



Constructing emotions from the perspective of the dramaturgical theory on the example of the Smolensk disaster

Costruzione delle emozioni nella prospettiva della teoria drammaturgica: l'esempio del disastro di Smolensk

Michał Pulit

State University of Applied Science in Nowy S cz, Poland - michal.pulit@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The author uses the background of the Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory to analyze how emotions are constructed. The interpretation of reality as a theater play and individuals as actors playing several roles simultaneously allows the author to realize the potential hidden in the fabrication of emotions aroused in involved recipients of the interaction. The analysis of the interaction through the prism of a performance based on creating an already assumed impression by an individual allows the society to reveal the unstable credibility of the director's intentions and doubtful authenticity of emotions that have been automatically aroused in the audience. The way in which the Smolensk disaster, one of the most tragic events in Poland's recent history, was illustrated in the media, offers an example of how consecutive borders were pushed on the road to managing the impression. The exploration of the selected sociological concept in the perspective of emotions encourages us to reflect on the reality of identities possessed by social individuals and the very content of the communication sent by them. An individual is currently disorientated when interpreting polarized communications and experiences antinomian emotions, therefore it seems that the only chance of beneficial change in the value of social life lies in attempting to integrate affective and rational experience.

L'autore analizza la costruzione delle emozioni nella prospettiva della "teoria drammaturgica" di Ervin Goffman, per il quale la realtà è un teatro in cui gli individui recitano ruoli diversi. Ciò permette all'autore di cogliere il potenziale nascosto nelle emozioni presenti nei soggetti. L'analisi dell'interazione nel prisma di una *performance* basata sulla creazione di una ritenuta preesistente impressione da parte di un individuo permette di portare alla luce le mutabili intenzioni del regista e la dubbia autenticità delle emozioni suscitate nel pubblico. Il modo in cui i media hanno presentato il disastro aereo di Smolensk, uno degli eventi più tragici della storia recente della Polonia, offre un esempio di come si possano manipolare le impressioni oltre ogni limite. L'estensione al campo delle emozioni del concetto sociologico sopra citato induce a riflettere sulle reali identità dei soggetti sociali coinvolti e sull'effettivo contenuto delle loro comunicazioni. L'individuo è disorientato quando interpreta comunicazioni polarizzate e prova emozioni antinomiche. Pertanto sembra che l'unica possibilità di operare un cambiamento benefico nella vita sociale preveda un'integrazione di esperienza affettiva e razionale.

KEYWORDS

Dramaturgical Theory, Emotions, Symbolic Interactionism, Smolensk Disaster, Sociological Theory.

Teoria drammaturgica, emozioni, interazionismo simbolico, disastro di Smolensk, teoria sociologica.

1. Introduction

While making observations and elaborately analyzing the attitudes and behavior of societies in the information era, one might get an impression that there is no taboo subject to which social individuals feel a phobia that is strong enough to prevent them from discussing it or at least to harness emotions activated in them towards the object or a social situation. Therefore it may seem strange that social life commentators unceremoniously bring up even the most subtle issues to public discussion, thus depriving them of due pathos. It is almost impossible now to pick any material and hope that its virginal peripheries have not been rummaged, as the main goal of many journalists, columnists and influencers is to aim at finding the most provocative title, the most conflicting text or perverted approach to the analysis of the issue. In this rivalry for releasing the reader's and the viewer's involvement, emotions, regardless of their nature, become the currency. Obviously, they bring about particular viewership, popularity and website displays, which naturally translates into profits and incomes of companies, corporations and social individuals. Such emotions are most easily evoked with a shocking or sad image or text, therefore such large percentage of such content can be found in the mass media and the internet.

I would like to concentrate on the examples of dramatic events related to the Smolensk disaster, on which the mass media focused and whose analysis in the press, the radio, the TV and the internet was conducted in a way whose ultimate goals, apart from political ones, consisted in increasing viewership, the number of displays or subscriptions. This path led through building the emotion of tension, the feeling of uncertainty, conflict, anger and sorrow, regardless of legal and historical progress in the analysis of the whole event. The exploration of the issue is conducted through the prism of the sociological dramaturgical theory developed by Erving Goffman (1959), since in my interpretation the concept of symbolic interactionism ideally renders the analogy of a performance created by the media which sells bent reality of real events and simultaneously, constructing collective social consciousness, which is very dangerous.

The subject of the research is important particularly due to multidimensionality of the consequences caused by the effective pursuit of the true mission of the mass media. This no longer consists in explaining and commenting on the significance and sense of the events and the information itself. It is not development of maintenance of the community of values, creation of social or political consensus, either (McQuail, 2019). It just boils down to generating social tension, as de-

scribed by Charles Wright (1960), which seems to be a grim joke. Currently, the mission is usually to construct polarized emotions in order to incapacitate the viewer, the listener or the reader, and to deprive them of the remnants of rational thinking. The task pursued by the fourth power is to shape the society and politics. Unfortunately, the society is not brought up in order to develop defense mechanisms protecting it against abuse and corruption. Instead, thoughtless susceptibility to stimuli is activated, which will make the management of the mass of social individuals as efficient as the management of puppets in the theater.

Social events where death appears seem to be a perfect goal for the media, as it is difficult to find individuals, groups or societies which would remain indifferent to such facts. There are very few issues that would penetrate a social actor so deeply on so many levels. Regardless of whether we deliberate on these issues from the atheistic or theological perspective, they always constitute specific closure of the sequence, continuation, interaction on the sociological, psychological, cultural and legal level. Thus they put individuals struck by the news of such facts in a position of completing some sort of a stage, irrespective of whether they have been prepared for this epilogue or not. If we add here the potential offered by the specificity of a particular message, we have a recipe for the society for positioning the hierarchy of importance of the phenomena defined as those consuming energy, time and money.

2. The Smolensk disaster and the construction of emotions in the dramaturgical theory

10th April 2010 was the day which not only changed the chronology of the events presented in the media, but the day that burned a deep wound in the hearts and minds of Poles, especially the near and dear ones of all 96 casualties of the plane crash. Among the casualties were: president of Poland Lech Kaczyński and his wife Maria Kaczyńska, the last Polish president in exile Ryszard Kaczorowski, deputy speakers of the Polish Lower and Upper Chambers of the Parliament, a group of eighteen members of parliament, commanders of all types of armed forces of Poland, staff of the President's Office, heads of state institutions, members of the clergy, representatives of ministries, war veteran and social organizations and people accompanying them, who all constituted the Polish delegation to the ceremonies related to the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, as well as the plane crew.

Since 9th May 1987 the Polish aviation had not experienced such dramatic events in air and on land, when, as a result of increasing power in the engines of the liner plane Il62, temperature in the bearing of the low pressure turbine increased dramatically and destroyed the engine which, in turn, damaged the other engine of the plane. The plane crew could not control the plane and crashed into the ground in Kabacki Forest, 5 kilometers from Okęcie Airport in Warsaw. This caused the death of 183 people. (<https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/-1526349,1,najwieksza-katastrofa-lotnicza-w-historii-polski-mija-30-lat.read>, accessed on: 27.10.2019).

Though it is impossible to weigh up the significance of human beings, the Smolensk tragedy, due to its political context and the passengers of the flight gained cultural, sociological, psychological and legal dimensions, constructing anew the discourse of experiencing the events related to the death in a wider community. Never before in the modern history of Poland the divisions between

actors of the political stage, participants of social life, representatives of media corporations had been so clear, which contributed to the activation and polarization of particular attitudes and behaviors.

The analysis of emotion building in the dramaturgical perspective contains maturity, humbleness and awareness of the approach used by Erving Goffman, who claimed that the examination of the micro-sociological dimension is loosely related to macroscopic phenomena (Goffman, 1983) and deterministic transfer of this onto parallel phenomena would be semantically far-fetched. Nevertheless, even though a single gathering and an interaction episode may not determine any social significance on a global scale, when we combine them and establish them on the background of larger phenomena, it enables us to shape our image of the hypothetical potentiality of consequences.

The interaction activated as a result of the Smolensk disaster has followed the screenplay written by culture itself. Individuals involved in the process of mutual influence were equipped in norms developed by politicians, journalists, business people, agents of the former security services, but also by radical nationalists. The values that are so intensely consolidated in times of injustice and suffering – became particularly polarized. Convictions were established thanks to persistent media coverage. As a result, we woke up in the stratified society, whose members define reality in a highly individualistic way. This goes perfectly in line with the legacy of Mead, defined by Blumer as presumptions of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 2007). Such categories of people as friends or foes, independence of institutions, honesty found in other people's actions, have all been redefined on the basis of social interactions. The dynamically evolving reality after 2010 constituted a stage on which the media and the creators of the visions of the world around us competed in skillful juggling and maintaining balance between keeping up emotions of pain, sorrow, despair, and building the need of a vendetta and seeking justice in the society. In the situation when social actors, who play the role of the audience, are told to manage polarized emotions, a complex emotional system is created, and its processed elements enter the market in their stochastic structure (Hochschild, 2009). Due to the fact that people act assuming that they are always present on the stage, each social individual perceives the other party in a particular situation as the audience which he or she entertains (Turner, Stets, 2009). In this way the collective spiral of emotions gains momentum and after some time it is difficult to find the sources of actual emotions.

Sadness and depression, which, as primary emotions, the first ones in the collective expression, accompanied the hearts of Poles after the Smolensk disaster, were then gradually and selectively replaced by expectation, anger, hostility and hatred. The constellations of secondary emotions gave way to the attitude of dominance and then translated this into direct actions in meetings (Turner, 2000). These behaviors were manifested, for example, in the so-called Smolensk monthlies (2018). Born out of pain and desire to commemorate the tragically deceased, through their formula and elaborate media policy, they offered enough space to spark the rebellions in which the parties involved were even ready to declare that they felt the presence of *mana* when accomplishing their goals (Durkheim, 2010). It was enough to gain a single point focusing cognitive and visual attention, namely the cross and finally the monument of the casualties. It gathered both supporters and opponents of the concept of participation in the demonstration or the counter-demonstration, and the community offered intense visual contact and monitoring of activities. Each group demonstrated openness to communication, which led to the feeling of solidarity between 'us' and intense flow of emo-

tions. Interactions were accompanied by collections of ritualized ceremonious openings and closings, which, specifically prepared and selectively edited by opposing media, equipped actors involved in particular groups of meetings in an arsenal of ritual procedures aimed at indicating deviations and correcting alleged deviation behaviors (Goffman, 1969, 1971, 1981, 1983, 2010, 2011, 2012). Once a thick line separating the beginning of a religious cult from the structure of everyday interaction has turned now into an extremely thin string, ready to break at any time, allowing catholic extremists and calculating liberals to mingle. The former – stuck in the crusade reality, the latter – pursuing irresistible desire to gain profits, they are both ready to release their primal instincts and they often lack awareness of the fact that emotions which led them to particular attitudes and behaviors were meticulously constructed in line with the detailed screenplay. Regardless of whether some of social individuals were accidentally involved in the gathering they are participating, or initiated in the elaborate plan of the director, they both give false performances evaluated by the audience, who tries to decode their reality and credibility. The play is taking place at the crossing of the lines which determine the artistry of acting, the creation of the needs for the audience – the needs for which they will have to find the panacea, and the social situation, which may be both a supporter and the opponent for those staging the show.

Social actors equipped in props authenticating their intentions, namely the outfits and material objects proving their status and social class, or expressing their contempt for worldly symbols of consumption, are competing in the race for ideal presentations (Veblen, 2008). Some proceed in silence, merging into one legion, whose slogans on banners relate to emotions describing their willingness to seek compensation, others march in opposition, in a colorful counter-demonstration, whose motto seems to divert from the heart of the events that occurred on 10th April 2010. They all juggle with recipients' emotions, each time compensating their own deficits with diverting attention, buying illusory time and keeping upholding the value of the presentation. They all face the challenge of managing emotions on the level of the right to oscillate, as interpreted by Hogan (2011), implementing the immunization method in the philosophy of Beck (2011), simultaneously aiming at maintaining the balance in the viewer's conscience, ensuring the viewer does not yield to the fascination of the scene arranged for them, but activates totally rational activity and autonomously manages their decisions. In the 21st century, this operation is supported by digitalized information society, which unselfishly tests the theses of Damasio (2011) concerning harmonious symbiosis of emotions and pragmatic mind. A lazy social actor soaks up indoctrinated media coverage of the reality constructed for them, feeling appreciated for the fact that they are more and more often being released from the calories-burning process of thinking. They simultaneously express their fascination for technological advances, devoting more energy to gaining new facilities reducing their physical and mental activity than to attempt at reflecting on whose interests the public TV and radio, totally censored by the government, represent, what rhetoric is adopted by private media concerns, which overwhelmingly represent private profits of Western Europe and the USA. The viewer does try to establish who imposes the narration of hatred and clearly identifies the enemy responsible for all consequences of the Smolensk disaster. The viewer does not make any effort to understand why all constructive attempts at finding the guilty ones are nipped in the bud.

Therefore we should not be surprised to see the narration of the movies on Smolensk, relatively specifically directed at the audience, met with a favorable re-

sponse. Directors and screenwriters were aware that the passage of time poses the risk of depriving viewers of extreme emotions, and that is why even before the widows' tears dried, TV screens showed the movies filled with anger, fear and horror. Even in "Lista pasa erów" [Passenger List] directed by Ewa Stankiewicz and Jacek Pospieszalski, which concentrated on the feelings of the sufferers, their tragedy and pain, some slogans were mechanically introduced, thus sending a clear signal encouraging the audience to fight against someone or something. On the other hand, "Mgła" [Fog] by Maria Dłu ewska and Joanna Lichocka, in spite of its minimalism and simplicity, offers a clearly composed persuasion, successively intensified by the soundtrack. "Solidarni" [The Loyal] by Ewa Stankiewicz does not even try to pretend to show the quarrels at the cross and the rise of anger of social individuals neglected by the elites. Ewa Ewart, a documentary director, also balances on a thin rope, trying to show the personal tragedy of the families of 96 casualties of the presidential plane crash and also demonstrating emotions in order to build particular awareness among the viewers – people who were abandoned, neglected, who are embittered and who found a way to release their emotions. In this way we theoretically remain in the discourse, however, we skillfully drift past, turning out attention to a different place.

All this fits in with Goffman's rhetoric, which says that there is no single and objective reality, but it is subjectively created by social actors who are involved in building performances. On a more advanced level a play is staged, in which the screenwriter precisely plans every step they take to force the audience to react in line with their assumptions. Unfortunately, even in the most mysterious plan we cannot take into account all biogenic, psychogenic, cultural and situational variables constituting the horizontal and vertical context of the set goal. Thus the plan often falls victim to the limitations of one's mind or a social situation. This implies some mistakes and more or less conscious attempts to please the audience. The audience, on the other hand, effectively resists immanent homogenization, which is obviously supported by some universality of the course of thematic threads, such as dramatic and personal ones (Golka, 2007). As a result we witness a play in which the audience are convinced that they receive the product they desire, and the director believes that their recipients follow their intricate plan. Even though none of the involved parties can prevent errors, the aspect that determines the victory of a particular participant in a specific situation is the reduction of one's own errors to the lower level than that of one's opponent.

On the emotional level this occurs in the sphere of maximum camouflage of passions taking part in the decision process. This seems a breakneck task, as the sender of the communication, in order to attract the viewer's attention, must maximally destroy proportions between its rationality and emotionality and at the same time expect that the recipient of the communication will have an impression that they are taking decisions in an analytical and synthetic way, resisting or reducing the role of passion. This Machiavellianism in an emotional play around the Smolensk disaster was represented in a wide range of attempts. Private media concerns reduced the importance of the event, quoting the scheme of the tragedy description in precisely selected foreign newspapers and TV stations. Researchers, scientists and country authorities were accused of being hysterical while polarized anti-theses of the events were presented. On the other hand, those in power after the period of direct mourning wanted to transport the process of scheduled changes in the law and economy on the heated emotions of the voters, consecutively arousing the unconvinced groups with a vision of next tragedies. And thus the last social actors who believed uncritically and childishly that there is some

dimension for which the passage of time will offer some distance and enable us to go beyond the separation of the Church and the state, the pursuit of private interests and waging personal wars, have lost their illusions. The freshly healed wound have been scratched again between those who choose capitalism and those favoring the social version of reality.

In social situations in which the information communication is broadcast, the audience expects some coherence of the façade elements, that is using the elements of the environment and its decorations, engaging means of expression, social status and effort in order to take up particular roles. Trying to free an individual from the constituting, institutionalizing and, above all, stereotyping convention, social actors put their recipients in an ephemeral dissonance. This is often supported by garish dramatization and ideation. Its extreme manifestations were represented in the theses of Antoni Macierewicz, when he claimed that three people had survived the disaster (<https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/galerie/696365,duze-zdjecie,1,macierewicz-sa-dowody-swiaadcze-ze-trzy-osoby-przezyly-katastrofe-smolenska.html> access on 23.06.2020.) or covering up the evidence of errors made by the Russians on the other hand (<https://telewizjarepublika.pl/oto-jak-dokonywano-manipulacji-na-miejscu-katastrofy-smolenskiej,71817.html> access on 23.06.2020).

We can easily imagine what huge emotional load this play brings to directly engaged viewers. They play is about the higher interpretation stakes of the show directors, namely international politics, opinion polls giving continuance to abolishing those in power, acceptance of radicalism in some areas or creating a smoke-screen for a particular bill that is being passed. The suffering of the families, even when unuttered, does not seem to be worth of consideration if it cannot be instrumentally used to help macro-systemic changes.

However, it is the ability of people to negotiate the sense of verbal and non-verbal gestures that will determine how they will be agreed in the future (Turner, 2012). We can find some analyses which present an opinion that the Smolensk disaster unites Poles and the nation is as united as in times of "Solidarity" or after the death of John Paul II in 2005. Some theses were put forward, claiming that the migration of emotions that we could witness on 10th April 2010 was trans-national and that the evidence of that could be found in ceremonious holy masses of Catholic rite taking place in every region and every cathedral city in Ukraine, attended by Orthodox priests. This precedent was obviously not limited to the religious dimension, as all higher rank state officials, representatives of consulates and embassies of many nationalities were actively united in experiencing this tragedy (Berny, 2014).

The difference in the interpretation of reality could be overcome by the temporal dimension. Light lit on city squares and streets, showing respect and reconciliation to each other, as well as focusing on the tragedy, they were all replaced after a few days with an appeal to protest against the burial of the presidential couple in Wawel Castle. Aggressive media coverage, toned down for the period of mourning, were gradually regaining their primary character, and some shy gestures were made in the direction known well to most of the recipients.

3. Conclusion

The irresistible temptation to delay a theoretically relatively unambiguous symbol constantly leads social individuals towards defining new reality. Each director

and actor in this play aimed at building emotions, tries to forget that they play double roles. They try to cover up the impression that they are someone else, as an individual constructed and controlled by them. They neglect the necessity to move to the passive position in interpersonal interactions and unpredictable consequences of one's actions. It is much more comfortable to draw Goffman's framework, determining what is to be included in it and is to be excluded in a focused interaction (Goffman, 2010). The complexity of the organization of human experience offers so many facets that it eludes the control of a social actor who desperately cleans the applied keys and used fabrications. Even if they constituted the sphere of personal experience in an exemplary way, following the neo-Durkheim approach, they stop on the macro-cultural process, losing sight of a broader perspective. The world of emotions experienced by people is not a monolith, which accounts for the creation of advanced manipulations. Only harmonious consonance of rationality and emotionality allows us to come closer to the authentic experiencing of emotions and avoiding pre-arranged fabrications.

Managing emotions in the dramaturgical theory provides an opportunity to construct some pedagogical postulates. The example of the Smolensk disaster clearly shows that investment in training, consisting in educating people how dangerous social engineering tools used by social actors are allows to revise the views of the audience and to protect the society against making the same behavioral mistakes in the future.

An optimal solution is to take one step further and adopt a strategy of preventing rather than correcting irregularities. The stage of human development is closely correlated with the degree of immunization to manipulation because the earlier we arm an individual in protection tools and the earlier we avoid contamination from external entities exerting their destructive influence, the sooner we have the chance to interpret the communication message with an emotional component properly.

Education based on developing an ability to diagnose the credibility of media and interpersonal messages should become part of the school curriculum. This would enable us to equip a social individual with skills of decoding body language, tone of voice and coherence of a verbal message in order to determine whether a particular interaction partner is worth building bonds based on trust. Trust itself, in the world of Machiavellianism and emotional games is becoming a currency of the future, but in order to achieve fluency in this ability to conduct such exchanges, it is necessary to expand knowledge, develop skills and social competencies, which should be treated as their responsibility by tutors on each level of education.

References

- Beck, G. (2011). *Zakazana retoryka*. Gliwice: Helion.
- Berny, M. (2016). *Pot ga nadziei*. Warszawa: Prawdziwe Jedzenie.
- Blumer, H. (2007). *Interakcjonizm symboliczny. Perspektywa i metoda*. Kraków: Nomos.
- Damasio, A. (2011). *Błąd Kartezjusza*. Poznań: Rebis.
- Durkheim, E. (2010). *Elementarne formy życia religijnego*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1969). *Strategic interaction*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Goffman, E. (1971). *Relations in public: Microstudies of the public order*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Goffman, E. (1983). The interaction order. *American Sociological Review*, 48, 1-17.
- Goffman, E. (2010). *Analiza ramowa*, translated by Stanisław Burdziej. Kraków: NOMOS.
- Goffman, E. (2010). *Spotkania. Dwa studia z socjologii interakcji*, translated by Paweł Tomanek. Kraków: Nomos.
- Goffman, E. (2011). *Człowiek w teatrze życia codziennego*, Jerzy Szacki (editor), translated by Helena Datner- piewak, Paweł piewak. Warszawa: Aletheia.
- Goffman, E. (2012). *Rytuał interakcyjny*, Sylwia Brezcko (editor), translated by Alina Szul ycka. Warszawa: PWN.
- Goffman, E. (2012). *Zachowanie w miejscach publicznych*, Grażyna Woroniecka (editor), translated by Olga Siara. Warszawa: PWN.
- Golka, M. (2007). *Socjologia kultury*. Warszawa: Scholar Golonka-Czajkowska M. (2018). Ethnologia Polona. In *The Shadow Of The Sacred Bodies. The Monthly Smolensk Commemorations in Krakow*, Vol. 38, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology Polish Academy of Sciences.
- Hochschild, A. (2009). *Zarządzanie emocjami. Komercjalizacja ludzkich uczuć*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Hogan, K. (2011). *Nauka perswazji*. Poznań: Rebis
- McQuail, D. (2019). *Teoria komunikowania masowego*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Pytlakowski, P., Rzeczkowski, G. (2017). Największa katastrofa lotnicza w historii Polski. Mija 30 lat.
- Turner, J.H. (2000). *On the Origins of Human Emotions*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Turner, J.H. (2012). *Struktura teorii socjologicznej*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Turner, J.H., Stets, J. (2009). *Socjologia emocji*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Veblen Thorstein (1899). *The Theory of The Leisure Class*. New York: The MacMillan Company.
- Wright, C.R. (1960). Functional Analysis and Mass Communication. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24, 4, 605-620, Oxford University Press.

Internet sources

- <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1526349,1,najwieksza-katastrofa-lotnicza-w-historii-polski-mija-30-lat.read> , accessed on: 27.10.2019).
- <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/galerie/696365,duze-zdjecie,1,macierewicz-sa-dowody-swiadczone-ze-trzy-osoby-przezyly-katastrofe-smolenska.html> accessed on 23.06.2020 r.)
- <https://telewizjarepublika.pl/oto-jak-dokonywano-manipulacji-na-miejscu-katastrofy-smolenskiej,71817.html> accessed on 23.06.2020 r.)