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Orcid: 0009-0004-1616-6117

## The Land of the Sad Songs: Belarusian National Identity through Polish Documentary films in the 1930s

### Abstract:

Belarusian national identity is a taboo subject in Belarus nowadays, unless identity is understood in a Soviet/Lukashenko way. So for Belarusians, who have gone through national destruction more than once, this issue is not just a usual research topic but a crucial question that can contribute to national survival.

In the 1920s-30s a part of Belarusian lands belonged to Poland and Polish filmmakers shot some documentaries there, which turned out to be the sole materials since whatever was taken in Soviet Belarus at this time, got burned later. This research aims to determine what these visual materials communicate, how they can add to the Belarusian identity and why it is important for modern Belarus and its cinema.

### Key words:

Documentary, Belarusian cinema, national and cultural identity.

In the period between the First and the Second World Wars a part of current Belarusian lands belonged to Poland and Polish filmmakers shot some documentaries there, which turned out to be supposedly the sole footage of Belarusian life at that time since whatever was taken in Soviet Belarus, got burned later during the Second World War. This research aims to determine what these visual materials communicate, how they can add to the Belarusian identity and why it is important for modern Belarus and its cinema.

Belarusian national identity now – either in films, or in general – can be characterized (using the expressions of Polish and Ukrainian researchers in different contexts) as “uncertainty horror” (Kita, 2006, p. 18), “the national sparsity” (Кісь, 1998, p. 40) or at best as «an identity suspension” (Malicka, 2006, p. 51). Belarusian philosophers and writers are more categorical in their definitions. They speak about “the assimilative bog” (Лыч, 2015, с. 4), “the nation on a fault between being and non-being” (Бабкоў, 2004, p. 170), or even about “the suicidal, national destruction society” (Пазьняк, 1991, p. 109).

This state of affairs has been forming during the last few centuries, when not just once did Belarusians go through national destruction due to tragic historical events and endless devastating wars, mostly with Muscovy. While some other nations, like Poland, formed their national states in the end and later on were included into “the system of European democratic civilization”, they guaranteed themselves “the irreversibility of the national existence process”. On the contrary, Belarus stayed under the Russian Empire first and under the influence of Post-Soviet Russia afterwards. So not having gone through “the compulsory national-state stabilization”, it has come to national degradation. Its national psychological and ideological development was slowed down. Belarus was pushed to “the relict level of the ethnic-local consciousness” (Пазьняк, 1991, p. 107).

After the fall of the Soviet Union about 30 years ago Belarus received independence. Still 29 post-Soviet-one-president-ruling years have almost completed the ruination of Belarusian national identity having transformed the state into a kind of an island among other countries where the concept of what is “national” has a specific sense, different from what is usually understood under this term. Now, since “Belarus is a colony although not in the metaphorical sense at all” (Дубавец, 2003, p. 129), everything that can be considered «national”, is perceived in modern Belarus as «oppositional” and is being repressed and persecuted relentlessly - with this process having gained in intensity lately. In that way, any real analysis of the national identity is a taboo subject in Belarus nowadays, unless identity is understood in a revived Soviet/Lukashenko way. That is why this identity issue in any sphere is not just a usual research topic for Belarusians but a crucial question that can contribute to national survival.

Belarusian poet I. Babkou, writing about genealogy of the Belarusian idea, uses the notion of “Cultural Archive of a Nation”, by which he means “a complicated and polyfunctional cultural and ideological complex... , which deliberately accumulates “national” myths, projects, prejudices, strategies that take as their prerequisite a potential or real existence of this nation” (Бабокoў, 1996, p. 40). Belarusian philosopher Ales Ancipienka suggests a similar concept. According to Ancipienka, the real national spiritual revival is connected with the appearance of a National Text. Under this term Ancipienka understands “any semantic structure, which reflects chronotype, worldview and character of the given nation” (Анціпенка, 2003, p.43), whereas chronotype for him is “a certain time model, through which the peculiarities of different ethno-cultural formations manifest themselves” (Анціпенка, 2003, p.41). In the opinion of Ancipienka, the National Text creates a cultural space for the nation’s functioning. It also accumulates the cultural experience of a nation. So with every new generation a nation has an opportunity for self-regeneration through reading of this Text. In this regard, a hypothetical addition of any new material, for example, found-footage, to the Belarusian National Text/Cultural Archive, its inclusion into the Belarusian background, means a step to the renewal of Belarusian identity.

As a result, the Polish film series under review showing Belarusian Polesie – marshy woodlands in the southern-western part of contemporary Belarus – provides an essential insight into people’s lives of that time and could now be valuable material for a poetic film representing a collective image of Belarusians.

Polish filmmakers M. Emmer and J. Maliniak, the authors of the abovementioned documentary series, are known mostly for the fiction film by A. Ford “*Legion of the street*” made in 1932, for which Emmer wrote the script, whereas Maliniak was the DOP. This film stood out from the other fiction productions of the thirties: it did not have a commercial approach, which was typical for the period. In 1935 a crew consisting of the director M. Emmer, cameraman J. Maliniak and an assistant took up a non-fiction project and spent some months shooting in numerous barely accessible places, mostly forests, bogs, villages, in small remote factories and by rivers.

These lands, now Belarusian, a Polish agricultural periphery in the thirties, were then considered a neglected and underdeveloped region. For example, L. Grodzicki, the editor of “*Yearbook of the Eastern Lands 1937*”, mentioned two types of Poland – Poland A and Poland B – clearly connoting the superiority of zone A, with all the Eastern Lands (Kresy Wschodnie) being in part B (Grodzicki, 1936, p. 20). He wrote also that “during the last century these territories were treated as a transitional terrain”, whereas now “the independent Polish state has embraced

the Eastern Lands, destroyed through the war, with their people, exhausted and mostly scattered” (Grodzicki, 1936, p. 3). So Poland set a task of their economic, social and cultural “raising”. According to Grodzicki, “time has come to a stop seeing the Eastern Lands as a poor relation” (Grodzicki, 1936, p. 41). However, (and here the romantic tradition, deeply rooted in Polish culture and thinking, especially at that time, penetrates even applied texts of an economic character), there is “a need to wake up those sleeping”, who are to be involved in the development of the backward lands, yet “this whole great job is still far from being over” (Grodzicki, 1936, p. 3).

After Emmer and Maliniak’s four-month Polesian expedition 25 km of 35-mm film were brought, positive and negative all together, and some documentaries were made. This costly production did not get any institutional support and was organized by the authors at the expense of their private studio “Awangarda”. The films did not just have historical value but also artistic and later on were shown in Poland (for educational means) as well as abroad. One of the most famous films – “*Polesie: Report from the land of the sad songs*” was shown at the International Cinematography Exhibition in Venice and received the Silver Medal there. Yet, financially this project did not bring its authors any profit, and “Awangarda” lost the possibility of further activity.

Unfortunately, just a few films exist now. From Emmer’s series we managed to find “*Polesie: Report from the land of the sad songs*” (16 min) and “*Horodno, the town of clay pots*” (10 min). There is also a 1 min piece “*Water market in Pinsk*” from a newsreel of 1935 belonging to PAT (Polish Telegraph Agency), evidently shot by Emmer’s crew. Another valuable source of information was a diary of the director, published a bit later, who made notes during this memorable trip. One more film on a similar subject shot by PAT in 1938 “*Beauty of our Eastern Lands*” (11 min) contains some short fragments filmed in the same Belarusian territories and in the same style. We consider all this relevant footage as a whole, yet “*Polesie*” is the most representative and significant case, so we will focus our analysis mainly on this film. “*Polesie*” is a sound film (with written commentary, voice over, original music and folk songs from this region), whereas the other three are mute at the moment, the soundtrack of one of them is waiting for its digitalization. The materials are to be found in the National Film Archive in Warsaw and in Wytwornia Filmów Oświatowych in Lodz.

Emmer admitted that the Venetian Medal “was not exclusively our accomplishment” but first of all of “fabulous exotic Polesie” (Emmer, 1936, p. 280). Then, almost 90 years ago, it was an exotic and wild land with another rhythm of life even for Poland, in which it had recently been included and to which it had

belonged for about twenty years. As filmmakers Emmer and Maliniak wanted to depict this peculiar unknown terrain, and as Polish citizens they, of course, perceived these territories as “theirs”, “Polish”. At the same time – and it makes this film material even more important – it involuntarily refers to the foundation of the Belarusian mindset, of its origins.

Belarusian philosopher V. Akudowich writes, “Belarusians as a modern nation have formed entirely in the womb of the Belarusian village” (АКУДОВІЧ, 2008, p. 157). The images of the film represent everyday peasant life – faces, games, work, rituals, customs, material environment, buildings, scenery; most of this was later destroyed by the Soviet authorities or time. We analyze these motion pictures with the following questions in mind: What are the basic structures of Belarusian mentality? How can a national and cultural identity manifest itself through a documentary? What is hidden in these specific shots? Are they just a representation of past reality or does something else lie behind this provincial daily routine and festivities? Do these pictures reveal more for a contemporary viewer than just what they literally demonstrate?

Many definitions of a nation refer to the concept of an independent state, with which its citizens can identify themselves. Yet, this formulation is inapplicable in the case of this Polesian film representation: the territory was really “transitional” – belonged to the Russian Empire, to Poland (at the time of the shootings), to the Soviet Union after the Second World War and for the last thirty years to Belarus, which definitely could not form a strong and clear identity among the residents.

Another definition seems to be more relevant. British historical sociologist A. Smith believes that “at the root of the «national idea» is a certain vision of the world and a certain type of culture. According to this vision, mankind is «really» and «naturally» divided into distinct communities of history and culture, called nations” (Smith, 1979, p. 2).

The most elementary manifestations of an identity can be references to the language of a specific country or certain historical events, situations and political figures. “*Polesie*” has such evident signs as well. From the very beginning the authors adopt the Polish perspective, Polish point of view and try to define the historical context. In his notes Emmer recalls “the bolsheviks’ border” (Emmer, 1936, p. 280). The first caption of the film informs the viewer about “Polesie, the land of Kościuszko and Traugutt”, thus underlining the historical coordinates through mentioning a politician of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Belarusian-Polish-American national hero T. Kościuszko and general R. Trau-

gutt, one of the leaders of the national-liberation rebellion against the Russian Empire in 1863. The next caption refers to “russification”, which the “hard” local resident “could not escape” being in the Russian Empire. These facts and personalities Poles and Belarusians share, it is our common history.

It is worth noting that the “local resident” here is mentioned in the singular form, which denotes the characters of the film as a type, a kind of a collective image. What is more, this “typical representative” is named neither Pole (despite living in the Polish state then), nor Belarusian (who these people actually were) but “Poleshuk” – “a person who lives in the woodlands”. This peculiar definition associating the protagonists exclusively with the place where they reside is a very characteristic trait, another factor designating the Belarusian identity – the so called locality concept (in Belarusian “*tutejšasc*” – from “*tut*” – here). “Locals” or “*tutejšyja*”, according to Russian political scientist A. Akara, are “ethnic Belarusians without a «consolidating» idea, with low national self-conscience”, earlier it concerned uneducated peasants (Акара, 2008, p. 256).

Smith thinks that “Without territory, you cannot build the fraternity and solidarity that the national idea requires. You cannot instill in people a sense of kinship and brotherhood without attaching them to a place that they feel is theirs...” (Smith, 1979, p. 3). For Smith “a close link with soil and territory” is one of “the oldest and most basic forms of human association” (Smith, 1979, p. 160). Yet, in the case of Belarusian mentality, it happened historically that this locality concept reached its hypertrophied level, not just with Poleshuks but with the inhabitants of other regions too. Due to historical disasters, the Belarusian was so often close to elimination that he was bound to develop a protection strategy – this self-definition through locality provided people with a kind of a hiding. Belarusian philologist P. Vasiuchenka names Belarusians “the hobbits of the European forest, who hide in the shadows from themselves” because “it is advantageous for them that their real existence is unnoticeable” (Васючэнка, 2008, p. 108). According to V. Akudovich, through this locality «ethnonym» “our man marked his nature through coordinates in space” and Belarusians (unlike Russians) can consolidate only “through the territory instinct and not through the idea of collective «I» (Акудовіч, 2008, p. 154). Another Belarusian philosopher A. Ancipenka explains this defense mechanism in such a way: being just “local” means for the Belarusian being “a part of this landscape”, “I grow here as grass, or I lie here as a stone”, “what do you want from me? I have no identity”. This locality concept, in the opinion of Ancipenka, is “a kind of answer to the next conqueror that I am not here”, since “any certainty in Belarusian history has always ended very dramatically

or even tragically” (Анціпенка, 2012, p. 59). That is why this director’s definition of his character as “Poleshuk” is very indicative and absolutely natural for the Belarusian nation. On the other hand, Emmer could have used the term “Poleshuk” instead of “Pole” since it was more diplomatic and less obliging – which was understandable in the case of a group of people with a complex history and vague identity.

Moreover, it turned out that the protagonists did not accept even that classification, they were “masking” themselves even further. Emmer writes in his memoirs that he repeatedly asked the characters where exactly their terrain – Polesie – was. All of them kept saying, it was just such and such place, whereas Polesie was not here, somewhere else, farther away, which brought Emmer to the ironic conclusion “that Polesie is nowhere” (Emmer, 1936, p. 280). So, unintentionally, Emmer came across a very characteristic feature immanent of the Belarusian identity.

The reason why this land in the 1930s was so disconnected from other regions of Poland, keeping its wildness and peculiar lifestyle, was its exclusive isolation by natural barriers. Emmer underlines this in different ways. First of all, through the voice-over, which mentions “swampy inaccessible forests”, calling them a “wet Polesian jungle”, stating that this is “the only natural reserve in Europe for numerous elks and wild boars”. The commentary also informs that “tradition and local conditions” cause people to be used here “as a driving force” – we see men on the bank of a river pulling a ferry and boats heavily loaded with timber, on the field plowing with a pair of oxen. In the written text of the film Emmer acknowledges the fact that forests have always been there and now “primitive tar mills arise on uprooted clearings”. In his diary the director mentions “Polesie, backward for years” (Emmer, 1936, p. 279) and “fishermen from a remote wilderness” (Emmer, 1936, p. 274). Actually, in the captions for the film, describing the Poleshuk’s mode of life, Emmer uses the word “primitive” twice, which connotes a bit of a condescending position.

He writes about doing a very difficult job in Pinsk “revealing on screen a fair on water – the only one of its kind” (Emmer, 1936, p. 275). In his diary the author remembers the complicated conditions they were shooting in, such as long distances, thickets, heat, mosquitoes, absence of any benefits of civilization. He recollects that their characters, working in the fields and being thirsty, used to drink water from the puddles on the meadows. Emmer himself did the same and got ill. Still, the most interesting evidence of how intact, wild and impassable this terrain was we found in Emmer’s memoirs where he remembers how naturally his protagonists behaved while being filmed in the episode on haymaking. It

happened not only because they were extremely busy with very hard work. In addition, they actually did not realize what the crew was doing: they had neither seen the filming process before, nor had they ever heard about it.

What the authors do with this subject (as far as we can judge from the incomplete footage having survived up to now) – is not only observe this unique life, calling one of the films from the series a “report”, but they also set a poetic task of generalizing, of creating a kind of epic narration. The protagonists are not specific people with individual features, they are rather types, functions.

Emmer notices that they film “characteristic ways” of fishing, of boatmen pulling the boats and other activities like this (Emmer, 1936, p. 274). He emphasizes this typicality once mentioning his generous tips for the characters “for being extras” (Emmer, 1936, p. 275). (Mentioning this fact in the memoirs can also be considered a bit of a colonial attitude, typical for that time.)

Emmer also describes the efforts the team made to stay unnoticed while filming at the fair in order to avoid people staring into the camera – they covered it with newspapers – and he was satisfied with the result, observing how natural peasants were, “great actors involuntarily” (Emmer, 1936, p. 275). By this he means the filmmakers were trying to capture people at their daily chores as authentically and naturally as possible. Another sign of this generalized approach is determined by the lifestyle of the characters, which is governed by the changes of the seasons and the whole agricultural cycle. Researcher G. Mathews summarizes the thoughts of sociologist P. Berger writing, “Homeland, according to Berger, places the man not just in space but in time as well: there the man – in the sense of space – stands face to face with friends, neighbors and strangers; then – in the sense of time – stands facing the ancestors and descendants” (Mathews, 2005, p. 276). R. Radzik analyzing traditional life in the XIX century points out that “time in the village did not have a linear dimension” (РАДЗИК, 2009, p. 332). This describes exactly the way of life Emmer’s characters have – they live as their forefathers did centuries ago. Neither time is “actual” in the film. On the contrary, the narration is not determined by a chronological order; whatever happens is not a onetime unique occurrence but part of a repetitive scheme like plowing or haymaking that never end. The activity of the protagonists is “circled” while time can be characterized as “eternity”. Such an interpretation of the time category is a usual attribute of archaic traditional culture and this “timeless” motif is underlined in the film more than once. At first, we see people working hard, whereas at some moment a caption appears saying: “And on Sunday...” Afterwards the toil is over and festivities began. It is not a specific “Sunday” here, an actual



“today” but rather an endless biblical cycle – time for work and for rest. What is more, this “out of time” concept uniting the characters’ past and present is stressed in the film on a verbal level as well. One of the captions says that this land “keeps eternal beliefs and customs”, another mentions the Poleshuk, who “did not give up eternal methods of fighting for the primitive everyday life of a fisherman and farmer in one person”. Apart from that, in the very same caption as a double exposure, an image of a sickle appears in the background of the frame, as if to confirm visually the thought of immemorial peasant being, the symbol of a farmer. The voice-over says that “primitive tar mills” are still built “in the same way” as “great-grandfathers did” and “this whole ... business” keeps “the traditions of past centuries long gone”.

Polish researcher K. Loska states that a nation is “rooted not only in the past and tradition but in everyday life as well” (Loska, 2008, p. 81). Polish film historian M. Dopartowa speculating on identity in literature mentions keeping “any regional distinctness and local flavour” (Dopartowa, 2009, p. 16). It is what the director depicts in his Polesie series and everyday life of these rural communities is represented in the film in a ritualized form. Swedish sociologist G. Therborn underlines the correlation between an identity and rituals: “In the consolidation and reproduction of collective identities, rituals play a main part. Rituals revive memory and meaning, organize and visualize togetherness, and express a mutual re-affirmation, re-assurance of the collectivity. Hence rituals constitute an important empirical means of entry into the collective identity of a population” (Therborn, 1995, p. 230).

How does this rituality manifest itself in these old films? What we mostly see is rather not an individual action but a part of a collective activity with a clear cyclic pattern. Episodes are structured in a linear way. Actually, all the main activities of countryside life are shown in the films. First of all, it is hard agricultural work: plowing, haymaking, rafting of wood or hay. Boatmen are walking along the river, pulling boats heavily loaded with timber with the help of the ropes. People are having dinner together in the field eating from one pot but each with their own spoon. Countrymen live in multigenerational families – in the scene of bringing the clay pots and other products for kiln firing everyone is working, men, women and children of all ages, including toddlers. All village inhabitants are in functional traditional clothes, decorated with ornaments, which even assuming that in some episodes new and better items are worn due to the filming, are still used on a regular basis. In one of the scenes the voice-over refers to self-sustainability of these farmsteads, mentioning a comb, “made of wood with their own hands”.

Besides collectivity and repeatability – and it is characteristic of traditional societies – rituality reveals itself in dual juxtapositions, antipodes: male/female; boys/girls; children/adults; work/rest; young/old etc – the actions have their constant once and for all determined order (like rotating the potter's wheel), the roles are distributed and fixed. Some work is fulfilled by men only – like pulling the ferry or boats, plowing, digging out clay, working with tar. Sunday also gives an occasion for separateness: men and women prepare for the Sunday service in church in different ways. Men just wash their faces and change their “*lapci*” – bast shoes – to leather boots, whereas women decorate themselves with festive kerchiefs and necklaces, with the voice-over adding that “the desire to dress nicely is inherent in all daughters of grandmother Eve”. Girls copy what women do, the voice-over informs that “their festive clothes are not different from the ones of the adult women”, while “the boys are not bound to dress up even on weekends”. Also the games boys and girls play are not the same. Girls are leading a round of dancing, whereas boys are tumbling actively on the grass. Even taking into account the director's will – Emmer was looking for the most characteristic – these distinctions caused by gender are very typical for societies of this kind. In the adults they manifest themselves even more expressively. Leisure time for men means to shake hands in their own male circle and share a moment of tobacco smoking. At the same time, women chatter with each other (the voice-over says, they have “always and everywhere much to tell each other”) and an elderly woman is eating sunflower seeds. Still, there is an interaction between men and women, at work as well as during the games in the open air – here with a note of flirting.

In spite of the fact that many elements of this village life of the 1930s have already gone forever, nowadays there is still an echo of some archaic traditions in the Belarusian countryside, which I could observe myself. For example, even today no old woman in the village would appear with her head uncovered (at the time of Emmer's expedition this was a rule for all married women). At some important occasions – like funerals – besides a kerchief, old women could still wear their traditional clothes – skirts, vests and an apron, embroidered in a special way.

All archaic societies are closely connected with nature and depend on it. Moreover, making his documentary series Emmer was evidently guided by a romantic tradition, very strong in Polish art and culture at that time, and it can be seen in the way nature is represented in these films. One of the documentaries, later lost, was called “The Storm” – it showed a thunderstorm and shower on the river – the director mentions this production as a “mood report”. Actually,

the characters in the survived series are depicted as a part of nature, its intrinsic element. One of the episodes is edited in such a way that a river and forest seem to be completely uninhabited, no sign of man, just a paradise for animals – until some forest guards appear from nowhere. Also as an indication of wildness some pieces show bison. In fact, both dense forests and bison can still represent Belarus. As well as storks, one of which Maliniak, the cameraman, chased and which, as the voice-over informs, “provides an essential addition to the Polesian landscape”. Now the stork remains one of the most banal and widely used symbols of Belarusian culture and nature.

Yet the film representation of nature in *“Polesie”* has raised questions from some modern researchers. S. Łotysz is very critical of Emmer and Maliniak’s “vision of social and nature realities of Polesie in the interwar period” (Łotysz, 2022, p. 114). He disapproves of Emmer’s romantic approach that results in not mentioning some unpleasant facts in the films, such as, for example, the barbarian way, which characterizes relations of Poleshuk with their environment. In Łotysz’s opinion, the nature depicted in the film was actually neither virgin, nor untouched. The tar mills, in turn, were “one of the main instruments for deforestation in the past”. As for fishing, “Poleshuk were killing fish mercilessly” (Łotysz, 2022, p. 119). Łotysz also remembers the unfortunate weather phenomena in Polesie in 1935-1936 – a dry summer, rainy autumn, a huge fire, frostless winter, the flood in January that all together brought hunger and a typhus epidemic to the region – at the same time as the film was being shown on screens.

Emmer’s filmic reality is indeed rather “romanticized”, idyllic and does not show any threats, great hardships or conflicts. The protagonists are represented as a single organism, a harmonious community, who have not lost their connection with nature and their roots. The characters work really hard but it is routine for them; after their labours they rest and play with the same enthusiasm. This criticism of Emmer’s point of view, no matter how justifiable it is, seems to be a bit misdirected: the authors of the film were not responsible for the ecologic situation in that region and could not have seen matters from the perspective of a contemporary man. Besides, the director evidently did not even set a task of this kind. What is more, knowing now what damage to nature was done on these territories later – in the Soviet Union, for example, including extensive melioration and not only – in comparison, the Poleshuk’s subsistence farming and the scale of their harm to the environment does not look so disastrous at all.

One more manifestation of Emmer’s romantic orientation and his endeavors to convey the peculiarity of his filmic subject, is his varied, elaborated work with sound. The composer Henryk Gadomski creates a new melody for almost every

episode, usually it intonates the mood and rhythm of the scene. Some fragments are also illustrated with a voice-over. Sometimes one dominating sound is selected, like laughter in the scene of the mass game in the village street, or hoofbeats combined with splashes of water in the moment of crossing the river on a cart. In addition, Emmer uses original local folklore songs in the film, which really set an emotional intonation, for example, in the fragment when boatmen pulling the boats on the bank are walking with great effort, ropes tied around their bodies. The songs here are perceived as a kind of men's cry or moaning. In his memoirs Emmer writes that Polesian songs are "as sad as the landscape surrounding Poleshuk" (Emmer, 1936, p. 276). These songs – like everything connected with folklore – also manifest a national singularity, and they even gave the title to one of the films. The director observes that "the Poleshuk sings often, willingly and well" (Emmer, 1936, p. 276). It inspired Emmer to such an extent that he himself writes a song, dedicating it to one girl he heard singing, saying there that her "wild song" was written by nobody, it was a lullaby of the wind, or probably the girl's grandfather eavesdropped it. Yet he did not use his song in the film but brought some peasants from Polesie to Warsaw where their singing was recorded in a studio. Right after the films were released, Emmer was criticized for overusing the songs and melodies. Nowadays it is even more evident, one perceives the endless singing and playing of music in "*Polesie*" as excessive. It is also disputable, to what extent these studio records are authentic, still Emmer's intention was absolutely clear – this folk music was bound to add to the genuine atmosphere of the film. Emmer himself was sure that "without those songs the film would not have achieved the fullness of mood and longing" (Emmer, 1936, p. 278).

Another feature of traditional culture is mystical and religious consciousness. Emmer tried to get to Polesian sacred life not only through folk songs but in other ways as well. He was eager to "reveal ... the hidden activities of local healers" (Emmer, 1936, p. 279) and for that purpose the crew went to a very remote place to film a Polesian witchdoctor. Unfortunately, the plan failed since on the way the cameraman fell ill with dysentery (undoubtedly due to his drinking water from a swampy puddle some days earlier) and urgently needed to be taken to hospital. Then Emmer shot people coming to an old wooden church on Sunday as a solemn ritual collective practice. The final scene of "*Polesie*" shows an elderly man crossing himself in front of a big wooden outdoor cross. Such crosses were then (and in some places in Belarus are even now) a typical element of a country landscape.

Eventually, Emmer achieves unexpected results thanks to his editing technique, modern for that time. As a rule, in his documentary the transition of one

episode to another is carried out with the help of all possible “special effects” of the 1930s. In *“Polesie”* there are about 11 different types of frame changes, starting from a usual dissolve to using different vertical or horizontal lines, a diagonal shift, “opening and closing lenses” and other technical methods. Paradoxically, this excessive diversity, a kind of superfluity that would break the conventions of a contemporary poetic film, still functions in Emmer’s documentary. These technical tricks somehow create a contrast to the archaic nature of the filmed reality and accentuate the pristine mode of life represented there.

However, not all film experts agree as to the extent of “truth” in the representations of the characters. S. Zahorska wrote that onscreen Poleshuks were “strangely clean and wealthy”. She also noted an absence in the film of the smoky interiors of the houses, which people sometimes shared with their cattle. (Zahorska, 1936, p. 7). Łotysz insists that Emmer “quite consciously did not show the whole truth, in what conditions Poleshuks lived” (Łotysz, 2022, p. 117). Indeed, Emmer remembered ironically how they preferred to spend a night in schools or sheds since they realized that the air in Polesie was good just because “peasants do not open their windows” (Emmer, 1936, p. 278). The film contains only a couple of shots showing the huts’ interior, which we as modern viewers regret very much. Nonetheless, it is hard to judge now. Firstly, just a part of the footage is left, it is not known what exactly the lost films showed and what Emmer’s plans were. Secondly, the shooting conditions were really extreme. Many places were inaccessible, interiors poorly lit and it must have been a huge problem for the team to shoot in the houses in the dark with film that was not sensitive enough. Yet, as Łotysz aptly formulates writing about the protagonists, Emmer “did not use the opportunity to show their life in all its colors” (Łotysz, 2022, p. 122).

In the context of our analysis it is of interest what Emmer said in his interview for *“Kino”* magazine in 1936 after his Venetian prize. He remarked that he had wanted to show Poleshuks as “withdrawn, distrustful people” (Emmer, 1936, p. 6). At first sight, this negative remark may seem a manifestation of the above-mentioned “colonial” point of view, yet here the director rather stated the fact. It is exactly how Belarusians, especially those living in remote places, are characterized up to now, one of the stereotypes or “common truths” about the nation.

On the other hand, Łotysz reveals an interesting fact: analyzing what was written in Poland after the screening of Emmer’s film in Berlin in 1937, the researcher finds out that citing German press on the occasion, Polish director and journalist J. Bossak communicates just praising passages from it, while intentionally missing a remark about the “non-Polish character of Polesie” (Łotysz,

2022, p. 114). If we turn to the original, we can read by J. Rutenberg finishing his review for "*Polesie*" with the summary, "Not only in the landscape and people does a vast wide Russian valley resound, but also the spreading songs remind us that once the Tsar's eagle reigned here" (Rutenberg, 1937, p. 2). In light of Belarusian history with its complicated and long road to independence, this sobering connotation of Russia made by Germans in the 1930s is unfortunately unsurprising and explainable; it is just more evidence of how suppressed, almost eliminated, the Belarusian identity was after 200 years of being a part of the Russian Empire. Still, it is quite understandable why J. Bossak tried to hide the mentioning of the "Russian roots" in this context: independent Poland had got these territories then and wanted them to be "Polish".

This subtle connotation of "foreignness" is noticeable by other critics as well. Zahorska points out that in the films "everything breathes with some truth, unmoved for centuries, vaguely close and foreign at the same time" (Zahorska, 1936, nr. 9). M. Szytycer characterizes the music in "*Polesie*", mentioning its original folk songs, "full of mysterious reminiscences of alien motifs, clearly Eastern, with a spirit far from Slavic music" (Szytycer, 1936, p. 3).

One more Polish critic of the 1930s writes about "*Polesie*" as a "treasury of beautiful shots and charming folklore moments" (Ford, 1936, p.2) M. Łukowski indicates the following features of an ethnographic film: "a) old and modern customs and practices; b) traditions of crafts as well as professions of folk arts, which are dying out, including architecture; c) musical traditions; d) legends, myths, folk tales in a spoken and written form" (Łukowski, 1987, p.7).

Indeed, these films – as we see them now – have obvious ethnographic traits. The narration is turned towards the past, tradition, cultural legacy; the characters' lives in the XX century look as they could have looked some centuries before. The action takes place in a remote "wilderness" – in the country, among forests and marshes with no trace of urbanization (which, in its turn, always associates with "modernity" and "civilization"). The camera is focused on observing the everyday life of the protagonists, meticulously registering local customs and rituals. Folklore themes are accentuated – through clothing (floral ornamental pattern on a sleeve is shown in close-up), games, songs, behavioral models etc.

Among other characteristics of an ethnographic film Łukowski marks also "the achievements, activity, work methods of the ethnographers, who are involved in documenting folk culture as well as the accomplishments of the people developing and promoting folk traditions" (Łukowski, 1987, p.7). Emmer's films do not have these attributes.

Strictly speaking, there is no scientific commentary in “*Polesie*” either – different to the convention of ethnographic films – yet several aspects of it are present: the narrator refers to some data about history, nature, economic activity and even the demographic situation in Polesie.

Yet Zahorska notes in the 1930s that the film’s language has become “extremely international” and underlines how difficult it is to extract from it “completely specific accents”. She admits that probably not all of Emmer’s “reportages” “penetrated the wonders of Polesie to a large extent”, yet they escaped the “dancing, festive” note, “smoothed and sweet folklore”, so typical “for our film approach to local history research”. Thus, the films, according to the not-only-ethnographic vision of Zahorska, describe the land and the people “through life and not only through traditions” (Zahorska, 1936, nr. 9).

Often an ethnographic approach in historical films implies a kind of a “paternalistic” attitude on the part of the authors (“cultivated people”) towards their protagonists (“less civilized”). As we mentioned above, there are some elements of this in “*Polesie*” as well, yet it is not a dominating feature in the film, which actually goes a bit beyond ethnographic criteria, representing a wider picture of human existence.

Sztycer writes about “*Polesie*” as a “material valuable in a filmic sense, moving and dynamic”, admitting that the author’s method of filming causes “a perfect effect of directness, brings the action closer to us, puts the viewer somehow in the center”, mentioning the film’s “lively and interesting editing” as well as its “really artistic values” (Sztycer, 1936, p. 3).

We highly appreciate the meaning of these archive films for “stopping the moment, saving the world that has passed already (or will disappear soon)” (Smoleń, 2009, p. 273).

On the one hand, Emmer’s series was a big foreign success of Polish cinema abroad: being awarded, being shown in different countries and later on included in textbooks on the history of Polish cinema. M. Hendrykowska in her extensive “History of Polish Documentary Film (1896-1944)” sees “*Polesie*” in the context of the Polish film industry in the 1930s as “something exceptional”. Yet, recalling the main points of Polish reviewers of that time, Hendrykowska agrees that even now the series evokes “similar reflections”. She specifies “the most authentic character” of “*Polesie*” and its “unusual documentary value” (Hendrykowska, 2015, pp. 205-206).

On the other hand, it is unique footage for Belarus: nothing of that kind filmed by Belarusians themselves in the 1930s survived the Second World War,

all Soviet materials got burned in fires. This circumstance also affects the perception and analysis of these historical film materials: for a Belarusian film scientist it is a very valuable source, and its very availability makes some potential critical perspectives less significant. Moreover, although a couple of decades ago there were a few attempts in Belarus to introduce these film representations into the Belarusian cultural context (mainly in ethnographic research – it was a Belarusian ethnographer who discovered Emmer's films in Poland at the end of the 1990s), yet they were not really incorporated and their unquestionable potential for a documentary discourse has not been used up to now. The reason for this is that any step in that direction – either a scientific reflection, or any reinterpretation and decontextualization of this old footage by artistic means of documentary cinema – is unimaginable in contemporary Belarus. This would be labeled as “subversive” activity since it contradicts the official state paradigm. In addition, no Belarusian organization would dare to step into collaboration with an “unfriendly” country – this is the definition Poland is now given in official Belarusian discourse. However, for Belarusian cultural heritage – especially in the current “nationally-unfavourable” political conditions – these documentary pieces mean a lot.

Thus, here we are dealing with a paradoxical situation: the films that saved an image of Belarusians 90 years ago, making such a considerable contribution to the Belarusian national identity, do not come from a Belarusian cultural environment but from “outsiders” – from Polish artists who shot their documentaries on Polish territories and about Poles. This example shows the affinity of the two nations, complex historical turns and the important role of cinema. As I. Babkou notices, the process of an individual self-identification is “not really a clear event of joining some existing identity, equal to yourself, but rather a process of balancing in a polycentral space of cultural diversity” (Бабкоў, 2003, p. 67).

Finally, this footage in an expressive and poetic way to represent certain elements of Belarusian singularity, which is important for the consciousness of modern Belarusians as citizens of an independent state. Even some traces of the national originality, expressed in the reviewed films, could serve as a contribution to the Belarusian National Text, through which a nation determines itself and states its presence in the world (Анціпенка, 2012, p. 89).

Ultimately, “the ability to «visualize» a culture or society almost becomes synonymous to understanding it” (Fabian, 1983, p. 106).



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