

# War beading up into a red dot

Autobiographical discourse in Andrzej Żuławski's  
*The Third Part of the Night*

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## **Autobiographism in the fictional narration of *The Third Part of the Night***

In the opening words of her essay *Autobiografizm dzisiaj (Autobiographism today)*, Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska writes: *In recent decades, the invasion of autobiographism – in its different forms – into writing and mass media has become an omnipresent fact. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to try to pinpoint significant theoretical problems relevant to this phenomenon in writing (...)*<sup>1</sup>. The present paper does not aim to investigate the causes of this expansion of the autobiographical element or the fashion for autobiographism, as these problems have been already sufficiently described by theoreticians representing different research perspectives. Within the broadly understood context of autobiographical discourse, I am interested in its one selected aspect, namely film autobiographism as a particular communicative attitude of the film author, and the viewer's behaviours projected by this attitude. I would like to discuss this problem using the example of Andrzej Żuławski's film *The Third Part of the Night* (original Polish title: *Trzecia część nocy*).

*The Third Part of the Night* was Żuławski's first fictional film. It was inspired by the director's dramatic childhood memories of the second world war. The film seems to be a perfect embodiment of the poetics of the "autobiographical event", which was described by Tadeusz Lubelski as a form of autobiographical film: *It refers to a group of films which reconstruct an event or a limited sequence of events from the author's biography. At times, this autobiographical provenance is suggested in the film text, but sometimes it also happens that it can be learnt about only from the social text of the biography itself. Actually, the label "reconstruction" is an exaggeration; usually, in such films the plot is created from a mixture of factual and fictional events. What gets "reconstructed", or perhaps rather "fictionalised" especially often are events from childhood and early young age; they make the most favoured goal of autobiographical wanderings, particularly for debut artists*<sup>2</sup>.

As a representation of a piece of family history, Żuławski's film fits in the autobiographical discourse, and as a text about the Holocaust, it creates a universal message. This binary opposition inscribed in the structure of the film invites reflection on the relationship between the work and its viewer, or, to be more precise, between the ethical determinants of this relationship. Two overlapping ideas con-

cerning the reception of this film come into play: it can be read as a text about the Holocaust or as an autobiographical message. Both approaches need to take into consideration the author's intended attitude of provocation, a kind of a challenge to the viewers, who get involved in the very process of message creation: in *The Third Part of the Night*, the fragments of family biography project a hidden, transformed and phantasmatic autobiographism, deeply ingrained in the fictive tissue, in the background of the presented world.

*I would never make a film about myself, Żuławski claims, for several reasons, including ethical ones. I believe that this shouldn't be done. And yet on the other hand, I'm also very reluctant, actually more so in literature than in film, towards telling about things that you know nothing about, that you're not familiar with*<sup>3</sup>. The director admits that his is a generation marked by war, that traumatic experiences and memories connected with the wartime past have shaped his identity: *After all, we've been raised on the stuff of war; although we haven't experienced it directly, we stem from it as we are*<sup>4</sup>. Images and scenes remembered from his childhood in the time of the Holocaust recur throughout Żuławski's output, both literary and cinematic: *These are such memories that until sixteen I couldn't sleep without the light on. My sister died on our hands from hunger and cold. Half the family were killed at Auschwitz, the other half in Siberia. Three of us made it: my parents and I. My first film, "The Third Part of the Night", was a tribute to them*<sup>5</sup>. In his statements, Żuławski underscores that *The Third Part of the Night* is a tribute paid to the war generation of fathers, *to what they had been, as intelligent educated young men from good families, and to what they must have experienced to turn into the persons that I later knew*<sup>6</sup>. In another interview, he adds: *When talking to my father and other people who survived the occupation – and their life adventure in it, in such a drastic, complicated moment – I wanted to learn about the questions that they were asking themselves, to know which of these they considered fundamental. (...) for me, an extremely important issue is how to preserve one's self from the moment of such disaster, what to draw from it in order to defend the fundamental truth or fundamental principle of one's life*<sup>7</sup>. The autobiographical context of the film can be complemented with the director's conclusion: *we turn to the fate of our fathers because for us they are a condensation of sorts, a drop of that which makes fate as such, existence as such, because this something nearest to us, and the most visible*<sup>8</sup>.

The script of *The Third Part of the Night* was based on the novella *Minuta milczenia* (*A minute of silence*) by the film director's father, writer Miroslaw Żuławski. *I wanted to make this film as a parable about that stratum of intellectuals that my parents represented. But also in order to tell about that historical, political and human paradox: bringing children into the world in the year 1940. My father was in the Home Army, he was in charge of underground press in Lviv; also my mother was a resistance soldier. They met, they conceived two children; I was more lucky, because I was stronger; my sister lived only several months. She died of hunger and cold. My father found a job at an institute where anti-typhus vaccine was produced. I asked him to write out the theme of lice feeding (with oneself) and dissecting. The vaccine was made out of lice guts from lice feeding on human body, human blood. I reworked father's text, weaving in the drama of the doubleness of characters*<sup>9</sup>. This is further developed elsewhere: *Since childhood, I had been absolutely*

*certain that my father's work at Rudolf Weigl's Institute in Lviv, where he was a feeder of typhus-infected lice, was the most normal thing on earth. It was only with the beginning of my contact with the world of film, cinema, that I realised that this had not been the most normal thing on earth but the most abnormal, arresting, the most striking thing. (...) this condensation, this crystallisation, such beading up of war into a red dot – as that was how it appeared in my mind – is something totally priceless. It mustn't slip into oblivion. This is something that I know, and others don't. Others won't make it into anything, so I have to show it. It was an absolute certainty, conviction. It rested on the fact that this is a family history, and that I'm alive thanks to him doing it. (...) this was something obvious on the one hand, and on other it proved totally arresting, surreal, bizarre, and completely different from everything else that has been said on the subject* <sup>10</sup>.

In *Minuta milczenia*, Mirosław Żuławski described everything that used to take place at Weigl's Institute in minute detail, basing not only on his memories, but also on entries from a journal which he had regularly kept at that time <sup>11</sup>. *This almost para-documentary layer of the story determined the poetics of the film: It was in appreciation of the advantage of a documentary that I chose for my film a metaphorical, sign-based form* <sup>12</sup>, stated the director. In Żuławski's film, the war condensing into a red dot is not only a metaphor, functioning like the Barthesian *punctum*, but also an autobiographical trope, which enables viewers to wander in the anamorphic labyrinth of the Żuławskis' family history. The labyrinthine image of the world in *The Third Part of the Night* is constructed on two levels. The localising and constitutive level consists in specific places of action, events and characters. Under this outer layer, there is the inner tissue of film narrative, composed of wartime treasures from the film author's archive of memory. The author of the story concludes an autobiographical pact with his viewers, and the manner in which this is done gives rise to the form of film message. Holocaust experiences are shaped by, or rather indirectly reconstructed from, shreds of childhood memories, accounts of adults, and historical knowledge. Instead of a first-person narrator, typically used in autobiography, an omniscient narrator guides us through the past; in this way, the autobiographical element of the narrative at the same time projects its universal dimension, transforming a story of the wartime generation of fathers into a parable of "Apocalypse fulfilled".

According to Philippe Lejeune, a consequence of the autobiographical pact is the referential pact, understood as a commitment to tell the truth, with the provision that: *the autobiographer is not someone who speaks the truth about his life, but someone who says that he speaks it* <sup>13</sup>. It does not matter whether the narration is a self-portrait or self-creation, or even mystification; what is important, as Mark Freeman repeats after Ricoeur, is "the truth of the self", second-order referentiality, and not accuracy of factographical detail <sup>14</sup>. When Żuławski commits himself to telling the truth about family history, he does so in a way which to him as the author seems the most adequate. Events presented in the film have, to a large extent, a metaphorical-symbolic (sign-based) character, and in this context they are neither a fabrication nor a pure account. Jerzy Kosiński, a prominent author of literary auto-fictions, warned against trusting too much in the thoroughness and literariness of memory records. He rightly noticed that what we remember from the past constitutes a certain construct in which emotions can be located, and these emotions can

only be expressed through symbols: *if memories have a truth, it is more an emotional than an actual one*<sup>15</sup>. If *The Third Part of the Night* is not fully anchored in the sphere of facts, it is because the story presented in the film is above all a manifestation of a child's feelings, and as such is based on memories reconstructed from a child's point of view, or actually on what has remained of them after many years. Hence, the film must be read from a symbolic rather than a realistic perspective. The chaos and absurdity of wartime images appearing in the presented world result from the binary viewpoint prevalent in their portrayal: behind the *alter ego* of the author of the film narrative, there hides the boy witness of authentic war events. The space of the apocalyptic world is, in a sense, filtered through the "child's gaze"; due to his age and lack of life experience, the boy does not fully understand the reality he has found himself in, and, witnessing events, he makes us, too, into witnesses adopting a child's perspective. Dominant in Żuławski's work, the category of emotional truth projects a viewer who will not only want to learn from the film what the author had gone through as a child, but also how he experienced it. In this case, Żuławski's approach is concurrent with principles regulating the broadly understood cultural reality, including the psychological language of culture: *Living in society and culture, human beings develop their own way of understanding the language of culture. Before acquiring a sufficient lexicon and developing abstract thinking, the mind of a little child is governed by the principles of visual-symbolic thinking. Such thinking is a language rooted in the archetypes of the collective unconscious and the cultural unconscious. It is based on a non-linear, symbolic and polichronic reception of reality. Things imagined and subjectively received are experienced as real*<sup>16</sup>. Visual and symbolic thinking does not completely disappear with age, but is pushed from its central position to the peripheries of the psyche. Visual language, on the basis of which the subjective image of the world is ordered in early childhood, is a permanent component of culture, activated in our contact with art and religion, in fantasies and dreams. It can be assumed that by using image, allegory and metaphor, art animates the visual-symbolic language, which is the fundamental language of communication between art and an individual's psyche.

In *The Third Part of the Night*, Andrzej Żuławski tells about his experience of war using film material which is visual and symbolic in character. The story is made up of situations seen and experienced: the stuff of various workings of imaginations. What is true and unquestionable in this narrative are the author's (and, consequently, the viewer's) emotions. They are expressed in figurative language, which is characterized by an accumulation of symbols and metaphors, fragmentariness, non-linearity, and lack of cause-effect logic. In this film parable about the past world which still lives in the author's memory, one can notice a tension between two discourses: the tendency to reconstruct the historical sequence and whole clashes with the force of memory and symbolic thinking, which pull towards non-linearity and are closer to the mechanism of association: *Rarely does the process of reconstructing memories preserve the order of events – we locate them through associations rather than methodical penetration, and we treat the past as an "archaeological museum" (...) of randomly scattered remains*<sup>17</sup>. Aleksander Ledóchowski rightly pointed out that Żuławski's film is characterized by an amassment of images and thoughts, billowing and expressive. Ledóchowski sees this kind of

a “gush of blood, bile and honey” as resulting from the author’s inner need: from compressing issues and problems which have to be addressed, but also keeping silent, from the accumulation of latent longing, thoughts and desires. He lists the following key features of the film’s poetics: transcendentalism of contents, brutal realism of episodes, mysticism, radical and shocking means of artistic expression, rich audio-visual composition. According to the critic, *the tumultuous arrangement and linking of particular situations bears some resemblance to a nightmare or pulsations of a wounded memory. (...) The film is multidimensional, labyrinthine, multi-layered*<sup>18</sup>. He continues in this vein in another article: *full of contradictions, it is something of a labyrinth: with corridors leading nowhere, mirrors reflecting past images, and blind illusory windows. From just the film itself it cannot even be determined whether Michał actually died or not*<sup>19</sup>. After the tragic death of his wife, son and mother, Michał leaves the family manor and moves to the city. He begins working for the Home Army under the cover name Szary, “Grey One”. He falls in love with a woman whose husband got killed by mistake instead of himself. For the sake of taking care of her and her new-born son, he takes up again the job he had quit before: lice feeding. The film presents Michał’s occupation in an almost para-documentary poetics. The credibility of this motif stems from the fact that in his novella Mirosław Żuławski thoroughly described the work of Weigl’s Institute, basing on his memories as well as detailed entries from his journal of that time. *The basic realities of the film are accurate, the director claimed, the fact that my father was a lice feeder, that the commander of the partisan division was blind, that I was born in similar circumstances as the child of the film protagonist. The cages for lice feeding were brought from Lviv, they are authentic German cages. (...) Also my characters’ way of life is real. All that the film is based on is real*<sup>20</sup>. When the director went to Gdańsk, where Weigl’s Institute had been moved after the war, he found that lice feeding was still continued: *Weigel [sic!] kept breeding them, he was a bit mad. Actually, he made an appearance in my film, there is a close-up on him dissecting lice. He brought them all to the film set, he had kept all that equipment. That work was permanent, because Weigl’s method of obtaining the protein that is the antibody had been continued until chemical equivalents for curing typhus were found. So that documentary part, which in a way is the essence of this film, was meticulously written out*<sup>21</sup>. Lice feeders were infected with lice toxin, they always had body temperature fluctuations, some got ill with typhus (the director’s father twice), and, as Żuławski explains, *with such daily conditions, they were like heavily drunk people, drunken like after rectified spirit, like after vodka. (...) They would never sober up, my father told me very much about that*<sup>22</sup>. This delirious outlook on reality is reflected by the camerawork. Blinking, unsteady, incomplete, fragmentary – the pictures are to trigger particular associations rather than presenting the course of events. Individual scenes have their own rhythm, emotional intensity, and even style. What is common for the majority of images is a kind of detachment from reality, a phantasmagorical character; after all, we enter into the realm of memory, and, moreover, we touch on matters which contradict the commonsensical, habitual way of perceiving reality. The arrangement of elements which constitute the presented world resembles an almost fractal structure, whose deformed, misshapen matter contains a logic measured by the adopted viewing perspective.

The apocalyptic reality of *The Third Part of the Night* has not only form, but also colour: *I chose grey and green hues, the colours of my childhood and fear; which contrast with the red of blood sucked by lice* <sup>23</sup>. The colour of life blends with the colours of dusk, creating a vivid metaphor of “fading time”. *If we try to imagine this “fading time”, we will probably see a “fading sun”, getting darker and darker, finally to become a “black sun”, and the world of the “black sun” (...) is a reality from which the source of light and warmth was taken away*, writes Paweł Rodak about literature of the war generation <sup>24</sup>. Thus, it is a world of darkness and cold – and such is the world presented in *The Third Part of the Night*. In a world where time has faded out, there is no place for a harmonious rhythm of day and night, and the order of successive periods of light and darkness is abolished: *Since time has been “cut in half”, in the world of cut time there is only the eternal night* <sup>25</sup>. Night features in the film not only as a symbolic motif, but above all as the principle of existence of a world in decay. Although in a film about the experience of the Apocalypse of war nocturnal imagery might not strike us as something extraordinary, it is significant, and its concept is very close to the literary equivalent of the film. Night often features in the literature of the time of occupation, usually as a synonym of war. *Just as the laws of war organise daily life in the occupied country, the laws of the night organise poetic imagination*, says Rodak about the works of second world war poets. *In a world which is at the same time a horror of war; night and dream, there is no clear division left between humans and non-human creatures, and further: between the living and the dead, material and non-material, real and unreal. Everything in this world loses its place in whatever thinkable order. It is a world without concrete places or concrete time; a world of monstrous forms without contours or shapes; a world of beings whose status is difficult to ascertain, beings suspended between existence and non-existence. It is populated only with headless phantoms, spectres, apparitions, shadows, ghosts (...), and, above all, it is a world full of corpses* <sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, Rodak underscores that in the poetry of the war generation, corpse is not only a materialised image of death, a synonym of a dead person; it is also a mode of existence on the threshold of life and death, a state in which living people see themselves as dead, experiencing their own death while alive. Death is one of the more important keywords to understanding the war generation. As Rodak aptly notes, in the literary output of the those “infected with war”, death, identified with night, is not something approaching, but rather something which is already there, encountered in daily experience. One is immersed in death, as in night and war: *Being trapped in death does not mean, however, the inevitability of a soon physical death, but rather the inescapability of death as an existential experience. He who lives under corpse-like bruise-purple sky, in the middle of the night which swells like a corpse, he who sleeps embracing corpses, partly becomes a corpse himself* <sup>27</sup>. *The Third Part of the Night* brings us into, or rather shows us around, an analogous representation of the “inside of war”. We notice that life inside war is a form of entrapment in death. Michał witnesses the deaths of many people, including his family. *We are no longer here*, his son Łukasz tells him, and yet keeps appearing together with his mother in Michał’s life. In the hospital basement, the protagonist sees his own dead body, and immediately afterwards gets fatally wounded in the larynx. When he finds himself in the family manor again, he sees his wife alive and dead at the same time. The war memory of the



*The Third Part of the Night*, dir. Andrzej Żuławski (1971)

Photo courtesy of Filмотeka Narodowa

Żuławskis, both father and son, is a world full of corpses. The son speaks on his own and his father's behalf, and this makes the survivors' story a film parable about the dualism of human condition, about the mysterious duality of human nature. In the film, this split is inscribed in the space of the presented world.

### References to the already said

What is autobiographism? – asks Jerzy Jarzębski in his essay *Powieść jako autokreacja (Novel as self-creation): Is it more of the author's account of his or her own life, or rather a creation, a putting together of biographical myth out of the stuff of real facts?*<sup>28</sup>. The multiplicity of concepts and approaches suggests that theoreticians studying autobiographical narration have not reached a consensus on this matter. Philippe Lejeune, who authored the fundamental category of “the autobiographical pact”, keeps returning in his works to the relationship between autobiography, truth and person. In *Definir l'autobiographie*, he addresses problems which are to large extent relevant for the autobiographical discourse of Żuławski's *The Third Part of the Night*. According to Lejeune: *The promise to speak the truth, to distinguish truth from falsehood, is the basis of all social relations. (...) Autobiography has inscribed itself in the space of historical cognition as a desire for knowledge and understanding, and in the space of activity as a promise to offer this truth to others; it has also inscribed itself in the space of artistic relation. (...) As for the fact that individual identity in both writing and life is created thanks to narration, this does not mean in any way that it resides in the world of fiction. Placing myself in the written word, I carry forward that creation of “narrative identity”, which is, according to Paul Ricoeur, what our whole life relies on. Of course in trying to see myself better, I always keep creating myself, I rewrite drafts of my identity, and this gesture provisionally subjects them to stylisation or simplification. But I do not dabble in inventing myself. I follow the rules of story-telling, yet I remain faithful to my truth (...). If identity is imagined, autobiography which adheres to this imagined representation lies on the side of truth. And this has nothing to do with the intended play of fiction*<sup>29</sup>. In Zofia Mitosek's interpretation of Lejeune, the truth of an autobiography is ultimately determined not by the logical value of the utterance, but rather by the author's desire for self-knowledge, regardless of the extent to which such desire would deform the objective, actual content of a personal message: even if the narrative is not in accordance with the truth, what is true is its pragmatic motivation, aim<sup>30</sup>. Thus, Lejeune understands the referential pact as the author's commitment to tell the truth, yet with the provision that the autobiographer is not someone who tells the truth about his or her life, but rather someone who says that he or she tells it. Truth is inaccessible, especially when it concerns human life, but autobiography based on a representation of truth is possible. It exists when those who believe in it exist, for, according to Lejeune, it is not an object of aesthetic consumption, but a social means of understanding between humans: *Autobiography has been created to enable sharing a universum of values, sensitivity towards the world, unknown experiences – all that within the framework of personal relations, perceived as authentic and non-fictional*<sup>31</sup>. Many authors have discussed the important problem of the coexistence of “design and truth” in autobiographical narratives. In this case, Barbara Skarga's reflections seem rele-



vant: *That story of mine may turn out to be a myth. This, however, is irrelevant for the constitution of my identity. Nobody has proven that the I must build itself on truth. (...) The more painstakingly I search for sense in my story, the more deeply I investigate my own actions, their motives, my experiences, suffering, the better I see their entanglement in and dependence on things outside myself, various powers, circumstances. (...) Hence, in the attempt at making sense are inherent contradictory tensions, which result from the dialectics between what is mine and what transgresses "mineness", being general, alien, between my history and the history of the surrounding world, between my view of the past, my remembering, and the memory of others.*

*(...) The question that remains unresolved is whether I create a story in order to find myself, or, conversely, it is this story that creates myself, even though it is full of gaps and distortions* <sup>32</sup>.

Thus, at the basis of writing oneself and one's work out in autobiography lies the overriding need for self-knowledge, for speaking about oneself, pursuing the truth about oneself, even if that truth should be incomplete and fragmentary, and the process of making sense should not be entirely under control of the person concerned. This indefiniteness and unclearness of relationships with the past, which often reinforces the autobiographical pact, features also in the auto-narrative of Andrzej Żuławski, who based the autobiographical discourse constitutive for his film on a remembrance project of his father, writer Mirosław Żuławski. Lejeune, one of the pioneers of research on "collaborative autobiography", argues that in such cases it is fundamentally significant to ask whether the text was initiated by the teller or the writer, as there is no balance of power between them <sup>33</sup>. The concept of collaborative autobiography is an essentially problematic idea. It provokes various reflections, for instance on the author, the owner of the life which is being told, the addressee of the message, the responsibility for the intentions of the autobiographical declaration. It also prompts us to ask what such narrative actually is and how it influences the shaping of the autobiographical space. Thus, what turns out to be important in creating and at the same time revealing the autobiographical space of *The Third Part of the Night* is the intertextual space, which, as Stanisław Balbus put it, *designates for itself and opens the text every time through the technique of intertextual references used in that text* <sup>34</sup>. In his essay *L'autobiocopie*, Lejeune claims: *We never write without having read and listened – to everything: autobiography does not feed on autobiography alone. All utterances, all fictions, all aphorisms, poems, paintings and musical pieces which we selected and absorbed mix in the melting pot of our identity. (...) Autobiography begins to "write itself" already in the very life, intertextuality does not begin at the point when we lean over a blank page, and this is why it is so easy to miss* <sup>35</sup>. Lejeune limits his discussion to the case of citation. Małgorzata Czermińska, on the other hand, distinguishes four kinds of references to texts, to "the already said": auto-commentary, reference to somebody else's autobiography, reference to one's own non-autobiographical text, or to such text by another author <sup>36</sup>. As Czermińska emphasises, apart from the horizontal relationship between two types of texts, of decisive significance is (...) *reference to a kind of a "third force", when we go beyond the universe of mutually interrelated texts into the extra-sign and extra-code realm, into personality, which creates autobiographical writing and observes its own reflection*

in it<sup>37</sup>. Then the above-listed categories of reference (...) *turn their other side toward us, one which was not visible before. The first category connects with the third one (in both cases these are references to one's own texts), and the second with the fourth one (references to texts by others). The distinction between the autobiographical and the fictional, is replaced by a different one: I speak or somebody else speaks*<sup>38</sup>.

The thus understood relationship of reference to “the already said” is a highly important category in the autobiographical discourse of *The Third Part of the Night*. In the associative and polyphonic stream of Żuławski's personal revelations, their content is subject to a dual order, so that main themes are arranged in doubles (e.g. the duality of Michał's, his wife's and son's existence after death). The doubleness of composition and some thematic motifs not only shapes the personal identity of the speaking author, but also actualises a process aptly summarized in Jacques Derrida's thesis about the existence of two texts in one: *Two texts, two hands, two visions, two ways of listening. Together simultaneously and separately*<sup>39</sup>. The first text contains a key to the other text, and together they complement each other, creating an auto-narrative composed of a strange mixture of emotions and forgetting. The construction of the world presented in the *Their Part of the Night* keeps revealing yet new meanings. Events and situations are portrayed in a manner which suggests that everything happened not just once and, what is more, simultaneously, but somehow it has happened many times, in the past and now, here and in infinity. This way of perceiving reality reaches back to Blake's philosophy and the literature of Romanticism. And since the 20<sup>th</sup> century has sharpened the concept of the doubleness of entities, the labyrinthine representation of the world in *The Third Part of the Night* resembles Lacanian wanderings in search of *significance* or Barthesian *écriture*.

### The Żuławskis' poetics of memory

It follows that *The Third Part of the Night* presents itself not quite as an example of an autobiographical event, but rather as a fiction essay with an autobiographical base. Tadeusz Lubelski describes it as a borderline case *in which the free, collage-like structure of a journal combines with an autobiographical balance statement, a “totalising attempt”*. *And it is not about full reconstruction of the life path (as in autobiography), but rather about reaching the essence of existence, the metaphysical core, by delving in the memory of its various fragments*<sup>40</sup>. Żuławski's film makes use of the poetics of essay writing and the double perspective characteristic of this literary form: *The essayist, a writer or a film-maker, thinks in terms of common things, referring to tradition and everyday experience generally present in culture, and yet the vision he creates is individual and unique. It is permeated with subjectivism, both in the approach to a topic, in its presentation, and in the way of narrating it. (...) On the one hand, the artist presents a world which exists beyond him, together with its inherent mechanisms; on the other, he superimposes on it a grid of his own notions, thoughts, feelings, and manipulates it arbitrarily, which is decisive for subsequent interpretation*<sup>41</sup>. In relation to the category of subjectivism, two problem areas suggest themselves. The first one would concern the poetics of the film, and here we could mention the metaphorical, sign-based narrative



*The Third Part of the Night*, dir. Andrzej Żuławski (1971)

Photo courtesy of FilMOTEKA Narodowa

form. The other area is more difficult to identify, as it overlaps with the first: what is meant here is subjectivism connected with the author's emotional involvement and the exposure of his personality through references to personal feelings and experiences. This brings Żuławski's film close to spiritual autobiography. As Czermińska puts it, *In such utterances, the narrator resembles the speaking "I" of lyrical poetry. The writing process is sometimes compared to vivisection, it can be a difficult and risky work of self-cognition and it can lead to unexpected outcomes. Introvert writing may serve as a kind of auto-therapy and self-creation. Sometimes, the imaginative process of studying one's own self (...) transforms into deliberate posing. Then, alongside the self-absorbed author, there emerges the reader, for whom the poses are meant*<sup>42</sup>. Żuławski's film is designed as a provocation, as a challenge to the viewers, who get involved in the very process of message construction. The impression of visual dissonance and the deprivation effect of the film on the level of perception can make the viewer feel anxiously helpless, so that reflection on authorial strategy is brought down to the question: How to read this very personal text about the Holocaust?

Like none other, art which thematises experiences of the Holocaust invites reflection on the relationship between the work and its recipient, or, to be more precise, the ethical determinants of such relationship. This type of artistic production evokes certain emotional states in the recipients, depending mainly on their individual mental disposition. In this respect, works about the Holocaust seem rather disinterested and free of presumptions, save for one: the need to bear witness. The need to remember and reconstruct one's own borderline experiences corresponds with the recipients' need to find them – in this sense, the recipient is not completely disinterested. The problem shared by recipients of all works thematising the experience of the Holocaust, including *The Third Part of the Night*, is how to find a strategy that will enable the fullest possible understanding and interpretation of such works, so that the act of reading is not limited to a passive adventure but becomes a “responsible response”. All discussions centred around the problems of memory, filling the void after the Holocaust, appropriation of trauma, catharsis, or repetition, show that the difficulty of finding one's place in this discourse is shared by both those who remember and those whose image of the war is shaped by more or less authentic accounts of the survivors.

Two main approaches, two “schools of reading” can be adopted vis-à-vis the autobiographical discourse of *The Third Part of the Night*. On the level of the ethical determinants of text-recipient relationship, we can maintain detachment, and the act of detachment, as Martha Nussbaum argues, is the basic element of empathy<sup>43</sup>. Empathy enables an imagination-based reconstruction of the other's experiences without judging or evaluation, and thus it is far removed from compassion. In this sense, empathy makes it possible to understand properly somebody else's states and emotions, though at the same time it lacks the element of personal involvement. In contact with the personal rendering of Holocaust experience in the *Third Part of the Night*, a rendering determined by its autobiographism, a thus understood empathy provides recipients with the necessary detachment, without which one might (or would have to) find oneself on the other side, entering the mass grave, a pit full of corpses. According to Nussbaum, the feeling of empathy, if properly understood, allows us to focus on the sufferer's experiences, yet we have to remember that this is only a model of preferred emotional reactions, as in reality the borders between compassion, sympathy, commiseration and empathy are often blurred. A radical strategy has been proposed by Ágnes Heller, who believes that with regard to the Holocaust, memory should consist in actual suffering, which is the more severe because it is meaningless<sup>44</sup>. The practice of memory discussed by Heller means immersing oneself in meaninglessness; it has ritual character. What matters here is a particular kind of emotional re-actualisation of past events, an authentic experience of pain, in which: *Approaching lack of sense takes place through communing with this lack, its assimilation and reconstruction*<sup>45</sup>.

An autobiographical reading of *The Third Part of the Night* yields interesting conclusions regarding the manifestation of autobiographism in the film's structure and pragmatics, i.e. the sender-text-recipient relationship. The sender's specific communicative attitude, as intended in the film, and the resulting intended behaviour of the recipient arrange themselves into opposing patterns. Andrzej Żuławski bases his strategy of remembering the time of the Holocaust on a Hellerian immersion in the meaninglessness of the time of night, on emotional re-actualisation of

experiences remembered from childhood, and those passed on by his parents. This translates above all into the style and poetics of the film, which force the recipient of this story to adopt a distinctly detached position against it. A dose of necessary detachment, not only critical one, allows viewers to find the autobiographical elements of the film and trace their meaning, without burdening the consciousness of those “born later” (the recipients) with somebody else’s traumatic experiences.

Investigating the autobiographical discourse of *The Third Part of the Night* calls for a reflection on the memory discourse inscribed in the film plot. Andrzej and Mirosław Żuławski clearly suggest that returning to the apocalyptic past is an almost futile activity, for it is difficult to find any sense in the remembered experiences. There is a certain aporia in their autobiographical message: governed by the aesthetics of fragment, it does not constitute a coherent whole, but rather an intimate mental patchwork, in which individual fragments shed light on each other over and again. In lieu of a complete structure, we get a living form filled with meaningful images, which only rarely turn into a coherent narrative. In this light, the autobiographical narration of *The Third Part of the Night* appears as a supporting structure secondary to the (non)sense of the world of the Holocaust which the author wishes to present, as a framework of understanding and cognition. Its important function is to capture life, processes and events which unfold in time, turning them into “complete structures of sense”. If we treat the category of narration as a constitutive component of human identity, the latter becomes understood as a “narrative identity”<sup>46</sup>. Narrative identity, or at least the individual narrative identity, is not possible without a *self-aware subject (the “I”), without a clear division into the internal and the external, into the “I” and the world, the “I” and other people, and finally without placing oneself and the world in the temporal order of subsequent events. To express it in the conceptual language of history of ideas, one can say that it is about individualism, rationalism, and historicism; in the language of the theory and history of literature – this would be realism and autobiographism*<sup>47</sup>. The convention of re-constructing war-marked reality proposed by Żuławski in *The Third Part of the Night* suggests that the personal memory of father and son is overbuilt around the autobiographical narrative, and their identity is constituted by both categories. After all, it is thanks to the narrative process that we orient ourselves in the basic dimensions of our existence, endowing it with coherent sense: *we determine our relation to the past and tradition, we give our life a form of an aim-oriented pursuit, and we define our attitude towards others. (...) To know who you are means to be able to tell yourself the fundamental moments of your identity: this is done through individual narrative, embedded in the narrative of the community from which the individual stems, and the community narrative is, in turn, part of the great cultural-historical narrative. For a human being, to have an identity means more than just to be; to have an identity means: to repeat constantly, and thus to reinforce and confirm the act of self-interpretation*<sup>48</sup>.

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- <sup>1</sup> R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska, *Między autobiografią a literaturą*, Warszawa 1993, pp. 15-16.
- <sup>2</sup> T. Lubelski, *Autor jako bohater. O postawie autobiograficznej w filmie*, in: *Autor w filmie*, ed. M. Hendrykowski, Poznań 1991, p. 91.
- <sup>3</sup> Żuławski, *Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, ed. P. Kletowski, P. Marecki, Warszawa 2008, p. 14.
- <sup>4</sup> *Pojedynek w Riwierze*, "Kino" 1971, no. 12, p. 17.
- <sup>5</sup> *Jesteśmy mięsem dla tygrysa. Z A. Żuławskim rozmawia T. Lubelski*, "Kino" 1992, no. 7, p. 6.
- <sup>6</sup> Żuławski... op. cit., p. 24.
- <sup>7</sup> *Pojedynek w Riwierze*, op. cit., p. 17.
- <sup>8</sup> Żuławski... op. cit., p. 148.
- <sup>9</sup> *Opętanie. Ekstremalne kino i pisanstwo A. Żuławskiego*, ed. S. Naitza, Warszawa 2004, pp. 16-17.
- <sup>10</sup> Żuławski... op. cit., pp. 86-87.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 88, and Mirosław Żuławski's memories published in "Twój Styl" magazine 1993 (no. 1, 2, 3, 22).
- <sup>12</sup> B. Sycówna, *Obszar pogranicza*, "Kino" 1988, no. 4, p. 25.
- <sup>13</sup> P. Lejeune, *Definir l'autobiographie*, paper presented at the 1st International Conference on Auto/Biography in Beijing, 21-14 June 1999; here quoted after the Polish edition: P. Lejeune, *Czy można zdefiniować autobiografię?* in: idem, *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii*, trans. W. Grajewski, S. Jaworski, A. Labuda, R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska, ed. R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska, Kraków 2007, p. 2. For a book-length collection of Lejeune's essays in English, see: P. Lejeune, *On autobiography*, trans. K. Leary, ed. P. Eakin, Minneapolis 1989. A comprehensive list of English translations of Lejeune's individuals papers and essays can be found at his homepage: [http://www.autopacte.org/Bibliographie\\_personnelle.html#Anglais](http://www.autopacte.org/Bibliographie_personnelle.html#Anglais) [translator's note].
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. M. Freeman, *Rewriting the Self. History, Memory, Narrative*, London 1993, p. 113.
- <sup>15</sup> J. Kosiński, *Notes of the Author on "The Painted Bird"*, in: idem, *Passing By*, New York 1992, p. 204.
- <sup>16</sup> Z. W. Dudek, *Psychologiczny język kultury*, in: Z. W. Dudek, A. Pankalla, *Psychologia kultury. Doświadczenia graniczne i transkulturowe*, Warszawa 2005, p. 245.
- <sup>17</sup> D. Lowenthal, *Przeszłość to obcy kraj*, "Res Publica" 1991, no. 3, pp. 20, 21.
- <sup>18</sup> A. Ledóchowski, *Czas zatraty, czas odkupienia*, "Kino" 1971, no. 10, p. 5.
- <sup>19</sup> Idem, *List otwarty*, "Kino" 1971, no. 12, p. 6.
- <sup>20</sup> *Pojedynek w Riwierze*, op. cit., p. 17.
- <sup>21</sup> Żuławski... op. cit., p. 89.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 90-91.
- <sup>23</sup> *Opętanie...* op. cit., p. 17.
- <sup>24</sup> P. Rodak, *Wizje kultury pokolenia wojennego*, Wrocław 2000, pp. 55-56.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibidem, pp. 56, 59.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 60.
- <sup>28</sup> J. Jarzębski, *Powieść jako autokreacja*, in: *Powieść jako autokreacja*, Kraków 1984, p. 412.
- <sup>29</sup> P. Lejeune, op. cit., p. 5.
- <sup>30</sup> Z. Mitosek, *Hermeneuta i autobiografia*, "Teksty Drugie" 2002, no. 3, p. 139.
- <sup>31</sup> P. Lejeune, op. cit., p. 18.
- <sup>32</sup> B. Skarga, *Tożsamość, ja i pamięć*, "Znak" 1995, no. 5, pp. 12-18.
- <sup>33</sup> Cf. P. Lejeune, *Qui est l'auteur?*, here quoted after the Polish edition: *Kto jest autorem?* in: idem, *Wariacje...* op. cit.
- <sup>34</sup> S. Balbus, *Między stylami*, Kraków 1993, p. 155.
- <sup>35</sup> P. Lejeune, *L'autobiocopie*, here quoted after the Polish edition: *Autobiokopia*, in: idem, *Wariacje...* op. cit., p. 221.
- <sup>36</sup> M. Czermińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadectwo, wyznanie i wyzwanie*, Kraków 2000.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 101.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.
- <sup>39</sup> J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, Chicago 1982, p. 65.
- <sup>40</sup> T. Lubelski, op. cit., p. 99.
- <sup>41</sup> E. Lachnit, *Esej filmowy*, "Powiększenie" 1982, no. 4, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>42</sup> M. Czermińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt...* op. cit., p. 22.
- <sup>43</sup> Cf. M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought. Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge 2003.
- <sup>44</sup> A. Heller, *Pamięć i zapominanie. O sensie i braku sensu*, trans. A. Kopacki, "Przegląd Polityczny" 2001, no. 52-53.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibidem, s. 27.
- <sup>46</sup> Cf. K. Rosner, *Narracja, tożsamość i czas*, Kraków 2003.
- <sup>47</sup> P. Rodak, *Narracja – dziennik – tożsamość. Przesłanki (projektowanej) antropologii literatury*, in: *Narracja i tożsamość (I)*, ed. W. Bolecki, R. Nycz, Warszawa 2004, p. 225.
- <sup>48</sup> A. Bielik-Robson, *Wstęp. My, romantycy – źródła romantycznego modernizmu Charlesa Taylora*, in: Ch. Taylor, *Źródła podmiotowości. Narodziny tożsamości nowoczesnej*, Warszawa 2001, pp. XXXIII-XXXIV.