

KRYSTIAN LUPA AND THE POP CULTURE ICONS, I.E. *PERSONA*. MARILYN AND THE MYTHICAL BODY IN FLAMES

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"In the midst of fire, death ceases to be death. This death is the least solitary, it has a taste and a cosmic dimension in the eyes of the lustful [fire]"¹

Marilyn/Reinterpretation

The premiere of the play *Persona. Marilyn* took place at the Dramatic Theatre of the City of Warsaw on the 18th of April, 2009. The director, Krystian Lupa, planned to create a series of performances under the title *Persona/Triptych*. A play devoted to Marilyn Monroe inaugurated the series, while subsequent performances were to be devoted to Simone Weil and George Gurdjieff. In the end, only the play dedicated to the Armenian philosopher did not come to fruition. The purpose of the planned triptych was not to stage the biographies of the above-mentioned figures, nor to present the hitherto undisclosed truth about their lives, but to present a variation on their personalities.² The director notes that the idea for the series of performances was the result

¹ W. Augustyn, *Gastona Bachelarda psychoanaliza ognia* [en. Gaston Bachelard's psychoanalysis of fire], "Znak" [en. Sign] 1971, no. 199, p. 130.

² The performance went down in the history of Polish theater. This is evidenced not only by the numerous awards granted to its creators (including "Paszport Polityki" [en. Polityka's Passport Award] 2009 for Sandra Korzeniak for the role of Marilyn; an award for best actress for Sandra Korzeniak and a special award for Krystian Lupa for his original production *Persona. Marilyn* at the 16th National Competition for the Production of Polish Contemporary Drama Play), but there is more. The strength of the impact the play has had on theatrical culture is evidenced by the fact that a play referring to Lupa's iconic work has also been produced – *Persona*.

of several inspirations. On the one hand, he “stole” the idea from Bergman’s *Persona* (he intended to show an actor at a turning point in the development of his or her personality, in the irreversible process of transformation), while on the other hand, he was inspired by Andy Warhol’s film work.

When the American visual artist first turned to film, he did not intend to follow the script, but to use the camera to record creations of reality. Actors, very much inspired by Warhol, played out psychodramas in which their “self” was revealed in an intensified, somewhat more interesting form. The movies by the American filmmaker became a space for self-discovery, in which the actors’ personas “blossomed”.³ According to the director, who is fascinated by Warhol’s cinematic oeuvre, personality is not what someone has already developed in themselves, but rather that which is not yet in them – it is what a person dreams of and aspires to.⁴ Therefore, when telling the story of Marilyn, Krystian Lupa shows her in a situation in which she strives to fulfil her dream, in the midst of her creative process. According to the director, when actors embody a specific character, they “expel” it from themselves, and if they do not play a role that is meaningful to them, they carry it within themselves, that character enters them.⁵ In Lupa’s opinion, out of all “her characters”, the one that Marilyn was the most was Grushenka, since she never got to play her. Correspondingly, he portrays the actress precisely at the moment of her attempts at transformation. Monroe plays the role of Grushenka from *The Brothers Karamazov*, a character that would demonstrate her creative potential and influence the reinterpretation of her myth. The actress locks herself in an old film production hall to try to step into the role of Dostoevsky’s heroine, while attempting to be reborn as an artist. The play – as the director envisaged it – was not as much intended to be a vivisection of the actress’s downfall as a representation of the relationship between Norma Jeane’s demise and the “creative delirium” that MM essentially was.

Ciało Bożeny [en. *Persona. Bożena’s Body*] (directed by Jędrzej Piaskowski, Zagłębie Theatre in Sosnowiec).

³ A.R. Burzyńska, Krystian Lupa, *Kto inspiruje? Tadeusz Kantor!* [en. *Who inspires? Tadeusz Kantor!*]. A conversation produced as part of series *Biografie w teatrze* [en. *Biographies in Theatre*], Cricoteka 2014.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

In the collective consciousness, Marilyn Monroe epitomizes a reduced femininity, confined to that of the body. She became a symbol of a peculiar type of beauty (*glamour*) – a combination of the girl next door with an inaccessible object of desire. She was (as an imaginative construct) an ideal of physicality that radiated sex appeal and, at the same time, an object of consumption. It is not an exaggeration to say that she dominated the social imagination and became a mythical figure. Marilyn is still a story, an icon, who has been abstracted from the real person, idealized, enclosed in her face reproduced on various products, and therefore ceases to be perceived as a real person.⁶ It is not without reason, then, that Lupa introduces the Jung's persona⁷ – a mask – into the title, which in this case leads to the destruction of the person – Norma Jeane.

The director does not attempt to discover what lies behind the famous actress's mask, nor does he attempt to add to her myth, but also he does not he cut himself off from what influences Marilyn's construction of herself as a story and essentially recycles elements of the manner she was commonly perceived. The play includes the motif of physical violence Monroe had experienced,⁸ emphasizes her self-destructive attitude (drug and alcohol addiction) and, perhaps most significantly, her peculiar blend of sensuality and vulnerability. The director seeks to capture an intrinsic part of her personality – her inner weakness, shyness and insecurity.⁹

The film production hall is meant to be a refuge to provide the artist with peace and quiet, a place to work on her role and herself. What constitutes the center of events during the play, is a huge table, which also serves as a bed, a set for the photo shoot, as well as an interior stage on which Marilyn “performs”.¹⁰ It is full of objects used for staging – there is a tape recorder from which Marilyn plays a musical background for her improvisations, costumes and props for posing in front of both the photographer's camera

⁶ Cf. *ibidem*.

⁷ Krystian Lupa understands the concept of persona broadly, as both a mask and a real personality.

⁸ Biographers have written about domestic violence in Marilyn Monroe's life during her relationship with her second husband, that is, in 1954, many years before the actress's death. See S. Churchwell, *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe*, transl. R. Waliś, Warsaw 2018, pp. 65-70.

⁹ Cf. A.R. Burzyńska, K. Lupa, *Kto inspiruje? ...* [en. Who inspires? ...] op. cit.

¹⁰ Tamże.

and the film camera. The actress's character, played by Sandra Korzeniak, oscillates between acting and the reality of the film production hall, between Grushenka's life story and her own fate. The world of stage fiction blends with the real one, the actors sometimes become spectators. Some of the characters watch Norma Jeane's rehearsals from a spectator's perspective – her mentor, Paula (Katarzyna Figura), sits across the table, with her back to the audience, to observe her. She is also followed by the aforementioned Andre, the actress's photographer (played by Piotr Skiba) and Greenson (Władysław Kowalski), her psychoanalyst.

The structure of the play is quite simple. The performance consists of meetings between Marilyn and people close to her: the aforementioned mentor and confidante, Paula, a photographer and psychoanalyst, and the guard of the film production hall, Cerberus (Marcin Bosak), who becomes the star's lover and friend. The guardian of the hall visits Marilyn driven by curiosity, a fascination with the actress. Conversely, Paula Strasberg, Ralph Greenson and André de Dienes want to drag the star out of the film production hall, to "reclaim the body", which brings them profit. For as well as telling the story of the artist, the director also wants to look at Marilyn's mythical body – the body that had already been exploited before her death, just like her psyche. Krystian Lupa attempts to reinterpret it, as Agata Łuksza writes: "it is an undisciplined body, isolated from *glamor*, formless, spilled under a wide jumper or squeezed too hard by tight clothing. The actress's body in the play is not an aestheticized nudity, a product for sale, but attempts to be an image of the spirit"¹¹. When she is stripped of her elegant superficiality, when her nudity ceases to be appealing in the way that the characters played by Marilyn are appealing, it evokes sympathy rather than excitement.

An important part of the play depicting Marilyn's body, and at the same time foreshadowing the actress's death, is the photographic session, which takes place when Marilyn's aforementioned favorite photographer, Andre, visits her in the hall. The session seems somewhat subversive, a kind of play on *glamour*, a reference to the actress's earlier, real-life photographs, and at the same time a prefiguration of Marilyn's death. Right at the entrance, the character played by Piotr Skiba begins to photograph the drunk actress,

¹¹ A. Łuksza, *Glamour, kobiecość, widowisko: aktorka jako obiekt pożądania* [en. *Glamour, Femininity, Spectacle: the Actress as an Object of Desire*], Warsaw 2016, p. 110.



Fig. 1. A shot from the recording of the play *Persona. Marilyn* (the Dramatic Theater 2009, directed by Krystian Lupa). Marilyn Monroe (Sandra Korzeniak) in a shiny dress referring to the authentic Marilyn Monroe outfit

her half-naked, weakened body writhing on a table in bed sheets, surrounded by empty bottles. With this scene, the director alludes to André de Dienes' authentic photographs from 1953, later collectively titled *Marilyn Monroe. Breakfast in Bed*. But if we consider that in Lupa's production the photographer visits her before her death, we can see the analogy with Bert Stern's session, taken at the Bel-Air Hotel in Los Angeles two months before the actress's death. The photographer's album of images from the last session, titled *The Last Sitting*, was published in 1982. At one point during the shoot, Marilyn remarks that she will look "a bit like in a dissection room".¹² This phrase has become somewhat of a foreshadowing of "the end of her body". When Andre arranges the hair of the actress lying on her back so that it reveals her face, it is reminiscent of the actual last photographs of the artist – taken by a police photographer just after she was found dead.

The sexual and erotic nature of fire

In the finale of the performance, Krystian Lupa kills Marilyn in fire. The last scene of the play (which, much like the entire theatrical story about Monroe, is a mixture of fact and fantasy about the actress) cannot be unequivocally

¹² K. Lupa, *Persona. Marilyn* (p. 1), the Dramatic Theater 2009.

interpreted. The display of a burning body at the back of the scene is encased in a series of gestures and references to the sacred symbolism of fire, the reading of which sometimes leads to contradictory conclusions. At the same time, the director makes excellent use of the potential of this natural element and its multidimensionality.¹³ This scene is one of the most significant parts of the performance. It points to the staged attempt at yet another transformation of the actress, shows the duality of the figure that was Marilyn, and at the same time metaphorizes her death.

Marilyn Monroe is rather associated with the erotic element of water¹⁴; it is not without reason that she was shown in films and photographed during photo shoots surrounded by the sea or on the beach. As Marek Bieńczyk points out:

MM is close to the water, she is persistently compared to the new Venus or Aphrodite, so many times she is seen by rivers, streams or emerging naked from a pool. George Barris' last, simply extraordinary photographs – in the summer of 1962, moments before her death. The Pacific Ocean is skimming and wetting her feet – they show her on the beach in a skimpy swimsuit [...].¹⁵

However, Lupa chooses to end his variation on Norma Jeane's last days with her death amidst the flames. Marilyn slowly, hesitantly steps out onto the stage (which is a film set) in a silver, tight-fitting dress. Paula Strasberg, somewhat frightened by the actress's mental state, tries to prepare her for the scene and begins to strip her of her spectacular creation. Marilyn refuses to do so, tries to cover her nakedness with the rolled up dress. She doesn't want to go out on set, screaming that she doesn't know if she's developing as a person or if what she's doing is good for her. The film crew encourages her; "you're more important than Jesus!" – screams the mentor. "Nonsense, that's not true. You're telling them it's all true! You have to constantly embellish your humanity", Gabriel Balthazar scolds her.

¹³ Cf. M. Koziół, J. Szdura, *Ogień* [en. Fire], in: *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych* [en. Dictionary of Stereotypes and Folk Symbols], ed. by J. Bartmiński, S. Niebrzegowska, Lublin 1996, pp. 264-300.

¹⁴ G. Bachelard, *Water and dreams*, in *Wyobraźnia poetycka. Wybór pism* [en. The Poetic Imagination. A Selection of Works], transl. H. Chudak, A. Tatarkiewicz, Warsaw 1975, p. 119.

¹⁵ M. Bieńczyk, *Dziewczyna na moście* [en. Girl on the Tridge], *Gazeta Wyborcza* [en. The Electoral Gazette], 20-21.09.2014, pp. 32-34.



Fig. 2. A shot from the recording of the play *Persona. Marilyn* (the Dramatic Theater 2009, directed by Krystian Lupa). Marilyn's body is laid on the "altar"

Marilyn finally gives up, lets them lead her to a huge table, which now looks like a sacrificial altar – it is covered with a white tablecloth. Around her, women in headscarves help the actress lie down on the table, arrange her body. Above her, the guard working in the film production hall hovers on a tall, double-rail clothes rack. His outstretched arms and head tilting to the side evoke the image of the crucified Jesus Christ. The lights go out. For a moment, we see nothing but the image of the lying actress projected at the back of the stage. The light which produces this image illuminates the figure of Cerberus hanging from the rack. Marilyn begins to burn. It may have been a spontaneous combustion, but the viewer does not know if the culprits of the fire are not the crew members. The camera watching Marilyn rotates to show in the background of the scene the audience – perhaps the tragedy of this victim is to blame on all the audience members preying on her body?

The death scene undoubtedly alludes to Marilyn's last two appearances: both in film and in public – the famous performance of Happy Birthday at President John F. Kennedy's birthday party. A kind of quote from this event is the actress's creation – so tight that it had to be sewn on Marilyn. Lupa writes in his journal about this outfit as a dress imitating nudity, a camp creation situated between pornography and kitsch. These types of creations are Nessus'

shirts, which irritate both the one who wears them and the one who looks at them. The sparkly dress, according to Lupa, is even a “pre-eruptive” symbol.¹⁶

Agata Łuksza also writes about the extraordinary nature of Marilyn’s image during this performance:

For a brief moment, Marilyn belongs unreservedly to all those watching her, giving herself to them completely, existing as a materialized fantasy of the female body, as a spectacle of sensuality and carnality. In a shimmering sequined dress with luscious platinum hair, she radiates in an inhuman manner.¹⁷

With the body in the center of the performance, which functions in the collective imagination as an icon of glamor and an object of social desire, it is impossible not to associate its finale with a fire symbolizing a love relationship, being “the fruit of an erotic experience, a child born from rubbing two pieces of wood together”.¹⁸ Watching the burning flesh is, in a way, a sexual act.¹⁹ The actress, positioned horizontally, is “devoured” by the vertical flames, connoting an animalistic nature after all.²⁰ Perhaps, then, the fire consumes Marilyn as did her spectators, admirers and collaborators.

At this point, it is worth recalling another important element of the final scene, which could be an argument for an erotic interpretation of the fire motif in the play. In the projected image, Marilyn is on fire, lying in the flames, but she is not burned or charred. If we assume that the body is not affected in any way, the conflagration can be linked to the property of fire that Bachelard writes about, emphasizing that in alchemical thinking about this natural element there is a distinction between masculinity and femininity of fire. The masculine fire is the one that draws from the depths of matter and penetrates it, while the feminine fire merely scorches, leaving its depths unexplored. This is also how Marilyn remains – an unknown mystery.

Another fact of Monroe’s life to which the director refers is the aforementioned final appearance in film. The staged episode on the set is a variation on

¹⁶ K. Lupa, *Persona*, Warsaw 2009, pp. 84–85.

¹⁷ A. Łuksza, *Glamour, kobiecość, widowisko: aktorka jako obiekt pożądania*, op. cit., p. 110.

¹⁸ G. Bachelard, *Wyobraźnia poetycka. Wybór pism*, op. cit., p. 235.

¹⁹ W. Augustyn, *Gastona Bachelarda psychoanaliza ognia* [en. Gaston Bachelard’s Psychoanalysis of Fire], op. cit., p. 35.

²⁰ G. Bachelard, *The verticality of flames*, in idem, *The Flame of the Candle*, transl. J. Rogoziński, Gdansk 1996.

the filming of one of the scenes in *Something's Got to Give* (1962, directed by George Cukor) – and the most daring in Marilyn's career. The scene in question is the one in which Ellen, played by Marilyn, bathes naked in the pool and then sits on the shore with her back to the camera. The film was supposed to be a low-budget production with a naked *glamor* goddess to lure cinema-goers. According to witness accounts, this bit was essentially undirected, relying on Marilyn's grace and talent. In the American production, the actress does a striptease, while in the play she is stripped by force, pushed out to act. Lupa thus depicts the scene from the set quite the opposite – as if the actress was no longer able to play with her body. In spite of everything, she gives herself into the hands of the film-makers, offers her body and allows herself to be laid on the “sacrificial altar”. The director thus suggests that the title of the last, unfinished film with Monroe could be perversely interpreted as, “something to offer” – perhaps the remainder of “MM's” life.²¹

Transfer to the sacred zone

Burning Marilyn on the “altar” is undoubtedly meant to perversely allude to the actress's functioning in the sphere of the “pop culture sacrum”, treating her as a modern deity. In many cultures, fire is an intermediary between the profane and the sacred. One burns whatever cannot be discarded, something that has a sacred dimension. Fire is often described as a “sensitive” element that is easily offended or angered, which is why, in pre-Christian times, fire was lit with a magical ritual – incantations were said to prevent the element from being temperamental.²² A character who already functions during her lifetime as someone “more important than Jesus” perhaps should not die in an ordinary way – by decomposing in the ground. It seems that the actress identified with an element of some kind of divinity should be absorbed by a natural element. As Teresa Paszkowska writes – the elements, through a kind of resemblance to the Almighty, provide a useful symbol for expressing the mystery of the human encounter with God.²³ Marilyn beco-

²¹ Cf. R. Węgrzyniak, *Całopalenie* [en. Incineration], “Polityka” [en. Politics Weekly], 1.04.2010.

²² A. Szyjewski, *Religia Słowian* [en. Religion of the Slavs], Cracow 2003, p. 104.

²³ T. Paszkowska, *Żywioły jako środek wyrazu dla doświadczeń duchowych* [en. Elements as a Means of Expression for Spiritual Experiences], in: *Obraz i żywioły* [en. Image and Elements], eds. M.U. Mazurczak, M. Żak, Lublin 2007, p. 37.

mes a transcendence, which is suggested through vertical flames.²⁴ Before she begins to burn in *Persona*, she is properly prepared. The body, arranged with care by the bizarre priestesses, burns on a specially prepared platform, with an imitation of a cross stretched over it, which additionally, by moving its arms, connotes a bird, which, in combination with the altar and the flames, resembles a dove – the symbol of the Holy Spirit. The ritualistic nature of this scene may certainly be associated with other “transformation sessions” in Lupa’s theater, conducted by some guru, in which the protagonist changes his or her state of consciousness or experiences some kind of illumination.²⁵ Interpretations of the last scene as another stage in the transformation of the character that was Marilyn are also motivated by the predominance in the performance of the lying, horizontal position, which has a special significance for the director:

In Lupa’s texts we repeatedly encounter the metaphor of a lying position. It is the starting point for an anthropological-philosophical reflection on the spiritual-bodily condition of a human being, whose media are, of course, the actors. The lying position encompasses the entire spectrum of experiences and “adventures of the body” that humans encounter in the course of their lives, from birth to death. Lupa attributes a very high status to this universal position, referring to the words of the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who explores the mysteries of the Existence.

“The lying position – it is a sacred position. The greatest work is done in this very position” – these words recur like a mantra in Krystian Lupa’s plays and texts. In the lying position we sleep and dream, levitate and make love, get sick, suffer and die. Lupa makes these non-public and intimate activities (according to the accepted social norm) to be central events of his performances, exposing them to the public eye.²⁶

²⁴ See G. Bachelard, *The Flame of a Candle*, op. cit., p. 56.

²⁵ R. Węgrzyniak, *Całopalenie*, op. cit.

²⁶ A. Zalewska-Uberman, *Słownik Krystiana Lupy. Perspektywa reżysera* [en. Krystian Lupa’s Dictionary. A Director’s Perspective], „Didaskalia – Gazeta Teatralna” [en. Stage Directions – Theatrical Gazette] No. 96, p. 26.

Sacrifice and purification

Marilyn is thus perhaps sacrificed, on an altar. The burning of the human body in Christianity was something originally forbidden, whereas burnt offerings were desirable. Consequently, Marilyn burning on the altar becomes, in this interpretation, reduced to the body itself, as if she had no soul at all. However, given the presence of the “crucified” Cerberus, it is worth noting that in Christian culture the fire burning at the tabernacle is an eternal fire, symbolizing the presence of Christ.²⁷ Perhaps Lupa also uses this element to emphasize a kind of immortality of her body rather than her person.

Marilyn’s ritual burning is also a sacrifice by the actress and of the actress. The act of an artist’s total, self-sacrificing commitment to an art or role is a theme often taken up by theater creators:

The notion of theatrical ritual is rooted in the “ceremonial” understanding of the art of theater, which already has a long and rich tradition in Polish theater, taken from the tradition of the European one. Representatives of ritual theater: Antonin Artaud, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook or Jerzy Grotowski, tried to transplant the idea of an actor-sacrifice maker to the theatrical ground and treated the theatrical performance as: a celebration, a sacrificial mass or a religious mystery.²⁸

In the “ritualistic” interpretation of the show’s finale, the purifying function of fire is also of significance. In Christian symbolism, it also has positive purifying and burning properties (the fires of the purgatory, the fire of the Holy Spirit),²⁹ therefore perhaps the burning of Marilyn was meant to liberate her, to cleanse her soul from her body, i.e. to burn out what is the source of her suffering.³⁰

In the words of Gaston Bachelard, fire is both an ambivalent and a privileged phenomenon:

²⁷ See T. Paszkowska, *Żywioły jako środek wyrazu...[en. Elements as a Means of Expression...]*, op. cit., p. 39.

²⁸ A. Zalewska-Uberman, *Słownik Krystiana Lupy...*, op. cit., p. 24.

²⁹ Por. T. Paszkowska, *Żywioły jako środek wyrazu...*, op. cit., p. 44; D. Frostner, *OSB, Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej* [en. *The world of Christian symbolism*], Warszawa 1990, p. 70.

³⁰ Cf. E.B. Tylor, *Cywilizacja pierwotna* [en. *Primal civilisation*], Warsaw 1998, p. 357; J. Bartmiński, *Słownik stereotypów i symbolów ludowych: kosmos, niebo, światła niebieskie, ogień, kamienie*, op. cit.



Fig. 3. A shot from the recording of the play *Persona. Marilyn* (the Dramatic Theater 2009, directed by Krystian Lupa). Cerberus ,crucified' on a rack. In the background of the scene, a film is projected with Marilyn burning

Fire is distinguished by the fact that it manifests and reconciles in itself contradictory qualities: it is a pleasure and a torment, it burns in hell and in heaven, it is intimate and universal at the same time. [...] Of all that exists in nature, it is the strongest and clearest reconciliation of good and evil.³¹

Krystian Lupa's play *Persona. Marilyn* approaches this element in a similar way. He uses it ambiguously and perversely. On the one hand, the scene of the bizarre burnt offering is a reference to the understanding of Marilyn in terms of a deity who (as a contemporary myth) must live on after her death, while on the other hand it carries many negative connotations: it suggests that her person has been reduced solely to the body, and the burning is to be a punishment inflicted by the film community for trying to go beyond her own mask. The fire simultaneously "sanctifies" the figure that Marilyn was and consumes her body for the "sin" she committed against her creators. The incineration in the finale serves as the final point in the play about "suffering from one's own corporeality", so the scene seems to be cathartic – Marilyn frees herself from the source of her pain: her own body.

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Krystian Lupa and the Pop Culture Icons, i.e. *Persona*. *Marilyn and the Mythical Body in Flames*

The article presents an analysis of Krystian Lupa's performance "Persona. Marilyn" in terms of the symbolism of fire that appears in the play. The play itself is a fantasy about the last days of Marilyn Monroe's life, who, through her work on the planned role of Grushenka in *The Brothers Karamazov*, intends to find her identity and rediscover herself as an actress. The key to interpreting the play lies in the final scene of the performance, in which Marilyn Monroe burns laid on a catafalque. The text constitutes an attempt to flesh out possible interpretations of this scene, using references to the broad symbolism of fire in culture, particularly based on the thought of Gaston Bachelard (fire as a transfer to the sacred zone, sacrifice, purification, destruction, desire).

Keywords: Marilyn Monroe, Krystian Lupa, Gaston Bachelard, *Persona. Marilyn*, fire symbolism

Słowa kluczowe: Marilyn Monroe, Krystian Lupa, Gaston Bachelard, *Persona Marilyn*, symbolika ognia

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