

## Eagle and the Cross. Ethnography of historicity through art-based research.

In "The Eagle and the Cross" open-air spectacle, episodes from Polish history are reenacted by a team of up to 400 actors – residents of Murowana Goślina and surrounding towns. For several spring months they prepare a show with music, pyrotechnic effects, stunt scenes and advanced multimedia - with the ambition to define and strengthen Polish national identity. On the grassy stage, they form huge choreographic arrangements quoting scenes from 19th century Polish history painting, enacting compositions by Jan Matejko, Jacek Malczewski or Józef Chełmoński. The show has become the largest event of its kind in Poland, and an important part of a recent shift in the social usage of history; narratives that serve to enhance patriotic attitudes are conveyed through fun, family-oriented festivals of great scale and momentum, co-organised by local communities.



Image [1] Audience stand during the show, 5 July 2019; image [2] Rehearsal of a battle scene based upon Jan Matejko's painting "The Battle of Vienna" (1883); image [3] Behind the scenes of "The Baptism of Poland" scene: technical staff plug-in the water fountains while actors perform a dress rehearsal, 18 June 2019. Photos: Michał Sita.

I subject this situation of preparation, organization and context of the performance to ethnographic observation. I seek to identify **the kind of relationship to the past** that is produced here, through analyzing:

- the experiences of participants, organizers, audience, local residents;
- the assumptions, goals, values and their modes of transmission;
- the nature, range and depth of social relationships;
- the organizational structure;
- the nature of the discourses, representations and narratives used in the orbit of the show.

The aim is to reconstruct the **historicity** that is brought to life in social practice, rather than assess the veracity of the historical narrative, or deconstruct local historical discourse. Historicity – in its anthropological understanding – comes into being through contemporary practices, perceptions, and ways of interacting with the past. Historicity is specific for a given ethnographic setting. It tells us – how do events identified as past, or entities situated in the past, affect the present? On what grounds does one anticipate the future? How is the past experienced and what actions are taken towards it? This is exactly what I would like to find out regarding "The Eagle and the Cross".

Research on values and ideas will be based upon observed practices rather than mere declarations, which is fundamental for anthropological research. Unspoken and often unconscious aspects of the social situation under study can be revealed and understood when we act together with the research partners, experiencing as deeply as possible the reality under study. Participatory observation and reflection on my own experiences of playing in the show will be the main research strategies.

Additionally, photography will allow me to look closely at a selected property of the show, its spectacularity. The strategy, combining the artistic process with anthropological analysis, will help answer the question: what is the significance of the show's momentum for the meanings, identities, experiences and values created here? How does it impact historicity? I will focus on documenting the scale of the show, the set design, the visual effects, the aesthetic and scenic solutions, etc. Based upon the photographs, a brochure will be produced, initiating a process of public negotiation of meanings beyond the narrow circle of creators of the show. This process, in turn, will be re-analyzed anthropologically, through interviews, observations.