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/ POLITICAL THEATRE

“Are You Very Stupid or Very Intelligent?”

Joanna Szczepkowska and the Embarrassing Performance of Announcing the End of Communism

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The article takes a closer look at actress Joanna Szczepkowska’s appearance on Dziennik Telewizyjny [Television Daily] on October 28, 1989 when she famously said: “Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4th June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end.” Waligóra describes how the statement came about, the first responses to it, and how it was preserved in the collective memory. The author also discusses the actress’ public image in 1989 and the effect her public image had on the reception of what she had spoken on television. The author also explains why she sees Szczepkowska’s appearance as an embarrassing female performance – simultaneously emancipatory and eliciting consternation.

Keywords: feminism, embarrassment, Szczepkowska, communism,June 4, television news

1.

In the late 1980s, famous people were regularly interviewed as part of the Saturday edition of *Dziennik Telewizyjny* [Translator’s Note: or *Dziennik*, Television Daily, the major daily news program and a propaganda tool in communist Poland aired in 1958-89], the evening news program. On October

28, 1989, a popular actress Joanna Szczepkowska was invited to the studio to speak briefly to the host, Irena Jagielska, about her acting career. Unexpectedly, however, Szczepkowska asked for an opportunity to deliver a message to the audience. The final part of her conversation with Jagielska was as follows:

> Szczepkowska: Only I have a favor to ask of you. Since I am already here and in fact have an opportunity to sit at this table, I would like to share some wonderful news, in any case *I* believe the news is true. Could I maybe…
>
> Jagielska: Of course, please go ahead.
>
> Szczepkowska: play a bit and become like…
>
> Jagielska: Me.
>
> Szczepkowska: You.
>
> Jagielska: Sure, but let us remain in our seats if that's ok?
>
> Szczepkowska: Yes, yes that's ok.
>
> Jagielska: Then by all means.
>
> Szczepkowska: Well, if I were sitting in this place, I would say this: Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4th June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end (Szczepkowska in: *Dziennik Telewizyjny,* 1989, Oct.

28).

When Szczepkowska is about to say her announcement, the camera operator zooms in on her face, which she notices and announces the end of communism, in accordance with her desire expressed earlier, directly to the viewers. The last frame of the interview shows the amused smiling actress. The first printed reaction to the words spoken in *Dziennik* appeared six days later (Tym 1989), and the event has not ceased to inspire commentary until today.

2.

Szczepkowska has recounted the story of her appearance in *Dziennik* many times. At the core of her narrative there are her three autobiographical books: *June 4*[1], *Who Are You?* and *You Will Win When You Lose*. The first book (also chronologically) is a collection of memoirs from the communist period of the Polish People's Republic, whereas the other two constitute a diptych. *Who Are You?* tells the stories of the Szczepkowscy and Parandowscy families and the life of Joanna Szczepkowska herself from her birth to October 28, 1989. *You Will Win When You Lose* covers the author's life from that very date to 2014. The announcement of the end of communism is therefore raised to the rank of a turning point in her life by Szczepkowska herself.

The story, as the actress tells it, begins with a telephone invitation to an interview for *Dziennik*. At first, Szczepkowska rejects the proposal. However, she quickly begins to regret the decision because she comes up with ideas of how she could use her appearance in front of the cameras:

"I imagined myself accepting this proposal and turning the *Dziennik* upside down" (Szczepkowska 2014, p. 363).When another invitation to the program arrives, Szczepkowska agrees to participate. She has several days before the interview to prepare.

On October 28, 1989, Szczepkowska arrives at the television studio, where she learns that interviews in *Dziennik* are not broadcast live, but are only played from a recording which is shot on the same day. She immediately decides to say what she has prepared, but assumes that the incident will remain an anecdote and will never appear on television (Szczepkowska on Radio TOK FM, 2014, July 4). The situation has therefore fundamentally changed: as Szczepkowska initially planned to take everybody by surprise on a live TV show, she now assumes that her performance will not enter the field of visibility.

Another turn of events for Szczepkowska is that the interview is being recorded twice. After the first shooting, the producer asks to repeat the whole conversation, due to the fact that the exchange is taking too long. Szczepkowska interprets the request unequivocally:

> I understood that now the anchor's task would be to conduct the interview in such a way that it [announcing the end of communism] would not be possible. After all, that was what it was really all about (ibid.).

It is not certain if Szczepkowska's assessment was accurate. In 2009, the TV presenter stated that in interviews for *Dziennik Telewizyjny* she strictly followed the principle that a guest could say what he or she wanted (Jagielska 1999, p. 36). The first recording is not available (I do not know if it

still exists at all),[2] but the actress and the presenter agree that it was not much different from the second widely known version. Both recordings included the utterance about the end of communism, but because the course of the conversation was slightly different each time, Szczepkowska had to improvise twice in order to make her performance happen. Between the recordings, however, she did not have time to think about what she was going to say or plan a strategy, and assumed that the journalist would try to change the course of the conversation. In both shootings, the actress had to exhibit her quick thinking, vigilance, and her smarts.

According to Szczepkowska, right after the shootings, behind the scenes, Jagielska reacted with an emotional outburst (Szczepkowska 2009). The presenter does not deny it, but explains that she was afraid that the material would not be broadcast, and this would affect her credibility as a journalist. Szczepkowska and Jagielska assumed that the interview would not be made public; despite the success of Solidarity in the elections on June 4, democratic changes happening in Poland were still incomplete towards the end of 1989, and the results of the changes were still uncertain. *Dziennik Telewizyjny* was replaced with a new program called *Wiadomości* [the News] only a month later, on November 18, 1989. The Main Office for the Control of the Press, Publications and Performances was officially liquidated only in April 1990. At the turn of 1989 and 1990, staff exchanges were also carried out in television offices and studios. The very invitation of Szczepkowska to the studio was the result of a calculation, because, as Irena Jagielska says: "At that time, everyone wanted to see people from the other side appear on the daily show." (Jagielska 1999) But on October 28, 1989, the decision to broadcast the interview was in the hands of people who identified themselves with the former political power, so there was a risk that the interview could be censored. The fact that the two women were concerned in

itself perfectly shows how unstable the period of the systemic changes taking place at the time was. Nevertheless, the conversation was fully broadcast, as planned, on the same evening.

3.

I refer to Szczepkowska's gesture, as well as to other similar gestures, behaviors, and statements as an embarrassing female performance. I borrow the term (though the wording is not exactly the same) from Marcin Kościelniak's article “Embarrassing Performances by Losers: Counterhistories of Political Theater” (Kościelniak 2013). In his article, the researcher analyzes selected Polish theater performances. He is interested in emerging counter-historical initiatives, which are an attempt to regain one’s right to tell and write about one's own past in spite of the official historical narratives codified in rituals and institutions. One of the anti-historical strategies is to include scenes in performances which are cast from the vantage point of somebody who is weak and clumsy. In the performances of Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski, Kościelniak distinguishes the figures of the “excluded” who, on the one hand, are those who lost in a sense, but on the other hand get the chance to deliver long monologues:

> I would like to draw attention to the specific manner in which these monologues are conducted. They do not refer to any matter-of-fact, accurate argumentation, they do not aspire to be intelligent retorts, they do not try to convince anyone with iconoclastic rhetoric, on the contrary: usually the monologues are incoherent, mumbling, tearful or simply unsuccessful. […] In Strzępka and Demirski's

> embarrassing performances of those who, in a way, lost, it is honesty, sensitivity and ineptitude that become weapons to fight the hypocritical, cynical and effective rhetoric of the winners. (ibid. p. 75-76)

With regards to the productions of Wiktor Rubin and Jolanta Janiczak, the researcher notes that “an actor's performance that breaks the frame of the ‘stage – audience – performance’ convention is the vehicle of counter-history. This is what also determines the persuasive potency, effectiveness and significance of these projects.” (ibid. p. 78) On the other hand, in his discussion of the performances by Krzysztof Garbaczewski and Marcin Cecko, he mentions, among other things, the partially improvised performance by Justyna Wasilewska in *Balladyna*:

> Played each time according to changing and constantly redefined rules, the performance is not a well-oiled machine, on the contrary: it is sometimes convoluted and inarticulate, and Wasilewska – that is the first impression – is ready at any moment to falter, give up, compromise herself. This makes her embarrassing performance extremely effective, and at the same time moving. (ibid., p. 79)

An embarrassing performance is therefore an individual performance within a play which is founded on an agreement between the actor or actress and the audience. What is important is the affective firepower of the performance and not so much its consistency with the discourse. An embarrassing performance is delivered by a subject who exposes one's own weakness, powerlessness, and the possibility of one's failure (and on these grounds the aforementioned empathic understanding with the viewers is

built).

I find the category proposed by Marcin Kościelniak extremely interesting, although the researcher himself uses it to describe the phenomena belonging to the reality of the stage (i.e. the phenomena which are at least partially planned, written down in a script and rehearsed). I believe, however, that his proposal is sufficiently broad and it should also be used to talk about non-theatrical events and performances. What seems valuable to me in Kościelniak's proposal is that he draws attention to the discrepancy between the weight of the message and the form of expression which is inarticulate, imprecise, and prone to failure. However, such a form of expression does not diminish the intensity of the message – on the contrary, it even strengthens it. The embarrassing performance seems to be a weapon of the weak, marginalized, and disadvantaged. I would like to expose the word “embarrassing” so that it loses its stigmatizing, deprecating, or humiliating character and becomes the name of one of the strategies of appearing in public. Since in my analysis I will only be interested in performances by actresses, I add the adjective “female” to the term “embarrassing performance”.

It seems very important to me that in his article, Kościelniak emphasizes the strength of an individual gesture, because embarrassing performances – as I would like to understand them – are always individual, sometimes selfish gestures, often for various reasons difficult to include in communal postulates or projects, and sometimes standing in clear contradiction to the ideas of the community to which a female performer belongs. Embarrassing female performers act on their own (even if at various stages they use the support of the community, enter into alliances, identify with wider social movements) and, above all, they act at their own risk. This is crucial because

for an embarrassing performance in the public sphere, unlike in theater, there usually is a high price to pay.

Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* argues that the fundamental difference between men and women is that the former are marked with value, while the latter remain unmarked. Cultural reproduction in visual and linguistic arts marks unmarked women, whereas it remains indifferent to men. Therefore a man signifies the norm, and a woman is the Other who is marked by a man. Phelan's theory is rooted in psychoanalysis; she refers among other things to Lacan's texts on the power of the gaze, and she recognizes that the mutual gazes of women and men are characterised by a broken symmetry. For when a man looks at a woman, his position of strength is confirmed, whereas when a woman looks at a man, she must recognize herself as the Other, as a non-man. Phelan also questions the notion that greater visibility entails greater power: if high visibility meant a lot of power, she says, Western culture would be ruled by a naked white woman. In her opinion, the invisible, unmarked, and unutterable should also be appreciated. I think that the key aspect of Phelan's theory is the recognition that power comes from the marking process, therefore emancipation depends upon taking control of that process. Taking control is possible through the skillful use of what is invisible and hidden.

In Phelan's theory, I am interested in the question of the control over the marking process. Embarrassing female performers consciously enter the field of visibility and are always marked in various ways by those who watch them. They are ridiculed, heroized, fetishized, downplayed, and so on. Their performances, however, consist in surprising and embarrassing the audience. Embarrassment is associated with the discomfort caused by the feeling of losing control of a situation, which violates the process of marking

– the viewer who is marking no longer knows what to expect from the performer who is being marked. This feeling of uncertainty and lack of control causes frustration and forces the viewer to act towards either inhabiting the embarrassing performance, or ridiculing and discrediting it.[3]

4.

Joanna Szczepkowska's message to the viewers was serious, it informed about the political transformation in a matter-of-fact manner, and partially imitated the style of a news release. Precisely the ten-second fragment of her conversation with Jagielska, with the words: “Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4th June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end” was repeated in the media on various occasions (primarily news programs). Szczepkowska, however, closes her announcement with a smile, which blows up the seriousness of her words and establishes an understanding with the audience. The smile reveals that the actress uses the familiar image of the quitissential naif, which I will talk about later. The smile was also commented on many times and in various ways – it was considered stupid, frivolous, triumphant, innocent, joyful. The consternation it caused was part of the embarrassment strategy. It was also caused by Szczepkowska suddenly breaking up with the convention of a TV interview. The performer herself signals the frivolous nature of her message; she also raises a theatrical framework for her performance: she asks Jagielska's permission to “play a bit and become like” a TV presenter. Szczepkowska, in *Dziennik*, is therefore an improvising actress who delivers her message in the conditional mode: she would say something if she was in a position which she only pretended to be in.

Even though *Dziennik* had a large audience in 1989, it seems that the ten-second fragment broadcast in the middle of the program could have been

easily overlooked, and most of all ignored. One could have also easily considered the actress's willfulness as a funny or unfunny excess and quickly forgot about it. However, this did not happen. The initial reaction of the press to Joanna Szczepkowska's words was sparse and malicious. I will discuss a few examples. Stanisław Tym in *Gazeta Wyborcza* [t/n: Electoral Gazette, a liberal daily newspaper established before the elections on June 4] published an ironic comment in which he supplemented Szczepkowska's announcement with the exact time of the fall of communism, and then presented the dates and times of other regimes collapsing (a primitive community, slavery, feudalism and capitalism). He ended his text with the sentence:

> Historical regularity or coincidence? I hope that a seriously thinking faction of Polish actresses will soon be able to solve this mystery as well. (Tym 1989, Nov. 3-5)

A day later, Jerzy Urban also doubted the actress's intelligence in *Trybuna Ludu* [t/n: People's Tribune, a communist daily newspaper publishing between 1948-90]. In his column, he introduced Szczepkowska as a person known “mainly from the role of the daughter of Szczepkowski Sr.” He also stated that on June 4, communism had not yet become well-rooted in Poland, which was best proven by the elections in which the former ruling party lost. The columnist closed his commentary on the announcement in *Dziennik* with the words to which various journalists, commentators, and Joanna Szczepkowska herself would from then on repeatedly refer to:

> A gushing actress, who by design uses only the right, weaker hemisphere of her brain, confuses a complex, long-standing

> historical process with the one of its episodic outgrowths that she is able to grasp. […] Insufficiently staged little actresses, in fact it does not matter whether their male or female specimens – will come closer to the truth about what is going on reciting Shakespeare and not their daddy or some dude. (Urban 1989, Nov. 4-5, p. 4)

It is telling that in his sexist statement, Urban assumes that the performer is not the true author of the message: a man must have been behind the performance. The columnist also tries to show Szczepkowska where she belongs – she is an actress, so she should act, not engage herself in politics.

Meanwhile, at the end of the 1980s, the performer's political views were clearly articulated and at least known in certain circles. Szczepkowska, introduced to the opposition milieu by Halina Mikołajska, supported the Workers' Defense Committee. She helped, among other things, in the distribution of the press, participated in discussions and the social life of opposition activists, took part in a television boycott when martial law was introduced, and in 1989 she was involved in carrying out political campaign meetings. Also, taking from the previously quoted words of Irena Jagielska, it appears that Szczepkowska was associated with the opposition community and that is why she was invited to the interview on a television network which was adapting to the new political reality (although the topic of the conversation was only to be her acting jubilee). The announcement of the end of communism was also a political declaration, which the actress emphasized by saying that she would like to share “some wonderful news” – so it was obvious that she was on the side of those who were enjoying the change in the political system. It was also no coincidence that she chose the word “communism”, which sharpened the boundary between the order of

the past and the new democratic order.[4]

Jerzy Urban's gruesome attack on the performer on the pages of the main propaganda newspaper of the Polish People's Republic was therefore both a political attack on the views represented by Szczepkowska and on her right to take a political stance (as a woman and an actress). Also, Urban's behavior was probably influenced by the fact that he himself had lost in the elections on June 4. Moreover, he was defeated by an actor – Andrzej Łapicki. The columnist also tried to marginalize Szczepkowska's statement, referring to it as if in passing, and devoting the majority of the column primarily to the political activities of the recently created Parliamentary Club of the Polish United Workers' Party. From Urban's perspective, Szczepkowska was a threat because she was outspoken about what was supposed to remain hidden and unclear; she emphasized the victory of the opposition and the change that, alas, if it was about to happen, then it better be happening slowly and imperceptibly.

With the pens of their columnists, the two newspapers – *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a symbol of democratic changes, and *Trybuna Ludu* belonging to the old system – distanced themselves from Szczepkowska's gesture and unanimously suggested that the actress was not very intelligent. Urban was right that Szczepkowska used the common understanding of the word “communism”, but wrongly accused her of not understanding the complexity of historical processes. After all, the actress wanted to performatively establish a symbolic turning point and not to designate a literal date for the end of a political system.

In Peggy Phelan's theory, white heterosexual men, thanks to the fact that they are marked with value from the start, can act transparently. By this I mean that when they take a political stance or make decisions, what they say

or do is not questioned because they have the right to their own voice by definition. Joanna Szczepkowska as a woman and actress (and therefore someone who is perceived, especially at that time, as the one who speaks with someone else's script), appearing on television, however, causes consternation and elicits a reaction, especially since she uses the ambivalent form of an embarrassing performance which in itself causes consternation and embarrassment. Phelan emphasizes the fact that entering the field of visibility involves exposure to numerous dangers. The researcher mentions fetishization, voyeurism, and the colonial gaze (Phelan 2005, p. 6)[5], but these are only examples of the possessive practices of seeing which are imposed upon an observed subject. She also takes note of the fact that femininity is always read erotically. (ibid. 63) What comes after Szczepkowska performs her embarrassing performance proves Phelan's theses right. The first comments, issued only by men, mainly treat the actress mockingly and condescendingly. Columnists and publicists gave her either serious or ironic lessons on politics, society, economics, and philosophy. They also tried to act casually with regard to Szczepkowska's message and deferred the possibility of a genuine polemic, although the political content caused them to feel frustrated. At the same time, the actress was fetishized – she was said to be charming, she was called “Mrs. Joasia” [t/n: “Joasia” is a diminutive form of Joanna] (Sceptyk 1989), or some erotic insecurities are expressed towards her, just as Jerzy Urban did. Downplaying and fetishizing were strategies for discrediting Szczepkowska's competence as a performer. For it must be emphasized that the criticism was ad hominem, and the attempt was made to invalidate the performance by combating the performer.

5.

Upon reading the newspapers published in 1989, it becomes clear that there had been little threat of a myth starting to surround the appearance in *Dziennik* until Szczepkowska's critics made their voices heard. It was then that the actress's defenders spoke out, supporting the political engagement of her message. For example, in the theater community, Jacek Sieradzki took Szczepkowska's side. On the pages of the weekly magazine *Polityka* [Politics], he wrote that, admittedly, communism “is not subject to magical thinking and is not going to rot under the influence of a spell cast on TV, not even such a suggestive one” (Sieradzki 1989), but the actress's gesture heralds the exhaustion of the paradigm of the theater as a poor substitute for public life and is therefore of great importance.

Bronisław Geremek stood up in a different way in defense of Szczepkowska in his interview for the magazine *Po Prostu* [Just Like That]:

> Geremek: This date [June 4, 1989] cut through the post-war history of Poland. That day it became apparent what we could only guess: how many of us [there are] and what the will of the nation really is.
>
> Turski: So the announcement made on TV by Joanna Szczepkowska was not just a trivial joke.
>
> Geremek: I know that Joanna's words aroused great controversy. I do not know if I would articulate it in this way myself. I know, however, that she told the honest truth and I fully share her opinion (Geremek 1990, p. 1-2).

Ryszard Turski (editor-in-chief of *Po Prostu*) and Bronisław Geremek took Szczepkowska's gesture very seriously, admitting that the actress had a good sense of the historical turning point. Additionally, the authority of Solidarity supported the legitimacy of the performance. The extensive interview was printed on the first, second, and fifth pages of the first issue after *Po Prostu* started being published again.[6] Szczepkowska was mentioned only once in the conversation, in the fragment quoted above. Nevertheless, the photograph on the first page featured Szczepkowska, whereas the photograph of Turski's interlocutor was printed on the following page. One could say that it signaled Szczepkowska was, at the time, slowly becoming recognizable as an icon of the transformation.

6.

What made it easier to downplay and fetishize Joanna Szczepkowska, but also glorify her gesture, was the actress's career till then. In 1989, her face was widely recognized, mainly due to well-rated and frequently awarded film roles and numerous appearances in productions done by *Teatr Telewizji* [Television Theater], as well as on the stages of Teatr Współczesny [Contemporary Theater] and Teatr Polski [Polish Theater] in Warsaw. Her three debut roles were: Irina in *Trzy siostry* [Three Sisters], directed by Aleksander Bardini and featured in *Teatr Telewizji* in 1974; Joasia, a high school love of Stefan Karwowski, in the first episode of the TV series *Czterdziestolatek* [A Forty-Year-Old]; and Zosia from Jan Batory's 1976 film *Con Amore.* They can be considered as one (albeit nuanced) creation. In all of those roles, the actress played heroines who were young, naive, sexually inexperienced, and unlucky in love. She played weepy but flirtatious blondes who looked at men with admiration and gratitude, sometimes smiling amid tears, sometimes stamping their feet like schoolgirls, but eventually always

speaking with a sweet, soft voice. It was the kind of image which, apart from inexperience, suggested, if not low intelligence, then at least an inability to hold independent opinions, and being subject to strong and changing emotions rather than being able to formulate rational statements about one's worldview. The subsequent roles largely strengthened the image of Szczepkowska as the quintessential naif.

Thirteen years pass between her debut and 1989, and Szczepkowska gives numerous interviews during this time. She is always cast in a patrilineal narrative - she is first and foremost the daughter of the outstanding actor Andrzej Szczepkowski and the granddaughter of the outstanding writer Jan Parandowski. In interviews Szczepkowska is as modest, charming and gentle as the heroines she plays. And journalists, even when mentioning the strong sides of her acting, put her appearance in the first place:

> Not very tall. Petite. Head surrounded by blonde hair, large blue eyes, pleasant-sounding voice, great diction - these are, in my opinion, the qualities that distinguish Joanna Szczepkowska [...]. I had a conversation with a likeable, very serious (above her age) young person. (Szczepkowska 1980)

Szczepkowska built her image of a well-liked, "likeable" actress on two more pillars. First, she was a young mother. She gave birth to her daughters - Maria and Hanna - in 1980 and 1983, taking a short break in her acting career. However, since then she has been eager to emphasize that motherhood is an important life task for her. (cf. e.g. Szczepkowska 1988)

Second, she has always followed an internal moral code which entails selecting her roles restrictively. Apart from committing herself to play only

interesting characters, she strictly refrains from appearing naked. For this reason, she was surrounded by an aura of prudishness, which the actress was proud of.

7.

Inviting Joanna Szczepkowska to the studio, Irena Jagielska probably expected another pleasant conversation with the actress. Meanwhile, the course of the meeting was unusual from the beginning. Already to the first question about her assessment of her creative path, the actress responded with a deep sigh, adding that she did not care. Then she laughed and apologized for saying what she had just said, adding that now she was not concerned with herself at all, because she was more absorbed by the current events (political and social events, as one might guess). Szczepkowska also explained that she envied Jagielska and that she would rather be in Jagielska's place “reading from the first pages of post-communist Poland”. “I'm starting to think that it would be in line with my temper at the moment,” she added. Thus Szczepkowska outlines her aspirations quite safely - placing herself amid those who report, and not those who shape the political reality. Then the presenter attempted to change the subject and, quoting a fragment of one of the actress’ interviews, asked about the moral code that Szczepkowska adhered to. The performer replied:

> This is not about the choice of a scenario. This is about my way of life. I try not to pay attention to what gives a career, what gives money, because as one of my two daughters says, "God made gold without pleasure" and I try to use this moment - when I think that I should live for my home, when I should have more harmony in my

> life - use it according to this very feeling, no matter how compelling the propositions I get. I know that these are not artistic choices, but I hope they are human. (Szczepkowska in: *Dziennik Telewizyjny*, 1989, Oct. 28)

Immediately after this statement, the exchange I quoted at the beginning of the article followed, ending with the news about the end of communism.

A moment before her key statement, Szczepkowska was still the same actress that the audience loved - modest, hardworking, approaching her career lightly, focused more on motherhood than work, free from greed and seeking applause. I am convinced that if it was not for her image, built precisely and over many years, Szczepkowska's announcement would not have had such strength and social impact. The image of the quitessential naif, a schoolgirl, an actress from a respectable home, of course, exposed the actress to criticism and ridicule, but it also earned her the support of her defenders. Szczepkowska the performer – a Catholic, a declared oppositionist, whilst also a mother – was after all an ideal exponent of conservative Solidarity values, and her gesture was also perfectly amenable to reading such as that of Andrzej Urbański:

> Mrs. Joanna has been remembered […] by this symbolic sentence, when, on communist television, with charming timidity, she uttered the famous words […]. No politician, no opposition member, no moral authority did this before her, but her, a beautiful lady from a very respectable family of actors. With a mass of curly golden hair, as if taken out of a patriotic school book. She has captured many hearts, not only mine, forever. (Urbański 2013)

8.

In 2012 Jacek Sieradzki published an extensive article on the life and career of Joanna Szczepkowska in *Dialog*[Dialogue]. In it he wrote about the announcement of the end of communism:

> She [Szczepkowska] became, whether she wanted it or not, a personification of the systemic change, a sign of regaining freedom, an embodiment of the need for an emblematic take on what, out of the blue, happened in Poland at the time. Her performance in the communist *Dziennik Telewizyjny* and the message delivered with a sweet voice […] left an imprint on the imagination of the masses, and committed itself to the collective memory for good. (Sieradzki 2012, p. 158)

This is just one of the many voices confirming that the actress's performance was later considered significant for the collective imagination.

The elections on June 4 seem to have three visual symbols: a cowboy from the *High Noon* movie poster, Tadeusz Mazowiecki raising his hands in a gesture of victory after being sworn in as Prime Minister, and Joanna Szczepkowska’s smile in *Dziennik Telewizyjny*. The first two symbols are masculine and grandiose, the third is feminine and ambivalent, but it enters the symbolic space previously reserved for great and heroic gestures. Wojciech Tomasik aptly put it as follows:

> Joanna Szczepkowska's statement on TV […] is like a modest, feminine annulment (cancellation) of a doubly male Communist

> Manifesto. It is also the reverse of the message which was continuously flowing from TV sets on the frosty Sunday of December 13, 1981. (Tomasik 2008, p. 93)

After the initial discussions about Szczepkowska's appearance in *Dziennik* in 1989 ended, the question of evaluation and interpretation of the actress's performance returned in the press systematically, however, marginally. In the nineties, sometimes jokingly, sometimes slightly maliciously, Joanna Szczepkowska was described as the one who not so much announced the end of communism as overthrew it. She is described in those terms, for example, in 1999 in *Pani* [Lady] – one of the oldest Polish magazines for women – in an article presenting a list of ten "mothers of success", "Polish women of the decade", prepared on the occasion of the election anniversary of June 4. (Krajewska 1999) Of course, presenting Szczepkowska as the one who overthrew the political system was a metaphor. However, having put it in this way is telling, because it not only shows how the importance of the actress's performance had increased over time, but also emphasized its performative character. Szczepkowska was no longer the one who announced the end of an epoch, but the one who established that epoch's end.

Dariusz Kosiński puts forward a thesis that Polish identity "is of an eminently dramatic and theatrical character," (Kosiński 2016, p. 99) and the foundation for this state of affairs was invited by the romantic artists of the 19th century. In the situation back then (the lack of state sovereignty), it led to the creation of great patriotic theater that permeated all spheres of life and manifested itself both in great demonstrations (such as patriotic uprisings or funerals for patriots) and in everyday life. However, the dramatic-theatrical trait did not disappear with the regaining of independence. On the contrary,

it haunted the Second Polish Republic, was present during World War II, and defined the period of the Polish People's Republic, until 1989, when, according to Kosiński, the dramatic-theatrical aspect of identity was forgotten:

> The first Polish governments, and the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki especially, did not care about performances, did not even care to establish a holiday commemorating the great change, and only Joanna Szczepkowska, driven by her acting intuition, had to publicly establish the end of communism, otherwise no one might have even noticed it. (ibid. p. 103)

Kosiński spoke about the actress in a similar way a few years earlier, when he gave an interview in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. At that time, he indicated that the announcement in *Dziennik* was the only "performance of change".[7] He included Szczepkowska's gesture in contemporary social practices of taking over public space, setting the stage, and drawing attention to oneself, which in turn results in political change. (Kosiński 2014, Apr. 4)

A performance of change is therefore dependent on its use of media. Szczepkowska focused people's attention entirely on herself, for which many could not forgive her. The ensuing strenuous attempts to legitimize her statement, as well as furious attacks against her, partially resulted from this radical intrusion into the field of visibility. The actress, who had been collaborating with television for years, perfectly sensed the potential of the medium (egalitarian and universal), and also found the most adequate form of expression (a short, easy-to-remember sentence, a perfect bon mot, presented with lightness, irony, and a smile). Szczepkowska was perfectly

aware of what a performance of change should look like, because she was an excellent actress and was not afraid to use theatrical technique as a political tool.

9.

However, the thesis that Joanna Szczepkowska's performance was a symbolic event, referring, as Kosiński says, to the dramatic-theatrical tradition remains incomplete. The performance of October 28, 1989, does not fit so easily in the patriotic, sacrificial, and predominantly patriarchal history of Polish performances. The announcement of the end of communism is an embarrassing performance, shameful from the male, heroic perspective, as it could be seen from the reactions which were aimed at inhabiting the performance, including the reactions of those who praised the performance and read it in the religious-patriotic key and those who ridiculed and downplayed it or tried to seriously argue with it. Because something had to be done with Szczepkowska and her appearance on TV. A young woman or, as some preferred to say, "a pretty girl" and at the same time an actress is, due to those qualities, so socially and culturally positioned that when she delivers a serious message, but put in the form of an excess and a prank, she does not so much continue the dramatic-theatrical tradition, as much as she captures and transforms it. Thus, she brazenly breaks into the field of visibility, using the strategy of surprise and embarrassment.

The announcement in *Dziennik* was one of the few performances of change seen after 1989. It means that at least due to the absence of other strong gestures which would clearly mark the division between the Polish People's Republic and the Third Republic of Poland, the announcement must be

considered as a candidate for an event of historic importance. And yet it is unthinkable to admit that the founding performance, for the new Poland, was a female performance and that it was embarrassing. Moreover, it was the achievement of an actress who did not consult with any male authorities. A performance which started as a pretend game and was crowned with a smile of ambivalence. Thus, Szczepkowska’s performance held the spectators in a clinch between the dramatic-theatrical desire and the rejection of the embarrassing character of the performance.

10.

Thus, the actress was quickly excluded from the heroic historical narrative. Although various statements, including those I have quoted, exhibit certainty that the announcement of the end of communism had become, in the collective imagination, a symbol of a breakthrough, it was not part of the official narrative about the systemic change. The narrative which appears, for example, in history books. Although it might seem that the actress's performance in *Dziennik* could be great material for an anecdote for children and teenagers, and the frame documenting the ambivalent smile could easily be recognized by students, the textbooks do not even mention Joanna Szczepkowska. Although more careful research into this issue would be required, a cursory reading of more than twenty history textbooks published in different years (and therefore having been written according to different historical policies implemented by successive governments) clearly shows that the history of 1989 is shown from a male perspective. In the photographs illustrating the texts in question, men appear almost exclusively (often Tadeusz Mazowiecki raising his hands in a gesture of victory or the cowboy from the Solidarity poster), men are credited with achievements and utterances of symbolic importance.

Joanna Szczepkowska's performance was apparently not serious enough, or perhaps too feminine, to become a symbol worthy of passing on to the younger generation. But the strength of an embarrassing performance lies in its ability to perpetuate itself in another less official and more popular circulation: through citation in the press, re-broadcasting on TV, then posting videos of the interview (videos of different lengths) on websites such as YouTube, by recalling it in social media, blogs, and information websites (the serious ones, such as Onet.pl, and the gossipy ones, such as Pudelek.pl). The performance has also persisted, of course, thanks to having been repeated and paraphrased. The circulation of the images of the performance in various media and in various forms, of course, has built its popularity. The appearance in *Dziennik* became good material for an anecdote, a sentimental flashback, and a question in a game show –an episode of the game show *Jeden z dziesięciu* [One Out of Ten] from February 13, 2017 is a good case in point.[8]

In this way, the announcement of the end of communism successfully infected collective memory, mocking the official narrative from which it was erased.

11.

Szczepkowska, of course, had a claim to be a symbol of change, and telling the story she would eagerly attach heroic value to her gesture, presenting it as a brave act of resistance. However, she also knew how to find herself in the popular narrative and how to ensure that her performance was preserved in the collective consciousness. Hence, she readily repeated and paraphrased her statement from 1989, often for less serious purposes, thus taking advantage of the mocking form of an embarrassing performance. How

bizarre these repetitions were is best shown by Maciej Mazur's reportage which was broadcast in the news program *Fakty* [Facts] on December 27, 2017 (Mazur 2017, Dec. 27). The reporter used a fragment of an archival recording from June 4, 2009: it shows Szczepkowska, sitting in the window frame of a tenement house at 27 Mickiewicza Street in Warsaw's Żoliborz (i.e. in Jacek Kuroń's house). The smiling actress, dressed in white, announces through the microphone: “Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4th June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end.” Applause and cries of “bravo!” can be heard. “And now do what you want,” adds the performer. Of course, it is difficult to imagine a similar situation in which Tadeusz Mazowiecki repeats the gesture of victory in front of the cameras, to the delight of onlookers. It shows how frivolous and antiheroic the status of the announcement was – on the anniversary of June 4, 2009, no one even tried to pretend that the performer's repeated announcement was more than a sentimental joke.

The transformation of the announcement into an anniversary attraction took place not only with her consent, but also due to the actress’ inspiration. Thus, Szczepkowska's attitude was schizophrenic – on the one hand, she tried to arouse the conviction that her gesture was an exceptional act that was subject to the rules of honor, and on the other hand, she used it as she saw fit. But it was thanks to the perpetuation of the performance through embarrassing channels that it has retained its joyful vitality and power of influence. It has not succumbed to the megalomania of anniversary celebrations and avoided having been petrified into a patriotic formula.

12.

The story of the announcement of the end of communism begins with a

television incident staged by an actress who was widely known for playing naive heroines. Joanna Szczepkowska focused attention on herself and uttered a sentence which was one of the few attempts to mark the division between two political systems. “The young lady from a country manor”, “the little actress”, the well-liked “Mrs. Joasia” broke into the field of visibility and took a position previously reserved for men. No wonder that her performance caused frustration and attacks, laughter and mockery, but also attempts to explain and justify the performance. All this happened, although it seemed that thanks to her involvement in the oppositional political activities, the actress had sufficient political legitimacy to take a public stance on an important issue. Szczepkowska repeatedly emphasized that she said the words about the end of communism to check whether Poland was already a free country. The test of the freedom of speech turned out to be deceitfully effective, because the reactions to it showed that institutional censorship was not the only a mechanism regulating the formulation of statements in the public sphere.

However, Szczepkowska's embarrassing performance was so ambivalent that it remains beyond the reach of its critics. They end up ridiculing themselves, both when they try to seriously argue about a gesture which was intentionally designed to be witty, and when they try to ridicule an action intended to be funny and absurd in the first place. An attempt to marginalize it is also ineffective, emphasizing how insignificant the actress's gesture was, or suggesting that she was not the real author of the words she uttered. Szczepkowska skillfully pointed out that her gesture was intended for people, so it was modest and popular by definition. It is also difficult to effectively marginalize an event that has already entered the collective imagination.

While a female embarrassing performance continues to affect irrespectively of the scoffers, its performer has to defend herself, because attempts to discredit her gesture impact, first of all, the public's perception of her. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Szczepkowska skillfully toyed with the images of her as the quintessential naif, a capricious mother, and a well-liked actress. In a way she agreed to the images with which she was marked. At the same time, her political independence and her desire to rebel were growing. Around 2009, she began to take control of the narrative of the events of October 28, 1989. Although it was one of the few expressive performances of change, her television appearance, due to its embarrassing and troublesome nature, was omitted from the official historical narrative. However, it fueled its own independent circulation in social communication, became rooted in popular historical narrative, and started being perpetuated as an anecdote. From this weak position, however, it radiated with a strong discourse having an ever greater impact on the collective imagination. It was possible due to Szczepkowska, who was not afraid to use embarrassing and bizarre tools (repeating and paraphrasing herself) in order to remind the public of her announcement.

The announcement of the end of communism intercepted and exploded the heroic dramatic-theatrical identity, creating space for a different identity: antiheroic, mocking, feminine, and embarrassing.

Joanna Szczepkowska will probably never be able to convince the public to start reading her gesture uniquely in a serious tone. The actress has failed in her attempts to become a respected and revered symbol. And yet she has also achieved a spectacular success. In 1989, she was a speaker for a commonly shared conviction, but her appearance in *Dziennik* certainly influenced the recognition of June 4 as the official day of the beginning of

democratic changes and restoration of Poland's sovereignty. When SW Research, commissioned by the weekly magazine *Newsweek*, conducted a study on a group of eight hundred Poles aged between sixteen and sixty-four, the majority (68% of respondents) concluded that communism in Poland ended on June 4, 1989. (Szaniawski 2016) However, Joanna Szczepkowska won for yet another reason. Thanks to her embarrassing performance on television, she managed to switch into the role of a public life commentator, columnist, and an authority asked for opinions on various topics. In the context of the discussion on the absence of women in media debates ("Dziewuchy Dziewuchom…" 2018), this is of great importance.

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Footnotes

1. The quote used in the title of the article comes from the very book *June 4*. With these words Szczepkowska was reportedly addressed by a random drunk man who approached her in the street asking about her TV appearance.
2. Szczepkowska confirms that the recording repeated on TV and circulating on the Internet is the second version of the recording (Szczepkowska 2014, p. 364).

3. The category of an embarrassing female performance is explained in detail in the article “An Underrated Emancipatory Strategy: The Embarrassing Female Performance.” *Teksty Drugie*, 2020, no. 6.
4. In her autobiography, Szczepkowska explains that she had been considering which word would be the right word to choose. Ultimately, she had decided to use the term “communism” because of its recognizability. She had also been aware that “the Polish People's Republic was on an eternal, endless ‘road to communism’. The system that was established in our country was called socialism” (Szczepkowska 2009, p. 250). However, the actress had come to a conclusion that “it was socialism that was never to be found here.” (ibid.)
5. P. Phelan, op. cit., p. 6
6. Po Prostu had to be closed in 1957 due to the direction of the Main Office for the Control of the Press.
7. One could argue with Dariusz Kosiński's thesis, pointing to another performance of change, which was the exposé of Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki delivered on September 12, 1989, during which the politician fainted. However, the exposé did not become an embarrassing performance - the story appears in nearly all history books and other official history narratives (though it is also present in popular history). Above all, however, an exposé is usually taken seriously.
8. The question that was asked in the episode was: Who was the author of the words "Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4th June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end"? Unfortunately the contestant provided an incorrect answer by choosing Tadeusz Mazowiecki. It is worth noting that the question appeared in the category "History of Poland". Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5zNUZBzElY Accessed: 26 Feb. 2018.

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