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LAUGHTER AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE PEDAGOGICAL STUDY OF A GESTURE

In the beginning of XXI century in Poland, a public debate has been dominated by issue of schools. Rise to public discussion of professionals and politicians about the reality of the education system were the highlights in one of the vocational schools of the city Ryki, in the Lublin region¹. National media showed amateur video recorded on cell phone by one of the students. On it, a group of teenage boys' ridicules and humiliates teacher. In the situation we are dealing with a violation of teacher's physical integrity and threats of beatings targeted at him. These events were automatically associated with the events that took place in one of the Torun technicians². Then, during English lesson, one student bullies the teacher by imposing on his head a trash can. Shortly after that, that image has become a highly recognizable public sign. Trash can and the face of helpless teacher condensed the Polish educational reality and express in the common lament that we are dealing with the

collapse of authority, including of course the teacher's authority.

Looking carefully at the first reactions of commentators on presented outrageous scene from a school in Ryki, in my memory stuck a surprise, that the blame for this situation has been attributed to the teacher. Subsequent comments on television TVN24 entered in a narrative whose central theme was the teacher's passivity. Commentators pointed to the total inaction of educator in relation to the attackers. The first interpretations were limited to statements that apart from the lack of immediate reaction, which should take place, blame was folded on the lack of a closer relationship between teacher, a particular pupil and his parents, which would be a condition for a better understanding within the triad. Abandoning the comment to the obvious statements that the Polish school is going wrong directions, I focused on the question of the possible reaction of the teacher. What action could the teacher take in relation to a dozen tall, aggressive school students in Ryki?

Amateur video of Torun documents following situation: a group of boys and girls surrounds a teacher who sits obedi-

1 <http://www.tvn24.pl/12690,1599716,0,1,zniewazali-nauczyciela-trafia-pod-sad,wiadomosc.html>

2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0basRxBw0o>

ently, with his head down over his desk. Phone camera carefully monitors the actions of one of the boys. He performs repeated gestures simulating pelvic thrust, anal penetration. Teacher loosened his shoulders, student pretends to masturbate close to teacher's face. The teacher attempted to break out of the clinch, but the attempt was ineffective in the face of overwhelming advantage. In the end, the cage is released, in the frame of camera one can see trash bin which is placed on the teacher's head. The situation with the roar is similar in many respects. One of the three aggressors, performs an erotic dance. The boy exposes the belly; his hips are moving rhythmically - sexual association is more than evident. Erotic dance moves smoothly in challenging behavior to fight. The boy with bare torso flexing its muscles, jumps like a boxer warming up muscles before the game. We can hear insults suggesting homosexual orientation of the teacher. The victim remains idle.

Both recordings can cause confusion and lost for words by critical viewer. It was my feeling, when I looked at them. Described events struck me as something of a spectacle played out in the middle of the class in front of the school public. That shirtless Chippendale played an erotic show in front of classmates, encouraging interaction of viewers who would feel tempted to join the fun. In *Torun*, a basket on teacher's head was not, in my opinion, the scheduled highlight. It was a rather extreme and uncontrollable impulse of one of the participants in a perverse game, triggered by fear. Watching these images, I focused my attention on what one can not see in the video, and what happens behind the camera. What can not be seen and hear is the laughter of the audience of the show coming from behind the camera.

The examined films are merely examples of the many amateur recordings,

documenting similar excesses. Searching the Internet database one can easily find multiplications of this thread recorded on mobile phones. Most of the situation combines laughter, filling classrooms. It becomes less important in this context to track and analyze individual events - the content excesses. So, I suggest to take a look rather at the form they take.

Homo Ridens

In most cases of fixed harassment of people in the classroom, laughter is part of the scenery of these acts of violence. The situation of humiliation becomes distinct features of humor, hence the reaction to it takes the form of laughter, reinforced by the impact of the group. During the events described above, the laughter of students becomes a secondary catalyst for further actions until a breach of personal inviolability. Comedy becomes a tragedy.

Bearing in mind these words, one can compare it with the assertion of Aristotle, that laughter is proper only to man, or Francois Rabelais saying that it is a genuine kingdom of man. It would mean a hidden ambivalence inscribed in purely human gesture and entitled to obscure even suggestions for the constitution of man considered through the prism of laughter.

So we can say that laughter, in the individual dimension, is a reaction in specifically human way to expand personal space of freedom. Bakhtin paid attention to this, describing the folk culture of laughter. Carnival laughter was a reaction to the feeling of the official enslavement, which could be challenged through ritual laughter. Consequently, says Bogusław Żyłko, at the point of absolute freedom, human laughter is impossible, as superfluous³. Such an absolute point is kind of perfection, and therefore beyond

3 Żyłko B. Śmiech według Bachtina i innych, p. 91.

the reach of the common man, who remains "homo ridens". This finding may lead to the question of theological nature. If the above is true, then we have to give a negative answer to the question of whether Christ laughed? Only in the case of man-god which has a fullness of freedom, laughter becomes impossible.

In any other case, laughter is proper to man. In the present context of the classroom and students' reaction, it is important to look at the social dimension of laughter. Ceremonial laughter establishes itself as one of the most important mechanisms that regulates social intercourse. Along with the creation of the definition of standards of acceptable in this group, and thus creating the definition of deviations from the norm, it arises "inventory ridiculous in terms of logic, morality, aesthetics, language and worldview"⁴. One can also say that ridiculous inventory as part of the regulatory pattern is part of a broader regulatory mechanism that constitutes, in fact, social sphere. Laughter as a reaction and spontaneous automatism is, after all, a mechanism that often escapes the control of the subject. As Kowalewicz says, difficulty of laughter use comes from the fact that laughter is always the human reflex⁵. The socialization of laughter becomes the social determination of the framework and conditions for laugh - possible or even recommended, and in other contexts forbidden. In this way, what is human, becomes, as a result of socialization, controlled externally by means of force to adapt to the conventional framework. I think the socialization of laughter can be compared to the practice of chastity, whose successful transition sets another important moment in the process of socialization of the child. The analogy does not apply, of course, to a function of or-

ganic removal and laughter. We become part of the society or group, when we learn to laugh together⁶.

Limits of correction

As a mechanism for socialization, laughter can be studied by assigning characteristics of necessity and inevitability. The situation changes when the mechanism will become a manipulation.

To deal with such a pathological situation, I have to start from the classical text by Henri Bergson "Laughter. Essay on Humor"⁷. According to H. Bergson laughter becomes an important element in bringing society together - it is a gesture of social bonding with the original idea of the mechanism imposed life⁸. In its positive form of laughter, it belongs to the domain of aesthetics and has a utilitarian purpose. Laughter is a gesture used in response to any "numbness". As Bergson puts it: "Every stiffed character, mind, and even the body will be something suspicious for the community, as it is a sign of the activity of the dying, or one that tries to be isolated, separate from the common center bringing together community, therefore, a sign of eccentricity"⁹. Eccentricity is treated: threat to the cohesion of the group. And the laughter becomes a proportionate response to this threat. Proportional because the stiffness in humans, this "numbness", is perceived as a rather simple but significant warning, hence such a simple but equally significant reaction. Clearly, Bergson sees

4 Kowalewicz M. H. Śmiech a mentalność. Słów kilka o społecznym wymiarze śmiechu, p. 83.

5 Ibidem, p. 83.

6 It is not surprising that people raised outside Poland do not find anything funny in the cult Polish film "Cruise". This is example of absurd and pastiche on a totalitarian ideology and as such should be significant for people brought up in post-war Europe. But it's not like that. If not, this may mean that at stake here are some other elements specific to Polish humor.

7 Bergson H., Śmiech. Esej o komizmie, Warsaw 2000.

8 Ibidem, p. 44.

9 Ibidem, pp. 22-23.

in stiffness the source of humor. This is because in the case of numbness or repeatability of human behavior, human aspect and inanimate one are mixed together. It's this intersection, this incompatibility that causes laughter: "it is the human aspect of the situation, which due to a specific type of bracing, mimics the mechanism of clean, automatism, movement devoid of life. This leads him to the voice of individual or collective defect that requires immediate correction. Laughter is precisely the corrections"¹⁰. Leszek Kolakowski, in his lecture of H. Bergson, cites the words: if someone behaves mechanically – evokes laughter¹¹.

In addition, the utilitarian laughter belongs to the domain of aesthetics. According to Henri Bergson, it is a reaction to the power of aesthetic subject distressed by disordered observations. Since the intelligence of the individual, as well as its flavor proportionality depends on the reaction, laughter lack symmetry. That laugh, what is very important, does not stigmatize "numbness" as something harmful, or even wrong. It is a humanistic response to human intelligence. Such behavior is rational in the sense that reason is based on the confusion of the human and inanimate. According to Kolakowski this is affirmation of humanity¹². In the context of my discussion it becomes necessary to place the question of the point, where laughter ceases to be an expression of the humanistic attitude. This is the point at which this reaction is no longer affirming humanity but transforms into the extreme dehumanization. This point must be located outside the field of rationality, where reactions are non-intelligent, a scoffer changes in the torturer. Near this place I can situate students laugh, fixed on the mobile phones.

There are no specific coordinates of

such point, and it can not be unambiguously fixated. I think one can study the behavioral manifestations of approaching to this point. When human laughter flows from this place, it becomes dehumanized. I think that today's mass culture, in particular the multimedia, can be seen as a marked by the feature of pathological laughter - this is not the total figure, though clear and conquering dominance. One can find examples in an interview with Slavoj Žižek, conducted by Christopher Hanlon¹³. In the introduction to the interview Ch. Hanlon gives a brief description of the philosopher and his works inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan claimed that all human desire is the desire of the Other. Slavoj Žižek, in his characteristic way, gives an example of such mediation desire. The example is based on the phenomenon of the so-called „canned laughter”. The thing applies to the artificial, pre-recorded laughter, putted into the television comedy, talk shows and entertainment programs. Slavoj Žižek asks the question: Why the laughter? Firstly, it serves as a reminder of the viewer when to laugh. This implies the philosopher's paradox, which for us is no longer a paradox, that laughter is not a spontaneous reaction, but rather a matter of obligation. This is a confirmation of earlier definitions of laughter, described as a gesture of socialization, in which conformism plays a leading role. However, this answer is not sufficient and S. Žižek proposes to go one step further. He observes that, often in situations where we hear laughter from the can (watching a comedy), we do not laugh. The correct answer is that the Other, embodied by the TV, release us from the obligation of laughter – the Other is laughing instead of us. "So, even if tired after a day of stupid work,

10 Kolakowski L. Bergson, Warsaw 2009, p. 80.

11 Ibidem, p. 81.

12 Ibidem, p.82.

13 Hanlon Ch., Psychoanalysis and the Post-Political: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek, „New Literary History” 2001, 32, pp. 1-21.

all night we did not do anything but dull staring at the TV screen, we can say quite objectively, that thanks to the mediation of the Other, we spent a very pleasant evening"¹⁴. Such mediated, replacement laughter has nothing to do with the operation of the intellect, does not indicate any reasoning, sense of taste remains dormant. I think this is a capitulation of reflective consciousness, and maybe even something more. While at the basic level, laughter is a reflex rather than a reflection, in the case of virtual reality we have to deal even with the resignation of the human reflex. If we could look at such situation from the outside, from the perspective of a *figure* staring at the screen, it is a *figure* that is being "laught by" this screen. Such *figure* reminds the human body without consciousness, a machine for the reception of signals - something worthy of our laughter.

The quoted example is universal and applies to the majority of those who are consumers of television production. However, to increase contrasts and to sharpen the features of this phenomenon, we can confront the virtual reality set with the reality of authoritarian Romania under Nicolae Ceausescu¹⁵. Norman Manea, a Romanian writer who emigrated from the country in the end-stage of the dictatorship, in his collection of essays on past

times, described Ceausescu as a clown¹⁶. And as Bakhtin (under the authoritarian regime pilgrimage laughter becomes the action of expanding, even for a moment, the personal sphere of freedom of the people), Manea writes: "every year we celebrated the day of his birth, organized on a massive scale, grotesque ceremonies, pompous, solemn and provincial. Even thousands of policemen laughed at them waiting in rows to suppress possible riots or laugh"¹⁷. What was threatening, was laughter out of place, laughing at the wrong time, one that can catalyze aggression. It is increasingly evident that the reversed laughter is the fear that, in certain conditions, laughter can mean terror, and cheers could be combustible dust for subversive activities. Hence tyrants take care of careful directing "spontaneous" fun. In any conditions, spontaneity, laughter can be turned into an automatic process of collective hard time. Norman Manea describes a personal encounter with Ceausescu, when after returning home from the police station, where he had to register typewriter, came out onto the balcony apartment, alarmed by the sirens of police cars. The street was passing cavalcade of limousines carrying the Clown on an unannounced visit to the construction of the White Palace. Dictator began an inspection, around him shook swarm of architects, engineers, sculptors and service. On the balconies of nearby houses turned out people from government buildings. As Manea notes, a visit was not announced, it has not been prepared. The writer observed the situation from his balcony and noticed: "For a moment we did not know what to expect from the crowd. After a while, some began to clap not shout, not complain or curse, oh no, they clapped! True, it was only a single round of applause, sleepy

¹⁴ ibidem, pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ If you get the impression that this arrangement implies congruence of virtual reality and authoritarian, this impression is correct. A feature of authoritarianism or totalitarianism is to create a world of fiction, in which citizens-subjects are placed. The world of authoritarian fiction involves reversing the order of importance where words mean the opposite or remain deprived of the labeled (Lenin and the Bolshevik press organ called "Truth"). Fiction is also the main structural component of the virtual world, in which there is a semantic confusion. Simulating simulation separates significant from the signified, which makes the possibility of any syntax.

¹⁶ Manea N. O kłownach. Dyktator i artysta, Sejny 2001.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 66.

habit, an automatic reaction to the ritual, which entered them in the blood from the first circus performances. Conventional applause, but still spontaneous, not least under the pressure of the police as usual, only out of fear of a friend, perhaps in front of a neighbor"¹⁸. The situation described in the conditions of Romanian authoritarianism shows specific inversion on laughter. First of, laughter here is an expression of extreme conformism - one that I am interesting in. This is no ordinary normalizing conformity - the one that sets limits, but allows people to negotiate. It is laughter, which is an expression of its dark reverse - fear. It seems to me that it could also be a fear of neighbor or colleague. This "joyous" applause is automatic, but this automatism takes place in the field of artificial spontaneity and anxiety. The reaction described meet their opposites - the spontaneity and automatism. If we assume that the essence of humor lies in imposing rigidity and repeatability to what is human, and therefore inherently flexible, people clapping on the balconies and the streets of Bucharest laugh at themselves over each other, but it was a laughter, which contorted his face into a painful grimace.

With this example, we have approached closer to the point where laughter can mean extreme dehumanization. Generally, it can be said that the mentioned laughter is *de facto* a gesture of self-destruction, unreasoning or hopelessness. This can be self-annihilation in an individual sense, or in a group context, where extreme assimilation is extreme alienation. Let us now consider the example where dehumanization reaches its end.

At a time when in the Soviet Union Gorbachev decreed perestroika, Belarusian journalist Svetlana Aleksijevič began working on a collection of reports, which

later appeared under the title "Cynkovije malchiki"¹⁹. It is a collection of interviews with participants and families of fallen participants of Soviet-Afghan War. Aleksijevič took traumatic topic for the citizens of a collapsing empire, and the idea of collecting materials on the subject required at the time of great courage. In fact, such choice could be a direct threat to the life of the writer. Nevertheless, the book was created. Aleksijevič shows in it, sometimes in a very drastic way, the complex picture of the Soviet military intervention. The whole is made of dozens of individual voices, arranged in a polyphonic accusation of a senseless war. Here is a fragment of an interview with private, serving grenade gunner: "We shot in this direction, which we were told. I was taught to shoot, where you're told. I shot, I did not regret it. I could kill the child. There, they fought us all: men, women, old men, children. Column goes by kishlak, the first motor car going deaf, the driver exits, lifts the flap and the ten-year-old child - knife him in the back. Where the heart is. The soldier fell on the engine. We turned the kishlak into dust. Everyone was trying to survive". After a moment, he continues; "I wanted to live. I never wanted to live like this, as then. You come back from combat, laughing. I've never laughed like there. Old jokes attended first grade". The Soviet soldiers who fought in this war were often nineteen years old, without preparation, and frequently without the personal consent sent to Afghanistan. In the abovementioned relationship, the rules in force in the war, and perhaps even the entire ruling system put them in a position of passive performers of orders. A young boy, we would say - a high school stu-

¹⁹ Aleksijevič S., Toy soldiers, Wrocław 2007. Polish translation may be misleading. The original title *Cynkovije malchiki* refers to the fact that the bodies of fallen soldiers were transported from Afghanistan to the USSR sealed in zinc coffins.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 80.

dent, was subject to total objectivity by assigning him functions of imperfect killing machine. Equipped with the machine gun, they received orders not to think, and thus disable a critical function of the intellect, which could make the differentiation of its activities. Dehumanized soldiers saw their enemies as objects without personal characteristics, age, gender. Therefore this depictions of the situation after the fight, during which the children were killed, contain the reactions of laughter. Here we can see the moment in which humor turns into a tragedy. I think it's because the deep scene of the Afghan war, when neither party is no longer the actors, and their places are occupied by mechanical dummies. Laughter is not so much coming out of the hollow human body, whether it is a gesture that expresses the fear of the outside or what is inside. In this tragic situation, laughter also receives the remnants of humanity object annihilation. It is as if a gun stopped the vital functions of the object, and the laughter would erase its importance. Along with the laughter disappears Afghan child, but also disappears Soviet soldier. That laughter is only clear image of sound, totally irrelevant.

Conclusions

Presented examples shows the different facets and meanings that can be identified in extreme situations, but which combines the topic of laughter. Intuitively positively evaluated gesture of laughter, as a reaction to the comic situation is not just muscular automatism. As one can see, the social function of laughter situates it in a position of adjusting mechanism. Laughter is also the human response, an example which shows how the realm of aesthetics combines with the sphere of ethics. The question is, how laughter of Polish students connects with the presented examples?

It seems to me that laughter in response to the abuse of the teacher reveals many elements present in the abovementioned examples. Certainly, it was an expression of conformity within a class, the duty and proof that you are not alienated from the group of colleagues. However, in the case of rape, with which we are dealing, conformism is totalizing, for it is the conformism bonding group of people glaringly violate accepted norms of behavior towards a teacher, but also in general to another man. The object of violence was both a teacher and in both cases the comments emphasized the passivity and lack of adequate response from his side. What in this case could mean the adequacy of the response? How could the teacher react to such behavior outside ineffective admonition, verbal reprimand hitting the void? Passivity of the teachers in this situation can certainly be interpreted as a reinforcement of Bergsonian "numbness", which is the essence of humor. When removing the reaction of teachers from the context of ethics we can say that their behavior was unsuitable to the situation, even comical. Laughter, as a reaction to stiffen teacher catalyzed the aggressive impulses, which led to the violation of physical integrity and to impose on the head trash. It seems to me that laughter in this situation was an expression of dehumanization. Teacher as martyr, almost passive object of group aggression with strong sexual connotation, was thus obliterated, a basket covered his face, as if annihilating his identity. Surrounded by the chair behind the desk, the only sign of his activity was a function of view. At the moment, the teacher stopped to see if he ceased to exist at all. In connection with what has been said, in the face of dehumanizing laugh of teenage aggressors, I believe that the only response that would be correct, would be a gesture of laughter from the teacher.