

ZBIGNIEW
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Tango – a Dance of Universal Alienation

These comments and reflections (preceded by a screening of two short films by Zbigniew Rybczyński: *Wdech-wydech /Inhale-Exhale/* realised jointly with Bogdan Dziworski¹ and *Tango*, the Oscar-winner from 1983²) originated upon the margin of a book on Rybczyński's *oeuvre* prepared by the Film Workshop in the Institute of Art at the Polish Academy of Sciences³. I would like to present them as a contribution to the theme: "Ethnology and contemporaneity". Today, the very fact that contemporary ethnology deals with film as a cultural text is no longer exceptional, rare, strange or isolated as testified by the development of a separate domain, namely, the anthropology of film perceived either as a sub-discipline of ethnology or as a specific interpretation approach intent on analysis. Emphasis is placed on joint experiences shared by photography, film, ethnography, and anthropology⁴. A new type of "writing" or rather creating anthropology is progressing with the assistance of photography, the film camera, and video; this so-called visual anthropology contains anthropological reflection on contemporary and past phenomena of visual culture. My remarks, therefore, can be a contribution or justification of the legitimacy, need, and purposefulness of the application of such an anthropological perception of film, its examination from an anthropological perspective, and the discovery of the anthropological coefficient contained therein. Briefly and simply, such a contribution could be entitled: *On the Need and Sensibility of Writing an Anthropological Commentary on a Film that No One Will Write Apart from an Anthropologist*.

A direct reason for my comments is the review by Charles Solomon published in "The Los Angeles Times" soon after the titular film received an Oscar, and titled (in a way captivating not only the anthropologist): *Tango – A Polish Dance of Alienation*. Solomon wrote: *Tango is an almost hypnotically complex work that requires several viewings to grasp completely*.

To the accompaniment of an old and rusty tango the viewers see an empty anonymous room. A ball falls inside

followed by a boy climbing through the window. The film seems to be based on live action, but its structure remains curious – the motions performed by the boy are repeated with astonishing precision. When he appears in the room once again, there enters woman holding a baby, to depart a moment later. The action develops to the moment when there are 26 actors and actresses present and the room becomes more crowded than the ship cabin in the Marx Brothers movie: *A Night at the Opera*. The crowd slowly disperses and the room empties. Importantly, these people do not cooperate, each continues his activity isolated, totally indifferent, and without reacting to the surrounding chaos – a comment on cramped flats in Polish towns and the painful alienation produced by this state of things, Solomon concluded.⁵

In contrast to the highly promising title this unambiguous and authoritative, seriously sounding housing-cultural interpretation features startling simplicity and is the reason why it becomes so difficult to refrain from smiling. But an equal feeling of dissatisfaction is produced by other explanations proposed in studies consistently developing the motif of the Polish housing problem. Characteristically, they all concentrate on workshop and strictly technical issues, as a rule stressing the banal nature and insignificance of the story. More, they caution against seeking in the film deeper philosophical contents. This primacy of technical questions is accompanied predominantly by reflections stressing that Rybczyński made the transition from the cinema to a new formula while abandoning the film for the sake of another. Such deliberations focus on the fact that he had discovered a novel form of depiction made possible by the video technique. Here are some samples.

In the article *Comme un Polonais* Jean Paul Fargier wrote: *Zbigniew Rybczynski fait de la Vidéo depuis toujours. Même quand il tournait en Pologne des films expérimentaux, il faisait de la Vidéo. Tango, (...) c'est indiscutablement de la Vidéo, même si son support est du film et que tous ses trucages sont de classiques caches/contre-caches cinématographiques*.

The time and spatial strategy, Fargier went on to say, which organises this ingenious work is part of a video approach. Its intention was to create the possibility of simultaneously watching about thirty actions taking place at the same time in a very small room (with a window, three doors, a wardrobe, a table, and a bed). Initially, the room is empty, but then a ball drops in through the window, followed by a boy climbing into the interior to throw the ball out and leave. The ball, however immediately, returns and so does the child. Note: this is a loop, followed by another, with a man entering and taking (stealing?) a suitcase lying on the wardrobe. Another twenty or even thirty actions will occur in the cramped space. A man sitting at the table eats soup brought by a woman and

departs once he finishes. The moment he leaves the table, another man enters the room, stands on the table to change a light bulb and, departing, leaves space for a woman, already appearing with a plate of soup ... Each particle of space is put to maximum use. The bed is used for changing a baby's diaper, for waiting for death, for making love. The overall effect is nine and half of *Nowa książka* (New Book, Rybczyński's previous experimental film – Z.B.) multiplied by three or four⁶.

Further on the French critic posed a symptomatic question, asking whether we are dealing with a housing crisis or a crisis of the cinema? When he first watched *Tango* he thought about the housing crisis in Poland and other socialist countries. Watching it for a second time he noticed a crisis of film (in a country of widely disseminated TV). *Tango* is cinema itself (with its doors and windows, entries and exits, banal and well-used scenarios), revealed at a time of the direct. Everything is visible in the foreground: tragedy and burlesque are expressed with finesse but gain density. There is no reason to mourn. Film represented a certain dramatic and comic force and, at times, enormous emotions. Video, on the other hand, opens up to a new world of emotion, laughter, and drama.⁷

Time to turn to analyses conducted from the inside and let the Polish authors speak. Marcin Giżycki: *A ball falls through a window into an empty ensuite room. A boy enters in the same way. He takes the ball and jumps out of the window. The ball immediately falls inside. The cycle is repeated, like a stuck gramophone record. Other figures enter from different directions. They behave as if they were alone in the room. All perform strictly defined activities and depart, to immediately reappear and repeat exactly the same motions. Despite the fact that the number of people continues to grow their paths miraculously cross in such a way that they never collide. This is Rybczyński's sui generis masterpiece, capable of coordinating all those activities in time with the precision of a fraction of a second, so that they overlap in the manner of a clockwork mechanism. An ordinary enactment by actors would be simply impossible, and even if they were to succeed to a certain extent they would still not attain that mechanical character of the plot, which, after all, comprises the very essence of the film. During the culmination, the room contains more than thirty persons, a number that we simply have to accept since we got lost counting already much earlier. Subsequently, the interior starts to gradually empty in the same way as it became full of people – now, after his/her successive departure a given character no longer returns and does not renew the cycle. The contents of the film, therefore, are motion and variable spatial relations between the protagonists – motion increases up to a certain moment and then is followed by an utmost complication of all the gathered figures and a decline of motion, until all*

action ceases. The dramaturgy of Tango is constructed by means of a densification, in the literal meaning of the word, of the situation. Each entry of a new resident intensifies the tension: "How will he manage to cross the room"? People keep arriving. Every surprising ending would topple the logic of the premise, although the author took the liberty of a slight deviation by allowing himself in the finale to slightly change the activity of the departing persons, which we could disapprove if it were to point the message of the film to a completely new direction. Since nothing of the sort takes place, the accepted solution is treated as a natural musical cadenza justified also in the title.

*Familiarity with Rybczyński almost guarantees that Tango interested him predominantly as a technical problem. He simply had an idea and knew how to realise it. Hence the need to be rather careful while seeking some sort of more profound philosophical intentions (and such attempts have been made). Nonetheless, while differentiating the characters as regards their makeup and costume (on the margin, the man in a red coat from *Nowa książka* resurfaces) and designing the sets the author created a specifically Polish panopticon. Everything takes place in a cramped ensuite room, that symbol of Polish housing difficulties but also of the democratisation of Polish society (after all, it is in such a room that the Polish post-war intelligentsia queued up to the bathroom together with members of the working class, as documented by Leonard Buczkowski in his celebrated comedy *Skarb / Treasure*). A gallery of average Poles appearing in the apartment represents a full range of fulfilled functions – from intercourse to death. Copulation, eating, dressing, cleaning, and even (presumably, since they take place beyond the frame, behind the bathroom door) washing and defecation. These may be secondary contents but they still produce numerous and various associations⁸.*

Finally, the opinion of Daniel Szczechura: *The realisation of *Nowa książka*, *Tango* and other films is based on a mammoth music score containing the movements of particular characters. This is the reason for the absence of photos in Rybczyński's films. It was impossible to obtain a photo from *Nowa książka*, since the final effect was but a product of the author's imagination and laboratory processing. (...) Assorted figures appear in an empty room as if on stage and perform simple daily activities. In time, their number grows, new people arrive, and each does the same. A boy leans through a window and picks up a ball that had fallen into the room, a woman changes a baby's nappies, a girl does her homework, a granny dies, etc. The culmination scene resembles a ballet or a pantomime of sorts, in which 26 characters take part. The action then slows down and once again we are left with an empty room. Everything takes place to the accompaniment of a tango. This film, simple and applying limited means, makes a great impression. After the screening there invariably emerges the question: how was this done? True, something like this has never been seen before⁹.*

Daniel Szczechura, himself an accomplished author and craftsman in this particular cinematic domain, reveals the secrets of filmmaking. His extremely meticulous and professional technical description reconstructs the production of *Tango* step by step. Why then do the analyses, as I have mentioned, seem to be insufficient? The reason lies in the fact that even when concentrated on the film and attempt to provide a detailed and thorough description they remain as if imprisoned within it and are doomed to repetition. In a manner of speaking, they evade attempts at answering the question: "What does *Tango* mean?" and even the much less penetrating: "Can *Tango* actually mean something?". It is here that I perceive the place and role of an anthropologist who could propose a commentary. Initially, it might appear that such an approach of an expert on the cinema to the dilemma in question: a technical (material) description or a quest for meaning, appears to be closer to the intentions of the author, who himself voices his opinion (I cite only a fragment of his statement, to which I shall return at the end of the text): *The most important is technology. One can speak about the beauty of the pyramid, but the way in which it was built is more essential. The same holds true for the Eiffel Tower. The construction of this enormous steel structure gave rise to protests. It was claimed that it was ugly. Now it has become the sentimental symbol of Paris. First there comes construction and technology, and only later do they become surrounded with meanings and produce an ambiance*¹⁰.

There exists, however, another extreme and different point of view declaring that we should not trust artists all the way. Or else, we may trust them but never believe what they say nor succumb to them.

In an interview published in "Konteksty" Janusz Bogucki drew attention to this issue by declaring: *An artist concentrates on that, which emerges in his mind and gradually changes into an object. Later, he works on this object and becomes totally immersed in its inner world. But then the object starts to pursue a life of its own, just as genuine as its original life in the artist's head and studio. Acting in this way the author does not really know what he is doing and is only partly aware of his conduct. A true artist is unaware of what he is doing and remains an instrument, a source of energy that becomes transferred into some sort of matter somewhat according to the principle of intentions but, predominantly, premonitions – true, the intellect wields control, professional skills are available, but how is all this possible considering that it is not a question of planning and execution? If the later is the case then the aesthetic object remains empty inside, but if we are dealing with a creative act then in a certain sense it remains independent of the author*¹¹.

Opting for such a stand and convinced that *Tango* is not an empty aesthetic object (as evidenced by the views of the afore-mentioned authors: "a hypnotic,

complex work", "a brilliant work", "a masterpiece", "the film makes an enormous impression") let us sum up the opinions of experts on the cinema. The number of extra-film references is scarce. Their interpretation takes place mainly within the range of the discussed work (the way it was made) and in reference to a single context (that of the film), consigning us either to local history of the film (Gizycki – *Skarb*) or its world counterpart – depending on the way in which we perceive it (Solomon – the Marx Brothers in *A Night at the Opera*; Szczechura, following the example of many others, cites Méliès as his point of reference). Meanwhile, the questions: "can *Tango* mean something?" and "does *Tango* mean something?" still remain important and continue to disturb us. They recur persistently and call for an answer. Take the question addressed to the author by a journalist conducting an interview for Andy Warhol's "Interview Magazine" wondering whether after he had won an Oscar the director can explain the meaning of *Tango*. Already forewarned that artists are not to be trusted we can calmly react to the negative response.

What can we do? What is going to happen to our cultural commentary in the wake of the author's *dictum*? We simply have to start at the beginning... Now is the time to go back to Solomon. Against such a backdrop, his rather ridiculous and flat statement, which we immediately rejected and read without the quotation marks: *Tango – a Polish dance of alienation*, still remain captivating and appears to lead us onto a correct course. Something does seem to be right. The tango in Kantor's theatre of death, the tango in Rybczyński's film, the tango in Mrozek's theatre of the absurd (this similarity of the title with Mrozek's drama was even keenly noted by Daniel Luliński, the official correspondent of the dailies "Trybuna Ludu" and "Życie Warszawy" as well as the Polish Press Agency, who concentrated only describing the scandal caused by the Oscar winner. Behaving assertively, Rybczyński tried to shout something about "Solidarity" into the microphone, thus disturbing the solemnity of the event. Then, after he went outside and was prohibited from re-entering by security guards, he started a fight)¹².

Following the example of the interpretation proposed by Solomon: *Tango – A Polish Dance of Alienation* we come to a problem central for anthropology and anthropological-cultural questions, namely, what are the local and universal qualities of culture and the absorption of the universal by the local and *vice versa*? Here, we are dealing with cultural translation. Are we capable of recreating this path? Admittedly, the rather difficult and perilous task resembles the situation from the motto that Jan Kott once gave to his analysis of Mrozek's *Tango*: *No one will leave until we find an idea. Edek, don't let anyone out*¹³. In the most general outline this path could be described as follows:

the local (an exotic Argentinian dance) becomes the universal by turning into the European and the global, and permeates local culture, where it is subjected to artistic, theatrical, literary and film processing in order to come back to universal world culture in a new local costume. This is the manner in which the local and the exotic are restored to the universal. By changing into a Polish speciality the tango as a Polish dance of alienation becomes universal. How does this take place, and how is it possible?

Let us start with the local stratum while attempting, at the same time, not to lose any of the traces contained in descriptions made by heretofore film studies. Not by accident did we begin these comments with a comparison of two very different dance films, i.e. *Tango* and *Wdech-wydech* (Dziworski and Rybczyński); *nota bene*, the French critic was wrong when he wrote that *Tango* was the last film made in Poland - actually, it was the documentary realised together with Dziworski (1981). This is a register and an image of a no longer extant world that appears to have vanished, and here and there is becoming the object of social nostalgia. A world of free-of-charge vacations and sanatoria.

Wdech-wydech is a documentary record of a People's Poland-era holiday (in contrast to the strongly accentuated simple daily life in *Tango*) or actually a training conference carnival attended by cultural-educational instructors of the Polish-Soviet Friendship Society realising a specific programme of "indoor recreation". A portrait of entertainment and competitions (including a contest testing knowledge about the USSR).

Two very different films! *Wdech-wydech* consists of natural interiors and natural music (a ballroom orchestra and music from a croaking loudspeaker), "golden oldies", a dance competition (to the strains of the song: *Moscow Evenings - Podmoskovniye vechera*) or an exotic costume contest, an artistic performance, open-air recreation, pirouettes on ice-skates, an ice-rink surrounded by a mountain landscape; these are living people filmed with precision, attention, and acuteness but also tenderness. Something that does not possess a film reference but can be situated only "between" and "above", something between and above *homo ludens*, *homo sovieticus* and *homo PeReLus* (PRL: People's Poland), and something that could be rather ineptly described as "between" films and socialist documentaries about hairdressing competitions, *Rejs* (The Cruise) by Marek Piwowski and the Czech film school with *Loves of a Blonde* and *The Fireman's Ball*.

Not by accident did we start with two dance-music films since they allow us to recall one more essential component in the *oeuvre* of the author of *Tango*, to draw attention to the ever-present stratum of visual anthropology in Rybczyński's films, and to mention a brief ethnographic-anthropological treatise: *Święto* (Holiday, 1975). Its recorded images come straight out

of a study by Roch Sulima (then recently published) about the *syrenka* automobile¹⁴. *Święto* features the "queen of the roadside", the "stationary automobile", a determinant of social prestige, a hybrid located between the "civilisation of timber" and the "civilisation of technology", and subjected to ceremonious washing. The ritual of a festive family gathering, together with gestures, greetings and farewells, embraces, first-name ceremonies and toasts, a visit to a cemetery, remembrance of the deceased by "lighting lamps for All Souls", and a baby crying in the background - brought to the cemetery, it grows aggravated in the baby carriage. Finally, there is the holiday ritual of the whole family watching TV. Hurried lovemaking (in the bushes of an allotment) - Eros and Thanatos (as in other films by Rybczyński) are close by. This is the way a foreign critic sees it: a petite woman in a suburban yard chops off the head of a chicken - a symbolic ritual of blood and the sacrifice of life inaugurating a calm, orderly, traditional family ceremony. A man drives out of a garage in a white car leaving behind a trail of green exhaust fumes. There now begins the ceremony of washing the car with yellowish water. A family of eight, together with a baby in a carriage, arrives at the home of an elderly married couple and preforms a *sui generis* ritual welcome dance. Next, they eat dinner - the slaughtered chicken together with delectable beverages. Afterwards, bored and unwilling to converse, they all watch television and their silence contrasts with a wild chase on the TV screen. Finally, a farewell ritual.

These cosy scenes from family liturgy are interrupted with takes showing a couple secretly fleeing the dinner and making love behind the house; the awkward ballet performed by their arms and legs renders them similar to insects devouring each other.

The man washing the car ends his task, immediately drives the beloved status symbol back into the garage, and closes the door. The elderly couple, now alone, remains in the room, with granddad soaking his feet and granny in bed, watching the same TV programme¹⁵. Rybczyński's camera, both in *Święto* and in such experiments as an image divided into nine fragments (*Nowa książka*) or a frenzied chase in: *Oj, nie mogę się zatrzymać* (Oh, I Can't Stop!), records and "renders indelible" customs, gestures, banal life, ugly townscapes and suburbs, registering the - what would be the best way of putting it? - ethnography of a small town, brief histories, old crumbling architecture and old-new housing-block socialist architecture, "reality neither urban nor rural" described by Piotr Szczepanik in the song: *Tango for half a złoty*. Outstanding artists are supposed to be the creators of a single work, revived in numerous forms; this is the opinion about Fellini and Bergman.

Tango (and its *sui generis* visual anthropology, the experience of Polish films) is a structure of impor-

tance for Rybczyński's *oeuvre*, continued in his other works; sometimes, we may even find its small elements (such as the gestures and twirling motion performed in *Wdech-Wydech* by a man dancing to the accompaniment of *Podmoskovniye vechera*, the energetic spins of magnificent American girls speeding across Manhattan on roller skates in the music video for *The Original Wrapper* by Lou Reed)

A drawing-note at the very beginning of a monograph about Rybczyński – probably a sketch to an experimental HDTV film for *Imagine* (three ensuite rooms, with the same figure of a man standing behind closed doors) - features at the bottom:

- is he all alone? – like the other figures
- repetition and addition - like in *Tango*?
- continuum of a certain story – one - several?
- what sort of a construction of the whole?

The protagonists of Rybczyński's film are not only "motion and spatial relations between the protagonists", studies in space and time, bipacking, a reprojector, masks, and high definition but also cultural relations and motion.

In an excellent study about the symbols and art that nurture this sort of creativity Małgorzata Baranowska, the author of "symbolic realism" - a conceit crucial for the creativity and art pursued by Rybczyński and a term with which she attempted to encompass and interpret his last films - indicated also a particular cultural stratum. Here, we once again come across the afore-mentioned incessant game, motion, and relations between the local and the universal: *Manhattan is a vision of a poetic entity composed of a huge number of separate cultures with their colours, costumes, melodies, dances, artists, New Yorkers suffering from insomnia, somewhat comical policemen and felons outwitting them, the homeless as well as inept politicians performing ritual gestures and oblivious of everything else. A characteristic feature of Rybczyński's films is their sense of humour. Both he and Michał Urbaniak did everything possible so that successive sequences would startle with changes but also at times with amusing sound and image. Probably the boldest scenes in Manhattan involve a fiery tango danced by Argentinians; the scenes are divided according to the popular rhythms of particular nationalities comprising the enormous ethnic mixture of New York. The middle parts of the bodies of the dancing couple have been replaced by large bellows, similar to an accordion squeezebox, stretching and folding to the rhythm of the music and rendering the dancers either giants or dwarfs. The overall effect is that of an image-sound play on words. Rap music danced in the air is equally funny – rhythm inseparably connected with stamping feet is suddenly suspended above a street* ¹⁶.

The anthropological dimension is to be discovered in both films about *genius loci* – as they were described by Małgorzata Baranowska who amassed in an abbreviated form the themes contained therein: *Films about*

genius loci amazingly link Rybczyński's uninterrupted studies on time and space with a vision of highly different towns. Here, the landscape retains its static character and people performing symbolic activities in an incredible dance of relativity define the character of the place. In great abridgement and simplification: Manhattan represents a great musician, a homeless artist, a child, a policeman, a kaleidoscope of worlds and various peoples, life, youth, love, home, and contemporaneity. Washington D. C. embodies a civil servant, a discoverer, a hunter, an assailant, a disappearance of old cultures, a soldier, a carnival, possession, money, love and betrayal, the passage of time, history ¹⁷. Now, time to return to Poland. We are well aware of the differences between the tango in the case of Mroźek (1964), Kantor, and Rybczyński, and this is not the place to delve into the subject. The tango (*La Cumparsita*) in Mroźek's play is a dance of submission to which we are invited by a power-wielding brute (*an offer you can't refuse*); is it some sort of a vision of our impotence or an echo and transposition of the dance of the Straw Man from the arch-drama *Wesele* (The Wedding)?¹⁸. Jan Kott derived the protagonists – the *Mroźek Family* ¹⁹ - from *Kurka wodna* (The Water Hen) by Witkacy. Jan Błoński wrote: *In Tango suicide is committed by the idea of rebellion; it turns into its own opposite because freedom announced by avantgarde art is perishing in the grotto of Edek the caveman, to which it guided us* ²⁰.

Different features belong to the room of reminiscences, the room of the dead mechanically repeating elementary motions. In Kantor's theatre the tango appears rather late: first in a dive in: *Nigdy już tu nie powrócę* (I Shall Never Return, 1988) as a sign of time and place: *The first part, an All Souls Day in a mysterious dive, is conducted by the Argentinian tango Tempos viejos (a replica of sorts of Waltz François from Umarla klasa /The Dead Class/)* ²¹, and then in *Cicha Noc* (Silent Night): *Figures slowly begin to emerge from unravelled shrouds. They successively describe their comical and tragic personal catastrophes. A whole gallery ensues. All are already strongly enrooted in the iconography of the Cricot 2 Theatre – a young Hassidic Jew in an overcoat and a skullcap; a dancing priest holding a wooden cross; a girl sleepwalking; a bigot wearing a rosary around his neck; a demonic streetwalker; a sensually dancing woman in mourning; a man merged with a broom, and another with a black umbrella; a World War I soldier and the "uninvited" in dark spectacles and a roll of paper hanging around his neck. The stage resounds with a tango. Every one dances in eccentrically joined couples.* ²².

The anonymous room in Rybczyński's *Tango* is far from the intelligentsia-intellectual "Warsaw salon" just as its protagonists are far from Kantor's phantoms; from the structural point of view they are closer to anonymous plain people from *Pieszko* (On Foot) by Mroźek; despite the video film animation technique these are

living people (filmed in the *live action* technique). One of the interpretations suggests that perhaps Rybczyński shot the room's memory of its (living? – Z. B.) residents²³. Since reference had been made to the “en-suite room” then both for Kantor and Rybczyński the background would certainly include the room-flat from *Kartoteka* (The Card Index) by Różewicz (although in Rybczyński's case without the threnody of Romantic protagonists or the wartime past).

Tango is situated as closely as possible to the universal/local roots of the tango due to its anonymous and commonplace protagonists (the screenplay mentions that they are people busy doing something: 1. Boy with a ball, 2. Nursing mother, 3. Infant, 4. Thief, 5. Man with a parcel, 6. Girl doing her homework, 7. Woman carrying soup, 8. Man eating soup, 9. Young man doing exercises, 10. Woman with shopping, 11. Man changing a light bulb, 12. Woman cleaning a fish, 13. Girl dressing herself, 14. Man taking out the litter, 15. Man in a uniform, 16. Woman cleaning, 17. Slightly intoxicated man, 8, 19. Man and woman – guests, 20, 21. Kissing couple, 22. Mother changing a baby's nappies, 23. Crawling infant, 24. Man with a newspaper, 25. Older man with a dog, 26. Old woman)²⁴.

Time to finally seek the opinion of an expert, an anthropologist of culture, and evoke cultural references. This task is made easy by the fact that such a function can be fulfilled by a writer. I have in mind not just any man of letters but Ernesto Sábato, author of an essay about the tango. In doing so I used two sources²⁵ (and thus hope that certain repetitions and reoccurrences in the text will be forgiven). I also preceded “information” about the tango with an excerpt of Sábato's ethnographic reflections about the subculture of the suburbs, important also for our topic: ethnology and contemporaneity. Here we shall find the periphery and the centre, the eternal question about cultural peripheries, *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* (here: from the culture and art of Poland and Argentina, aside from the tango), a question in which one might find echoes of Gombrowicz's enquiry about the merit of the cultural peripheries, immaturity, local qualities, and “imperfection”, which at times can prove to be a higher value:

Subculture of the suburbs²⁶

The rightist nationalists densely populating sterile and pure Argentine want us to write constantly about (non-existent) gauchos. Leftist nationalists, on the other hand, maintain that metaphysical problems are suitable for the old European civilisation.... According to this curious doctrine, only the residents of Paris or Prague can suffer “metaphysical pain”, and if one is aware that the cause of this pain is man's finity then it should be recognised that in the opinion of those madmen people die only in Europe but here they live on immortal. This is not the case, because if

*metaphysical anxiety is nourished by passage of time, then we, being more temporary, have more reasons to experience it than on the Old Continent*²⁷.

Tango – a song of Rio de la Plata²⁸

I HYBRIDAGE

(...) Millions of immigrants who came to this country in not quite a hundred years not only installed two attributes of the contemporary Argentinian, namely, disillusionment and sadness, but also prepared ground for the origin of the most original phenomenon of the del Plata region, which is the tango. This dance has been successively condemned and praised, satirised and analysed. Finally, its greatest author, Enrique Santos Discépolo, gave its most apt definition: it is a sad thing that one dances (...)

II DISSATISFACTION

(...) *All this is the reason why the tango is an introvertive or even introspective dance, a sad thing that one dances, in contrast to what takes place in other folk dances, which are extrovertive and erotic. Only a gringo would make a clown of himself by taking advantage of a tango for chat or amusement.*

The tango is a totally astonishing phenomenon from the viewpoint of the genre of folk dance in general.

Some maintain that the tango is not always dramatic and that upon occasions it displays humour. In doing so they seem to be suggesting that the tango can be light-hearted. This appears to me to be quite incorrect since we are actually dealing with concealed satire. The humour of the tango has something of Argentinian contrariness, and its epigrams are angry and grim.

Hard work all day

And on a Saturday evening you're a lord.

The face of the Argentinian displays a caricature irony of sorts. When a Neapolitan dances the tarantella he does so for fun; when a porteño dances the tango he ponders his plight, as a rule personified by his partner, or tries to resolve and delve into the general structure of human existence. A German, drunk on beer and skipping to the rhythm of Tyrolean music, laughs and innocently enjoys himself; a porteño does not laugh or have fun, and if sometimes he unthinkingly and furtively smiles his grotesque grimace differs from the laughter of the German just like a pessimistic hunchback differs from a gym teacher. (...)

III SEX

(...) Assorted Argentinian thinkers identified the tango with sex or, as in the case of Juan Pablo Echagüe, simply described it as lascivious. I believe that we are dealing with quite the opposite. True, the tango came into being in dives, but already this fact should produce suspicion that this is a case of some sort of a re-

verse, because artistic creativity is almost always an antagonist act, an attempted escape or rebellion. The imagination thus creates something that is absent, an object of our longing and hope, something which will magically make it possible for us to free ourselves from our harsh daily reality. (...)

IV

(...) The body of another person is a mere object and contact with its matter does not entitle to cross the boundaries of loneliness. The sexual act is thus doubly sad, since it not only leaves man amidst his previous loneliness, but intensifies it and the frustration of the effort. This is one of the mechanisms that could explain the sadness of the tango, so full of despair, anger, threats, and sarcasm. (...)

V BANDONEON

(...) From the brothels and the dives the tango set out to conquer the city centre together with a barrel organ and a parrot, which innocently and blatantly proclaimed:

I would like to become a scoundrel,
So as to possess a girl.

And with invincible force, that characteristic feature of authentic expression, the tango took the world. (...)

VI METAPHYSICS

(...) In this country of oppositionists each time when someone plans or creates something (a budget, a symphony or a housing project) there immediately emerge thousands of critics who with sadistic scrupulousness destroy everything. (...)

(...) The mentioned critics find metaphysics only in volumes by German professors, while, as Nietzsche said, it lies in the streets, in the entrails of the ordinary man. (...) Inevitable frustration, nostalgia for a distant homeland, the hostile attitude of the indigenous population towards the invasion, uncertainty and frailness in a rapidly changing world, the incapability to ensure a living, and the absence of absolute hierarchies – all this is expressed in metaphysical tango-istics.

In one swoop the concrete destroyed
The old neighbourhood – my birthplace.

Progress, forcefully introduced by the leaders of new Argentina, did not leave a stone unturned; more, it did not leave a brick unturned since technically that material is less durable. A fact that is even more depressing.

There is nothing permanent in this ghost town.

A folk poet describes his nostalgia for the old Cafe de los Angelitos:

I evoke you, lost in life and suffused in clouds of smoke.

In turn, the humbler, suburban Manrique asks:

What dreams did they pursue?
On what stars do they wander?
Those voices that came yesterday
and passed and fell silent.
Where are they today?
Along which streets will they return?

The porteño, as no European can, experiences the passage of time and the fact that the frustration of all his dreams and ultimate death are an unavoidable epilogue of all efforts. Muddled, leaning on a marble table-top amidst glasses of “semillon”** and the smoke of “negros” cigarettes, he asks in the throes of friendly meditation:

Brother, do you remember those beautiful times?

And concludes with cynical bitterness:

Life flows, departs, and never returns,
It is thus best to enjoy it, and may all cares
Go to the devil. (...)

The man of the tango is, therefore, a creature who meditates about the passage of time and that which it brings: unrelenting death.

* porteño – a resident of Buenos Aires

** cheap popular wine.

Time for putting things in order: *Wdech-wydech* is enclosed in the poetic of the extravertic tango. *Tango* is by the very nature of things introvertic. We are well aware of the differences between the phantom qualities of Buenos, Łódź, Warsaw...

Once we had already become acquainted with the structure of the tango we can return to the whole of Rybczyński's statement (previously cut short and deprived of the last sentence):

(...) *First there comes construction and technology, and only later do they become surrounded with meanings and produce an ambiance. THE CONTENT IS ETERNAL AND COMMON FOR ALL PEOPLE.*

*In one swoop the concrete destroyed
The old neighbourhood – my birthplace....*

What dreams did they pursue?
On what stars do they wander?
Those voices that came yesterday
and passed and fell silent.
Where are they today?
Along which streets will they return?

The sad thought dancing in Kantor's play, in Mrozek's drama, and in Rybczyński's film is different. The same is true for the sad thought dancing in *Tango*, *Wdech-wydech*, *Orchestra*, *Manhattan*, and *Washington*.

THE CONTENT IS ETERNAL AND COMMON FOR ALL PEOPLE.

Endnotes

- 1 *Wdech-wydech* (1981), scenario, photography, direction: Bogdan Dziworski and Zbigniew Rybczyński, music: Janusz Hajdun, producer Ryszard Okuński, production SeMaFor (for Polish Television).
- 2 *Tango* (1980), direction: Zbigniew Rybczyński, cooperation: Janina Dychto, Andrzej Teodorczyk, Andrzej Strąk, Janusz Olszewski, Zygmunt Smyczek, Wiesław Nowak, Halina Krajewska, music: Janusz Hajdun, sound: Mieczysław Janik, editing: Barbara Samocińska, producer: Ryszard Okuński, Ignacy Goncerz, production: SeMaFor.
- 3 *Zbigniew Rybczyński podróznik do krainy niemożliwości*, ed. Zbigniew Benedyktowicz, cooperation Teresa Rutkowska, Ryszard Ciarka, Warszawa 1993.
- 4 Cf., i.a. my introduction to an issue of "Konteksty" (no. 3/4 1992) on the anthropology of film and a whole issue containing pertinent texts. Cf. also: *Sztuka na wysokości oczu. Film i antropologia* Warszawa 1991.
- 5 Charles Solomon, "Tango" - polski taniec alienacji, transl. Teresa Rutkowska, in: *Zbigniew Rybczyński podróznik...*, op. cit., p. 37.
- 6 Jean-Paul Fargier, *Jak Polak*, transl. Teresa Rutkowska, ibid., pp. 44-45.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Marcin Giżycki, *Wizja i kalkulacja*, ibid., pp. 28-29.
- 9 Daniel Szczechura, *Tango, czyli nowe spojrzenie na kino*, ibid., pp. 34-35.
- 10 Statement made during a press conference in the Institute of Art at the Polish Academy of Sciences, subsequently repeated in interviews and the press.
- 11 Janusz Bogucki in a conversation: *Emaus za dużo czy za mało wolności?*, "Konteksty" no. 1/1992, p. 29.
- 12 Cf. an account of an interview given in "Interview Magazine", in: *Zbigniew Rybczyński – podróznik...*, op. cit., pp. 84-85.
- 13 Jan Kott, *Rodzina Mrożka*, "Dialog" no. 4/1965, pp. 68-73.
- 14 Roch Sulima, *Przyczynek do semiotyki śmieci*, "Konteksty" no. 1/1993, p. 33.
- 15 *Zbigniew Rybczyński - podróznik...*, op. cit., p. 67.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 189-190.
- 17 Ibid., p. 200.
- 18 Cf. an interview with Mroźek held by Jerzy Jarocki, in which the author admitted that the first play to make a great impression on him was *Wesele*, "Teatr" no. 4/1994.
- 19 Jan Kott, op. cit.
- 20 Jan Błoński, *Drugie danie czyli powtórka poczwórki*, "Dialog" no. 5/168, p. 70.
- 21 Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz, *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantor*. Verba/Chotomów 1990, p. 114.
- 22 Magdalena Smęder, "Betlejem, Golgota, Bastylia i Biedny Pokój", "Konteksty" no. 3-4/1991, p. 123.
- 23 Ryszard Ciarka, *Zbigniew Rybczyński podróznik...*, op. cit., p. 169.
- 24 Ibid., graphic insert.
- 25 Ernesto Sabato, *Pisarz i jego zmary*, coll., transl. and afterword Rajmund Kalicki, Kraków 1988; idem, *Tango piosenka rioplateńska*, "Literatura" 12, no. 12, 20 March 1975, p. 11. I would like to thank Mr. Rajmund Kalicki for his kind help in locating this essay, which I recalled but without pertinent bibliographic data.
- 26 Ernesto Sabato, *Pisarz i jego zmary*, p. 68.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 I introduced caption numbers due to a new arrangement of the fragments.



Zbigniew Rybczyński, drawing to *Tango*