

Rev. Jerzy SZYMIK

THE SPLENDOUR OF CATHARSIS

(ON KAZIMIERZ KUTZ'S FILM *ŚMIERĆ JAK KROMKA CHLEBA* [DEATH LIKE A SLICE OF BREAD])¹

"There may come a time in which a lot of people will feel a need to look closer at the recent saints who have given their lives for Poland. I think this will happen sooner than we all suppose."

Kazimierz Kutz

"Kazimierz Kutz's film makes us aware that we have gone far away from the Poland which has recently been. It is awful to think that this is the same country, the same people, and yet today's reality is different. [...] The film paralyses with its truth. It shows what we were, and brings to mind how much we have lost of the gravity and dignity with which we struggled for freedom. After victory everything has sunk into oblivion. Kutz's film plucks us out of our forgetfulness of that atmosphere."

Krzysztof Zanussi

At the outset allow me to make a very personal and, I think, important, remark – I am Silesian. Kazimierz Kutz is Silesian, too. Strictly speaking then, our "I" is not of Mickiewicz's *Dziady*, nor, the more so, of "Disneyland." I am of hard working ancestors from the fields of Wodzisław-Rybnik, of their work in the dim abysses of Silesian and Westphalian coal mines, of their prayer before the miraculous icon of the Smiling Lady of Pszów – the patroness of my home parish, of their faithfulness to God and land.

Kutz is from Szopienice, from smoking cinder tips, from *familoki* (red and grey houses made of brick and in the past inhabited mainly by miners).

I do not intend to impress you here with a cheap and in fact false mythologization of tradition. The latter is such as it was and is, i.e., grey, human, a mixture of heroism and weakness, beauty and ugliness, virtues and vices. Nevertheless, without a creative memory of tradition, man would be like a plant without roots; dry and able neither to make, nor watch, nor experience the film about which I am going to speak.

Obviously, I do not claim (God forbid!) that Podole, Kuyavia, Piedmont or Bavaria are anything worse than Silesia. Absolutely not. Yet, neither are they something better. No fear! I am not against patriotism within the parameters of Europe (on condition that it does not grow into nationalism, that is), nor am I against the idea of being European, (again, if this does not grow into "McDonaldism"). Quite the contrary, I think that Polish and European characters are possible only then when they grow out of a love of one's own village, district, parish, regions; of a love for one's landscape, cut short by the line of horizon, of the tie with one's "little homeland." With the stipulation again that it is a true love, devoid of narrow-mindedness, xenophobia and rapacity. Such love expands the capacity of the heart and widens one's vision. It helps to

¹ *Death like a Slice of Bread*. Polish production. Year of production: 1994. Screenplay and direction by Kazimierz Kutz. Music by W. Kilar. Director of photography W. Zdort. Starring: T. Budzisz-Krzyżanowska, J. Gajos, J. Radziwiłłowicz, and J. Trela.

love and respect that which belongs to one's neighbours, which is different.

All Kutz's works – not only his recent film – promote this view. His “film” love of people is most often expressed by way of images about our common “little homeland.” Let us recall the titles of the trilogy of the sixties and seventies: *Sól ziemi czarnej* (The Salt of the Black Land), *Pęta w koronie* (Jewel in the Crown), *Paciorki jednego różańca* (The Beads of One Rosary). This director has always been able to show – as hardly anyone else has – individual heroes in various interrelationships with the environment, which in turn moulded them. Most often it was the folk culture of Upper Silesia, penetrated by their own particular spirit, a spirit whose foundations rested on religious piety, diligence, fidelity, and simplicity.

I was stunned when I saw Kutz in a television programme (*Kariery, bariery*), face-to-face with the Warsaw social élite. There we had a director who had invited his friends to the studio, a folk group from Ruda Śląska which tremendously embarrassed the capital's high society. The boys from *familoki* sang in their incomprehensible idiom (subtitles appeared on the screen) and about incomprehensible matters. An important question loomed large in the studio: is it snobbery to show off fellowship with the “common man”? Can there be anything in common between film culture of the highest standard and the ballad *I am riding my motorbike*, in which we find the sentence: “my pants are fastened by a safety pin”?

There is much in common, I would say.

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Put briefly, the film is an epic about people who took a firm stance against evil to

defend the most important values. Nine of them: Józef Czekalski, Józef, Giza, Joachim Gnida, Ryszard Gzik, Bogusław Kopczak, Andrzej Pełka, Jan Stawisiński, Zbigniew Wilk and Zenon Zając, paid the highest price for this defence.

The screenplay was based on oral and written reports, diaries, materials gathered by authors who had written books about the crushing of the strike, and on talks with witnesses of those events. We have therefore a cinematic reconstruction of the events which took place in the period from 13-16 December 1981 at the “Wujek” coal mine in Katowice. It was filmed at the exact site of the tragedy.

The film assembled the leading Polish actors (including Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska, Janusz Gajos, Jerzy Radziwiłłowicz, Jerzy Trela), but it is not the figures they played who were the heroes of *Death Like a Slice of Bread*. Wiesław Zdort, the director of photography states: “The actors play authentic and real people who are alive, who lived through all that. Thus there is a priest, members of the mine's «Solidarity,» yet these people are like islands in a rough sea who emerge for a moment from the pressing crowd, and then disappear.” The main hero of the film is the multitude of people, and speaking even more precisely, a human fellowship dramatically gathered around values.

“With his film about «Wujek,» Kazimierz Kutz has achieved the extraordinary, something in whose accomplishment almost nobody believed. He brought us back to the experience of martial law in its pure form” – wrote Tadeusz Sobolewski. Exactly. The film is crystal-clear in its picture, ascetic, “true” in the sense in which a work of art may, and should, render the truth. Martial law, the years 1981-89... For quite a long time, the tradition of those days and the people con-

nected to them have been continually viewed with suspicion: there appear derisive comments, people mock at "veterans," "ethos makers," the audiences throng cinemas and have great fun watching a solidarity underground activist posing as an security officer.

It is in this sense and against this background that Kutz is very brave. He is not afraid of supercilious smiles, charges of backwardness, various kinds of pressure from leftist political trends, of standing counter to fashionable nihilism, and of noise made by the advocates of the former Polish People's Republic. Kutz is brave in yet another sense. He stages a scene in which the striking miners gather around a cross. Before the viewer's eyes there is a passion play with its piercing realism and suggested analogy. Yes, we are at the Golgotha, along with ZOMO officers (Riot-Squads of the People's Militia), and the emperor's soldiers who take part in the Mystery of the Altar. It is enacted on their behalf as well. Let us quote Sobolewski once again: "Such is the sense today of the film about martial law."

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Many viewers setting off for the cinema were filled with apprehension. What would it be like? It seems that the time for this film, made twelve years after those events, is not the best – perhaps is even the worst. Some amount of "ethos," a small dose of "miners' strike" deserve at best irritated acceptance, or a grimace of indifference. At the same time, as the most penetrating criticism has noted, Kutz's film, created as it was counter to the rules which govern Polish cinematography, is not intended to evoke immediate emotional reaction in its viewers. The director seemed to aim at a long-term

effect, at some purifying transformation. Perhaps it is here that its main value lies.

As viewers we are confronted with that which occurs during the strike, with gestures and words, of people about whom we know little. We must either get to know their religious and cultural background, or imagine it. The film lacks the background of domestic, Silesian ritual which Kutz recreated with care in the former "Silesian" films. Only the way in which miners turn to each other remains. Everything is devoid of euphoria and extraordinariness. We merely observe a chain of effects caused by of something which is beyond words, beyond the screen.

"It just can't be like that" – says one of the miners when they learned that the Militia (former police) had arrested their legally elected leader. This short sentence is a wonderful expression of that which we, in a scholarly manner call "to reveal moral obligation." "Man has a duty towards himself of which nobody can relieve him, the factors of external violence notwithstanding" – the priest explains at the Eucharist celebrated during the strike.

Everything is depicted in a monumental fashion, from a distance, as it were, with Wojciech Kilar's elegiac music in the background, music which combines church chorale with Silesian melody. Throughout, there is an interplay of many unobtrusive symbols. Perhaps the most profound of these and the one which gave the film its title: bread transubstantiated during the Sacrifice, and slices of bread which a young miner gives to a hungry soldier. It was not revenge that they had in mind, nor hatred. Kutz reveals this truth unswervingly. The film is a profound reminder, a pure return. And it proposes the return to purity.

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One thing more, which cannot be omitted from our reflection and which cannot be left aside. Wojciech Kilar, the composer of the soundtrack, says: "Kutz, this agnostic and atheist, gives us examples of such understanding of the matters of faith that it seems that the existence of God is obvious to him. A couple of days ago while on a walk, I dropped in on the parish house of Father Bolczyk, where some scenes were shot. Together with actors I listened to Kazik's beautiful harangue, while he was explaining to them the matters of faith, one's relation to God, etc. Walking me to the door, Father Bolczyk asked me how it was possible that such a man, in fact a heretic, could so beautifully and truly speak about these things. That which we – people of faith – ponder, observing its principles and tenets, e.g. fasting on Fridays, attending Sunday Mass, going to Easter confession, is so natural and comprehensible to him. And I do not know who is closer to God, I with my breviary and rosary, my intimate relation with the Church and church hierarchy, or Kazik [Kutz] – a nonbeliever."

This is rather imprecise and controversial, but wise (because it is humble) and profound, and it poses an important question. Is the observation which it contains right? Whatever the polemics about the film, they deal with details and the so-called "remote areas." Everyone is convinced as to the "evangelical charac-

ter" of the film's message – including me, as I have tried to present it above.

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The first recorded Polish sentence was written in Silesia in the famous Book of Henry. This is a well-known fact. But, as we are reminded by Bishop Alfons Nossol, it was said in Polish by a villager of Moravian descent to his Polish wife, and recorded by a German Chronicler in (as the Opole ordinary pointed out) the "ecclesial context," that is, in the monastery Chronicle of the thirteenth century. It still moves us with its kindness: "Why don't you rest and I'll toil": this is the essence of the Silesian character, though it is certainly not exclusively Silesian. Here we have the whole phenomenon of the Silesian land: a melting pot of baptized cultures bearing fruits of evangelical wealth and humanistic culture.

Therefore, one should not be surprised when Kutz says that the source for his screenplay became the metaphor of a simple inscription in the "Wujek" cloakroom: "Keep clean," that is, do not make a mess in your heart and mind, discern good from evil, fight, but do not give in to hatred.

The splendour of the truth, the splendour of Catharsis. May it help us to see better.

Translated by *Jan Kłos*