

“Oneiric communication” as a way of constructing one’s identity. Around Richard Kwietniowski’s *Flames of Passion*

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“[E]very person has a star, every star has a friend, and for every person carrying a star there is someone else who reflects it, and everyone carries this reflection like a secret confidante in the heart.”

Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*

Abstract

*The aim of the paper is to introduce the issue of process of communication and the problem of onirism in the Ryszard Kwietniowski’s short movie *Flames of passion* from 1989. Richard Kwietniowski is the British movie director, but his family come from Poland. “*Flames of passion*” is one of his short movies, inspired by a not very well-known silent movie under the same title from 1922, directed by another British director, Graham Cutts, and also influenced by Provençal lyric poetry. In the paper is considered the possibility of existing the process of communication between movie’s subjects – the mysterious main characters of the film. Communication act is understood not as established process of transmitting the information/statement, but – following the thesis of Tomas Goban-Klas – as a game between the subjects. Onirism is in the paper introduced in the context of psychoanalytical interpretation of the subject and identity (Freud, Lacan), and the vision of dreams, and such understanding allows the author to create the category of unconscious/oneiric communication. The paper considers the place and role of the subject in such kind of communication and how it influences and determines the process of individual’s identity creating. Onirism is therefore understood in the analysis not only as a surrealist, dreamy reality, but first of all as a state of mind. Moreover, in the paper is considered the epistemological potential of photography, which in the movie is a trigger to communicate. The author takes into consideration also another important factor of communication – narcissistic paradigm which creates the moment of characters’ meeting and understanding. In reference to the movie it is rather better to talk about the deformation of traditional communication, than about communication itself (it is the conclusion of the paper). Such kind of communication is also confirmed by particular movie technique – montage, shots, etc.*

Keywords: communication, onirism, Richard Kwietniowski, photography, psychoanalysis, narcissism

Introduction

One may say that an attempt to look at communication through the prism of onirism is actually a negation of the possibility of the existence of an actual act of communication and that a juxtaposition of those two notions may function only as an oxymoron. Therefore, it appears necessary to at least briefly present the accepted understanding of communication and onirism which I use, so that the validity of applying the category of “oneiric communication” in general, and further also in relation to Richard Kwietniowski’s movie, becomes clearer.

To me, in the analysis of the process of communicating (oneirically), of significance will be mainly the issue of the subject’s identity and the influence of this process on shaping the character’s identity and revealing certain elements of the character’s psyche as a result of accepting or creating the perspective of an oneiric vision.

a) Subject in the process of communication

The communication process assumes first and foremost transmission of the meaning of given information. One should add here that the information should be either the means or the place of the meaningful purpose (in an unambiguous and

the clearest possible way) of the message (Loska, 2004, 206). For understanding to occur, the message must have the sender and the receiver; both should be able to move within the semantic network of the other party to the act of communication. Obviously, communication depends on the context in which the message is sent. The background, against which the act of communication occurs, usually allows us to limit the field of reception and interpretation of the meaning of given information (understood here broadly: as a mere transfer of certain facts or as an only emotional message). The element which is indispensable in the context and which simultaneously constitutes the act of communication is, above all, *the conscious presence of the sender's intentions* (Loska, 2004, 207). Quoting the article's authors, we may also name the process of communication in the following way: "information transmission (preparing information for transmission, transmitting it through a medium, and receiving information from a medium) and information processing (understanding the meaning of information and integrating it into a mental model)" (Dennis, Fuller, Valacich, 2008, 576).

However, if we omit the binary method of perceiving communication by accepting Tomasz Goban-Klas's proposition that we treat the act of communication more like a relationship between people, similar to personal relations formed between participants of the same game (Goban-Klas, 1990, 16), it may transpire that the context is only relatively stable and that the conscious presence of the subject in the act of communication is implemented only partially or eliminated altogether. The communicated message, as a result of various procedures (for instance, differently interpreted rules of the "game" or different expectations of the "players"), may depart from its original application; it may also become independent of the players' intentions, assume a completely different form and a completely different tone than the ones in the message prototype.

In the most general terms, occurrence of a clear act of communication, concordant with the original assumptions, is very unlikely. Even if we do not assume interference of any irrational elements in communication, it will probably be, to a lesser or greater extent, disturbed, and the function of the subject will be deformed, as a subject unable to send a meaningful and precisely tailored message cannot be called a "pure subject." Therefore, in order to speak of intersubjective communication, one should revise his or her expectations connected with

understanding between individuals and examine those levels of communication which by definition do not take into consideration the possibility of existence of a conscious emotional and intellectual connection between the participants.

b) Onirism in psychoanalytical understanding; its influence on the act of communication

Therefore, is it possible to perform an act of communication within the presumed sphere of the structure of unconsciousness determining a potential communicative situation? Is it possible in a situation when, as I have assumed, even the structure of consciousness does not give us a "clear" communicative result? According to the binary model, it would be unattainable (the act would be unreliable because not conducted in the state of full consciousness). However, if one follows the theory of psychoanalysis, one will see that unconscious processes influence human perception, understanding of meanings, reactions; that the processes belonging to consciousness and that even this set of feelings and behaviors which we ascribe to consciousness are marked by unconscious elements. In Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's version (in contrast with Descartes's still self-conscious subject-reason being the basis of cognition), the subject is always unconscious of the self and of his or her own products, does not know what he or she is or says (Markowski, 2006, 67), because "we are locked in the world of our mental images" (Jung, 1996, 66; own translation - E. T.), which, as the mental apparatus has a trophic aspect and thus is composed of the spheres of consciousness, subconsciousness and unconsciousness, do not depend on human will and cannot be fully tamed by man and thus comprehended (Markowski, 2006, 49-51). Therefore, one may conclude that the act of communication may be only more or less conscious. Transfer of information or an emotional message in an invariably unstable context, filtered through the psyches of both the sender and the receiver, can never be implemented in its pure form, although we can consider such a message as one which can take place if we take into account the specifics of human mental processes and if we notice their profound influence on the way of communicating and the consequences for the message which result from them.

Psychoanalysis has also left the theory of dream understood as one of mental processes which transforms concealed thoughts into overt dreams (Freud, 1982, 236). Psychoanalysts did not treat

oneiric visions as irrational (mystical) elements in man but as one of the signs of mental activity. Analysis of dreams was to help discover and explain the reason for neuroses or disorders in the functioning of the mental apparatus; also, to Freud, the structure of dream and neurosis remained analogical (Freud, 1982, 251), which was changed by Carl Gustav Jung, who stated that dreams were the greatest reservoir of archetypes and thus very precious to the development of culture (Jung, 1988, 18–102).

Dream appears to influence communication in a similar way as mental processes occurring in reality do, as in both cases one should take into consideration the trophic aspect of human psyche and the influence of unconsciousness on perception and cognition. Therefore, I do not believe that the act of communication taking place in a dream may be implemented to a no lesser degree than in reality. Consequently, to me, communication in the oneiric sphere does not have an oxymoronic flavor, and communication and the oneiric perspective are not mutually exclusive.

However, the difference is that in dreams suppressed and repressed needs and experiences have more possibilities of being voiced. Moreover, Freud differentiates between the visible message of dream and the “thought,” stating that what we remember from our dreams is only part of their actual message, the translation of suppressed thoughts onto their other level, more visible and impossible to be experienced in reality (Freud, 1982, 241). Hence the fact that frequently certain experiences and desires do not come to fore even in the available dream matter deeply in human mind. Obviously, in dream we are less controlled by social and cultural conventions, and fantastical visions and frequent, broadly understood deformations connected with them gain the status of popularly understood reality. The difference may also occur within the context of a given situation as it may assume shapes which it would not have in reality. It may be less tamed but it is also difficult to state whether it would also have to be less stable, as oneiric visions have their own logic and their own laws of probability (understood even according to Descartes’s idea).

It is also worth adding that according to the theory of psychoanalysis, the status of the subject in the act of communication in oneiric reality does not undergo violent changes. After all, he or she is as unconscious of himself or herself as well as his or her own epistemological and perceptive situation as in

communication in reality. Frequently the degree of the taming of oneiric space–time is to him or her no greater than in reality. Nevertheless, it appears that the diegesis, from the oneiric perspective, assumes creational abilities of the subject at a higher level, as all events must be filtered through his or her psyche, through each of its aspects, and the major role is played here by the sphere of “id.”

The oneiric perspective, according to which I would like to examine the act of communication taking place (with any abovementioned conclusions connected with the possibility of the occurrence of an act of communication in mind) in the movie *Flames of Passion* by Richard Kwietniowski, remains identical with the oneiric vision, understood in terms of psychoanalysis as a special state of mind, not surrealistic (assuming an irrational juxtaposition of regular objects, creating a new aspect of reality, also subject to the nature of dream). This differentiation might seem unnecessary as both methods must analyze the logic which governs oneiric visions, although psychoanalysis moves the balance point to the subject taking part in communication and, by making it the dominant, makes reality registered and shaped from its perspective. On the other hand, the mere way of shaping space–time treated as a completely autonomous creation frequently becomes fundamental to surrealistic concepts. To me, the influence of the condition of the subject presented in the movie on the way of shaping the movie’s diegesis, their mutual relationships and analogies between them, constructed from the protagonist’s perspective, will be the most significant.

Photography as a prelude to the world of illusion

The oneiric form of communication in *Flames of Passion*, so far assumed only hypothetically, should become more understandable and visible after an analysis of the way the two (initial assumption) characters of the movie contact each other. *Flames of Passion* is a short movie from 1989. Its author, Richard Kwietniowski, is a British movie director, but his family come from Poland. *Flames of Passion* is one of his short movies, inspired by a not very well–known silent movie under the same title from 1922, directed by another British director, Graham Cutts, and also influenced by Provencal lyric poetry.

It is difficult for me to determine the establishing scene of the origin of such contact, which may be caused by the fact that the short

movie by Kwietniowski is characterized by its brief, fragmentary plot composed of seven impressions (seven days of passion) of a certain feeling or, as the quite ironic title of the work suggests (given that this phrase has its origins in the conventional imagery of Provençal lyric poetry), “flames of passion.” It is easily observable that the reason for the nameless protagonist’s experience of passion (for the record, I will call the character “A”) is his discovery of pictures of a man (character “B”) in a photo booth at the station. The medium of photography for a long time remains to A the basis for meeting B and thus it appears to determine the character of their relationship in general. In the present text, in the analysis of the functions of photography, I will place emphasis mainly on its mimetic function; more specifically, on its ability to create illusions.

Richard C. Allen states that photography creates *reproductive illusion*, which is able to register and also create illusion, concealing the actual status of the presented object (Allen, 1999, 286). To Allen, also the cognitive aspect of photography, the degree enabled by a photograph to which we can trust our cognition, is important. The author believes that the epistemological function of photography is not necessary, although illusion which we experience by means of it undoubtedly drives a wedge between thought and perception (Allen, 1999, 292). Moreover, to Allen, in the process of perception our visions and the expression of one thing through another one (not becoming aware of the falsehood within the representation itself) are inseparable from thinking; therefore, sensual and rational perception does not yield to illusion. In *Flames of Passion* illusion, which is always in a way carried by photographic representations, appears to remain unnoticed by A. The moment he finds the photographs of the mysterious man, he starts looking for him. Whenever he is on the platform, he appears to be looking out for B; he believes he will find the man also outside the photographs. During their first “real” encounter, A is rather surprised but he quickly decides to come closer, rather intimately and in a way definitely implying familiarity. Meanwhile, we cannot be sure that the man in the photograph exists in reality and is not a mere projection created on the basis of the photograph in A’s mind. Let us take a closer look at B himself: he appears for the first time as a photographed person and remains one for quite a long time, stuck in A’s imagination. He is introduced into the movie as a “real” person also through a number of conventional ways of aestheticization; he is rather blurred and surrounded by brighter light. B’s

disappearance is inexplicable, accidental and sudden (just as his appearance) and, in spite of the passionate kiss, the protagonists later continue to communicate by means of the photograph, perpetuating the illusion. It is also very telling that in *Flames of Passion* we do not see the context of the meeting (we only know that for seven consequent days A visits the station and gets on the train) nor a broader description of reality; we only see those aspects in which A participates.

Moreover, the contact takes place by means of a preset, tamed code, which is not language, but this lack of verbal communication appears to be crucial in the act of communication. First, oneiric reality is usually discovered by means of images, as words are probably an insufficient medium to communicate certain messages. Negating the verbal aspect of communication may, however, also be a sign of an attempt to establish as real contact as possible, not depending on linguistic conventions which limit understanding. Jacques Lacan said that unconsciousness is subjective disinheritance in language, language which man cannot control and to which thus he or she has to subject (Markowski, 2006, 64). The only words spoken in the movie assume a graphic form and the images-signs appearing in the movie in the form of photography and sign language become a code. In case of sign language we also witness an unusual phenomenon, as gestures are presented to the main character... in pictures. Interestingly, he believes in the reality of photography to such an extent that he buys a book explaining sign language. The linguistic code (conventional, tamed) is thus changed into a system of signs which A must decipher. Therefore, it appears that the model based on inference, not the semiotic code system, becomes closer to the communicative situation. According to James Peterson, this model allows for capturing the innovative form of avant-garde movies (Peterson, 1999, 160).

One should also add that the two meetings of the characters take place in accordance with a certain pre-arranged ritual. Each time they kiss, which is preceded by B’s losing his contact lens, looking for it, and by shaking hands, in which the lens is presumably crushed. Those symbolic gestures may be interpreted in various ways; however, in my opinion, they show the greatly passionate form of interpersonal communication, some kind of blindness, limitation of perceptive and cognitive abilities (lack of the use of language).

It also appears that lyrical intimacy so quickly established between the characters suggests their

pre-conscious "acquaintance." It is doubtful that they could have known one another earlier if they are only able to communicate by means of photographs left in the booth. Therefore, they sense some subconscious connection; B may also be an oneiric projection by A, resulting from his memories of the real B. If we assume that the situation takes place in reality, the characters' contact appears completely inexplicable and B, surrounded by a supernatural aura in the movie, appears to play the role of a magician or a spirit. In oneiric space-time the illusion of photography and the oddity of the contact may be explained by means of the protagonist's memories, wishes or fantasies.

The presented space-time also appears to be constructed in oneiric stylistics. However, we do not encounter here any surrealistic juxtaposition of the elements of reality, but slow movements of the camera, frequently with soft editing, unreal lighting combined with smoke going up during the meetings, slow rhythm, freeze-frames. The world is not deformed, it does not implement iconography characteristic of science-fiction or fantasy movies, but, by means of filmic measures, signals that the presented reality is not known from common experience. The construction of space-time in Kwietniowski's work thus remains commensurate with the shape which the filmed communicative situation receives. In other words, the world appears to be recorded through the eyes of the main character: we can only see this part of space which is important to A. The camera's way along the stairs suggests that the character has taken them, the space of the station is also presented in a very cursory manner (there are no panoramic shots), reduced to A's immediate surroundings. Even the train is "composed" only of the door through which the protagonist enters the compartment in which he sits down. Therefore, both on the factual level of the movie and on the level of the symbolic dimension of image, we remain within the area of A's observations and feelings. Narration structured in this way is typically subjective narration from the point of view of the character ().

The self and "the other." The narcissistic paradigm

Narcissism has been widely discussed on the level of psychoanalysis. Popularly understood as egoistic love for oneself, according to psychoanalysts, it has its origins in suffering, unfulfilled or lost love, as a result of which feelings are transferred from the loved object to oneself

(Brown, 1997, 643-648). However, the loved "self" is always perceived as an alter ego, someone else is subconsciously projected, even if his or her form is not fully crystallized. The phenomenon of projecting "the other" by the subject, who in this way has lost part of his or her identity, has been divided and remains an incomplete identity, as well as narcissism are connected with making reality unreal (Jankun-Dopartowa, 2001, 61). By analyzing the character of Locke/Robertson in *The Passenger* directed by Antonioni, Krzysztof Loska states that the "other" becomes to the protagonist the carrier of all values and wishes and that the "hallucinatory immersion in the other is based on the rejection of one's identity and the transgression of one's ego" (Loska, 2008; own translation - E. T.). This statement might also characterize actions taken by A from Kwietniowski's movie.

When A appears on the screen for the first time, he is presented to the viewer as a dull person, conventionally dressed, not showing any emotions (interestingly and according to my previous theses that the movie's space-time is perceived by the viewer through the main character's eyes, the world is presented analogically to A: the colorless space of the station, conventionalized characters with their schematic, non-dynamic movements). A's identity begins to show only after he meets B. The development of the character's emotional sphere is inseparably connected to "the other." Only after meeting B does the director show us the protagonist deliberately and joyfully smoking a cigarette in a non-smoking compartment, paying attention to his fellow passengers reading Keats's book of poems or Iris Murdoch's novel *The Italian Girl*. During the contact with the other character, A's need for closeness is revealed. It might also be the need for fulfilment connected with his homosexual orientation. The subject clearly looks for his complement, which may be suggested also by the symbolic act of joining the characters' hands or by the doubled image of embracing lovers shown at the end of the movie. At the beginning of the essay I said that the presence of two characters in Kwietniowski's movie was stated only tentatively. Of course, this notion is unjustified as both men's appearances are clearly different from one another and there is no evident basis to identify those two characters as one. However, as I have mentioned before, A's identity appears to develop and to be complemented by means of B. What is more, this process does not occur the other way around, as B appears only as a hazy spectrum, the reality is not

presented from his perspective and it is difficult to say what feelings he might have for A. Mariola Jankun-Dopartowa states that the main characteristics of the narcissistic paradigm are “attempts at reducing senses,” and, as a result, a stereotypical and fragmentary approach toward reality, trivial poetization of events as well as presentation of the world conventionally made unreal by means of applying “long shots, hazy symbols, moodiness” (Jankun-Dopartowa, 61; own translation – E. T.). All of the characteristics can be easily found in *Flames of Passion*. Accepting the narcissistic paradigm would additionally explain A’s attempts to complement his own identity, his search for the cohesion of his psyche and subjective identity, which can only occur as a result of closeness with another person or one’s alter ego. The narcissistic perspective is characterized by sharper focus on one’s own needs and emotions as well as by the sensed primacy of identity over the surrounding reality (Jankun-Dopartowa, 60), while an excellent background for its occurrence remains space-time made unreal, e.g. by means of an oneiric vision.

Deformation of the process of communication? Conclusion

If we assume, just as in the present article, that in the act of communication the interlocutors’ identities interact (also in case of nonverbal communication), one should accept that in *Flames of Passion* this process has been disrupted, deformed, a shift has occurred in it. It is mainly caused by the fact that shaping the identity pertains to only one of the persons, and if we were to accept my theses of the existence of the “other self” and of the implemented narcissistic paradigm, one may conclude that the act of communication occurs in the movie only between one split identity. The relationship between the self and “the other self” occurs in a reality made unreal and photographic illusion has been used as a medium being an agent in the act of communication. Those notions, on the other hand, lead to the conclusion that connection between the two poles of the character’s identity may only occur in the oneiric perspective, allowing one to explore his or her own self and reveal secret wishes and experiences.

The movie’s subject is shaped through mystification, illusive perception, elements of game, “which, as a matter of fact, lead to the equation of illusion and reality” (Loska, 209; own translation – E. T.). The spheres of reality and dream merge and complement one another, just as A’s identity and the

identity of “the other self” do. Reality is presented to us and shaped as the movie’s diegesis, analogically to the main character’s psyche; therefore, we encounter here parallelism of the structures of the micro- and the macro-world. The world surrounding the subject depends on the degree to which this subject’s identity is shaped and to which this subject is complete. The peculiar narration is conducted from the perspective of the characters; the place, time and even the characters and their appearance reflect the current condition of A’s identity. Introspection of the protagonist’s psyche implies the process of inspecting reality – it does not allow us to access those elements of space-time which do not define or pertain to A in any way.

Here one should consider, for the last time in the present essay, what communication we encounter in Kwietniowski’s movie or rather between whom and whom (what) it occurs. Therefore, it might be an attempt to reach fullness in a dichotomous identity (a narcissistic identity or one projecting “the other”) as well as understanding between the individual and reality, to find, by means of an alleged or genuine (it does not matter) feeling his or her place in the world, which, as might be suggested by the last caption in the movie, has been at least partially found. However, one may also interpret Kwietniowski’s movie as an epistemological study of man in the era of audiovisual media, which problematizes the relationship between a human creature’s identity and space-time to which he or she belongs.

Regardless of which of the proposed interpretation keys we accept, it is difficult to ignore the functioning of the oneiric level determining the process of communication taking place in the movie. It allows us to perceive the act of communication as possible and important, not rejecting the distance toward the events. It also implies the necessity of examining the subject taking part in the process of communication and the process of shaping the protagonist’s identity as a result of strongly-felt experiences. Therefore, I think that the structure of oneiric space-time and including in it the fate of some peculiar intimate relationship do not cause deformation of the presented communication in Richard Kwietniowski’s *Flames of Passion*, which gives new possibilities of analyzing such understanding, even ones taking into consideration the achievements of psychoanalysis. Therefore, it is a filmic representation of a subversive communication model rather than its negation.

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