego* [*World Encyclopaedia of Religious Film*], eds. M. Lis, A. Garbicz, Biały Kruk, Kraków 2007.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 9.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 8.

[7] A. Ayfre, *Dieu au cinéma, Problèmes esthétiques du film religieux*, Presses universitaires de France, Toulouse 1953.

[8] M. Marczak, *Poetyka filmu religijnego* [*Poetics of Religious Cinema*], Arcana, Kraków 2000.

[9] P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style In Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1972.

[10] *Poszukiwanie i degradowanie sacrum w kinie* [*The Search for and Degradation of the Sacred in Cinema*], eds. M. Przyłipiak, K. Kornacki, Wydaw. Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk 2002.

[11] *Ukryta religijność kina* [*The Hidden Religiousness of Cinema*], ed. M. Lis, Redakcja Wydawnictwa WT UO, Opole 2002.

run monographic issues.[12] The meeting of cinema with religion, from the point of view of theology and not only film studies, is shown by the collective work *Kultura wizualna – teologia wizualna* edited by Witold Kawecki.[13] In the foreword, its authors delineate the research area as follows:

It is our intent to take a broader look at the picture, not only from the point of view of the history of art but also from that of theology, philosophy, sociology, social practice, ubiquitous mass media or even the economy. [...] In this book we ask ourselves the following questions: Is God expressible in theology and preaching by the Church only with words? Or does He “enter” the language of images or the iconic language? Is it only the word that opens up to God or is the same capability to open up to God shared by the image as well?[14]

Such considerations expand the range over which religious film is defined in comparison to the approach taken in *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, referring mainly to the thematic criterion, and to that adopted in *Poetyka filmu religijnego* by Mariola Marczak, who recommends that the cinema of the sacred be distinguished by the transcendental style of motion pictures. What such considerations suggest is taking into account the “kerygmatic” potential and properties of film images, made use of by filmmakers. Just like the Word in the Bible, film images have the power to reveal the tenets of faith.

These conceptions show how fuzzy and multifaceted “religious cinema” is. Matters become even more complicated in the case of documentary films. Defining the characteristic traits of the poetics of the cinema of facts, Mirosław Przyłipiak[15] maintains that productions fitting into the documentary genre show on the screen an image of the world whose nominal meanings are identical with the source ones. There, the faithfulness to time and space in relation to events shown is preserved and documentary film makers do not attempt to manipulate the reality before the camera or, if they do, this fact becomes a structural element of their work usually introduced for the purpose of revealing the truth about people and facts shown on the screen. The autotelic function of a film documentary in relation to its material or technique, provided that such a function is present in the first place, must not suppress nor dominate its subject matter. This type of poetics, on the one hand, does not lend itself easily to the rendition of meanings that refer not so much to the existing physical reality but rather to its transcendence, which after all is the main purpose of a religious film.

On the other hand, the religious documentary has many years of interesting tradition, giving it a place in the history of cinema. Doc-

[12] *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2004, no. 45 (*The Sacred in Film*), *Studia Filmoznawcze* 2004, no. 25 (*Religion and Film*).

[13] W. Kawecki, J.S. Wojciechowski, D. Żukowska-Gardzińska, *Kultura wizualna – teologia wizualna*, [*Visual Culture – Visual Theology*], Instytut

Papieża Jana Pawła II : Instytut Wiedzy o Kulturze UKSW, Warszawa 2011.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

[15] M. Przyłipiak, *Poetyka kina dokumentalnego* [*The Poetics of Documentary Films*], Wydaw. Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk 2004, pp. 49–50.

umentary productions referring to the sphere of the sacred expand the subjects usually offered by feature films to include such matters as the life, structures and history of the Church, Church architecture and art, observances of feast days, pilgrimages to shrines, the preaching of the Gospel in various corners of the world and finally, biographies of real people who in their lives embodied the idea of sainthood. An example of the last-mentioned film type is the work of Dagmara Drzazga.

Religious documentaries often share the poetics of a transcendental style, especially in their resignation of the psychological motivations and inner dilemmas of their heroes. However, not infrequently, such documentaries attempt to dramatize the events they show, but of course producers of such films do not intend to cause an emotional shock in viewers. If the shock is there after all, it is evoked for a precisely defined purpose and for an ideological reason.

Because of the peculiar necessity to render the aura of the supernatural and divinity surrounding the events portrayed in the film, producers of such documentaries willingly take advantage of poetic visualizations, bringing to the fore, to a greater degree than other documentary types, the aesthetic functions of a film image. However, these are not purely ornamental measures, serving vain aesthetisation. Their purpose is to underscore the religious message. Dagmara Drzazga's film is a perfect example of this type of visualization. She uses well-thought-out tracking and pan shots, superimpositions, soft colours, careful lighting, first- and third-person verbal commentaries delivered either by specific individuals or off-screen, and music discreetly accompanying selected film fragments. When presenting sets of photographs and archival documents, she uses dynamic montages emphasized by tracking and pan shots. These techniques introduce the viewer into the atmosphere of the life story of the man for whom faith and related values were worth more than keeping his earthly existence at any price.

The film opens with the shots of a leafless crown of a tree shown against a dark sky. In an obvious manner, this image refers to the title of the film drawn from Jan Macha's farewell letter written to his family immediately before the execution. The camera lens moves closer, slowly and unnoticeably to the intricate silhouette of branches, offering their worm's-eye view against a brightening sky. The image is overlaid with successive frames showing the silhouettes of other naked trees, using pan shots. Through leafless branches, the light of the rising day becomes more and more intensive. A dissolve reveals a stone cross, standing amid snow in front of a church enveloped in winter fog. The next image fades in to show fog-wrapped church towers subsequently overlaid with another of a church stained-glass window. The camera wanders up the coloured panes towards the sky. A cut moves the viewer to the nave, flooded with light coming from windows behind the altar. Its golden rays have an almost mystical look. A long and slow tracking shot zooms in on the altar. Another cut-in shot reveals a leafless tree with a dark-blue sky looming behind it, darkening this time until the

screen is blacked out. Against this dark background, with a negative, white silhouette of a tree, the title and credits come up on the screen.

The film's prologue is illustrated with church music using the motif of *Agnus Dei*, selected by Dagmara Drzazga from the collection of Paris Music. This music motif is repeated throughout the work.

The story of Jan Macha's life, as told by the film, begins with a first-person narrative. Immediately after a short introduction by Father Dr. Henryk Olszar, a historian from the Faculty of Theology, Silesian University, the filmmaker has the protagonist speak. An off-screen narrator reproduces Jan Macha's statements and presents his curriculum vitae, which he filed with other documents when applying for admission to the seminary. Next, the camera records statements by people who knew Father Macha; they include his family members, priests and historians. Their accounts are supplemented with a dynamic montage of photographs shown with a moving camera in which the hero can be seen in various moments of his life; they also show his family members and historic events (for instance, the rising in Chorzów in 1921, the entry of Gen. Haller's soldiers into Chorzów and the welcoming gates built by local residents, members of the Azoty Chorzów sports club of which Jan Macha was a member, newly ordained priests from a seminary, the entry of Nazi troops into Ruda Śląska and the occupation of other Upper Silesian cities by the Germans). The historical documentation is supplemented with the pictures of various certificates and letters. Among them, prominence is given to the secondary-school leaving certificate, documents from the Archdiocesan Archives such as the application for admission to the seminary and a certificate of good conduct issued by a parish priest according to the custom prevailing at that time, as well as notes written by a seminarian, Joachim Gürtler, and smuggled out of prison. The documentary character of these sequences, assembled from photographs, contrasts with recurrent poetic images. One of them is the motif of a sign from heaven, heralding unusual events to take place in the hero's life, mentioned by Father Macha's nephew in front of the camera.

In the scene in question, an establishing shot begins with a slow tracking of the camera along the nave towards the altar. Light comes in through apse windows, the same motif of church music played in the same version is heard. The narrator begins his story, but only after a moment does the camera, in the next shot, show his face. We hear the words he is saying:

During incensing of the altar, somebody saw the smoke of incense wrap around the neck of the newly-ordained priest as if it were a scarf; it was, some say, grey, while others claim it was red. Witnesses took it to mean that something will happen.[16]

The next shot shows a crucifix inside a church with a window and a fragment of a figure of a saint standing on the altar in the back-

[16] Quotation from Dagmara Drzazga's film *Without One Tree, a Forest Will Stay a Forest* (2011).

ground. The saint possibly could be St. Michael, because he is wearing armour. The shot is out of focus and is blurred by the smoke of incense and light coming in through the window. Accompanied by suggestive music, a trail of incense smoke rises to the sky in white billows; the camera follows and the screen is blacked out.

Dagmara Drzazga's film has also an autotelic aspect. The shots showing a meeting in an apartment, attended by relatives remembering the murdered priest, switch between the family members and the film crew, recording their conversations. We see a mixer with his equipment, a brush cleaning a camera lens, a dictaphone set for recording, a microphone being attached to a shirt, a reflector being positioned to catch the best light, and a camera lens in close-up. These shots are interposed with others showing the nieces and nephews of Father Macha entering the room and greeting one another. The relatives speak of the atmosphere in the home of Father Macha, the customs meant to cultivate the Christian faith and patriotism observed by the parents of the future martyr and the impact such attitudes had on the work done by the priest under the Nazi occupation.

The following scenes, telling the story of Father Macha after his arrest and imprisonment, share a similar style, with documentary and poetic images alternating. Recurrent motifs include naked tree crowns against the sky or snow surrounded by a landscape accentuating a cross or church towers. The fragment telling the story of Father Macha's younger brother, Pietrzyk, uses a dynamic montage of pictures of buildings in Auschwitz, with various shots of barbed wire fences. The images are accompanied by music which is not silenced even when we hear verbal commentaries; it is only turned down to provide a background for them.

The same suggestive montage of picture and sound is employed in the final scene, which is very dramatic. Initially quiet, the sounds of church music introduce once again an image of a tree trunk shot with a lens pointed upwards. The camera moves up the trunk to portray a leafless crown against a grey sky. In the next shot, the viewer is shown Father Macha's farewell letter handwritten in German to his family; at the same time an off-screen voice reads it out in Polish. The words of the letter fall silent every other moment, letting the music sound ever louder. We see the interior of the prison; a slow tracking shot focuses on the death row door and then the camera pans to the door of the death chamber while the last words of Father Macha are heard off-screen: "Pray for your Hanik".<sup>[17]</sup> The door opens, as if pushed by an invisible hand, letting the camera in to film a guillotine standing in the darkness lit only with a spot light. A slow track-in follows with a close-up of the guillotine blade, shining ominously in the light. The music grows ever louder; a choir accompanied by an orchestra sings *Agnus Dei*. The image fades out until the screen is blacked out. An inscription comes up

[17] Ibidem.

on the black screen: “To the memory of Father Jan Macha and others executed for their faith and homeland”.[18]

The film of Dagmara Drzazga was noticed and won awards at Christian film festivals. In 2012, it received the first prize for a documentary film at the 27th International Catholic Film and Multimedia Festival in Niepokalanów, Poland. This year, it won the first prize, too, for the best documentary at the 8th International Catholic Festival of Christian Films and Television Programmes “Magnificat 2012” in Minsk, Belarus.

[18] Ibidem.