



Towards a Spirituality *À Rebours*? Traces of Post-Secular Discourse in Selected Movies of Małgorzata Szumowska

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Abstract

The paper aims at a scrutiny of traces showing that Małgorzata Szumowska, in several of her movies (*33 sceny z życia* [*33 Scenes from Life*]; *Body/Ciało* [*Body*]; *W imię...* [*In the Name of*]; *Twarz* [*Mug*]), plays with the models of metaphysical cinema, at the same time juxtaposing them with phenomena and processes connected with the shaping of the so-called “new spirituality.” Szumowska creates her movies along the lines of the thinking of postmodern philosophers who build on the differences between religiosity and spirituality. Films that at first glance seem secular and avoid straightforward questions about faith (questions that would be strictly theological), make manifest the traits of human existence in the postmodern world, an existence marked with insatiability, loneliness, despair, disorientation, doubt, and emptiness, and attempt to find a cinematic language that would visualize the reality and the phenomenon of the struggle between what is carnal and what is spiritual.

Keywords: new spirituality, post-secular discourse, metaphysical cinema, modern Polish cinema

Słowa kluczowe: nowa duchowość, dyskurs postsekularny, kino metafizyczne, współczesne polskie kino

The works of Małgorzata Szumowska reveal a focus on the changes of the social-cultural reality described as the forming of postmodern spirituality.¹ Stories about representatives of various environments, ages, and professions in movies such as

¹ See A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*, Kraków 2000, pp. 265–396; J. Mariański, *Religia w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym. Studium socjologiczne*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 195–242; B. Guzowska, *Duchowość ponowoczesna. Idee, perspektywy, prognozy*,

Body/Ciało (Body, 2015), *33 sceny z życia (33 Scenes from Life, 2008)*, *W imię...* (*In the Name of...*, 2013), and *Twarz (Mug, 2018)* present an opportunity for diagnosing processes and phenomena in keeping with the post-secular vision. This article constitutes an attempt at a comprehensive presentation of issues connected with *new spirituality* in selected movies of Małgorzata Szumowska. Detailed analyses of each of the movies would go beyond the scope of this article, so the emphasis is placed on those narrative motifs and concepts which reveal traces of post-secular discourse in Szumowska's works. It is worth recalling that *33 sceny z życia*² (2008) was the beginning of a search for a unique cinematic language to represent a reality marked with the struggle between the carnal and the spiritual.³ This search rose out of admiration for the movies of Andriej Tarkowski and Krzysztof Kieślowski's cinematic contemplation of the Decalogue, but was fuelled also by neglecting the latter's European works and being drawn to the movies of Lars von Trier.⁴ Szumowska's attempts at transforming Kieślowski's model of metaphysical cinema⁵ are connected with embedding the stories in contexts undertaken by postmodern philosophy, which questions the form of spirituality that is linked with certain metaphysical assumptions and juxtaposes the categories of spirituality and religiosity. Therefore, some of her works can be understood as being free from metaphysical assumptions, and from the perspective consistent with the Christian theology in which it is linked to basic religious matters. Szumowska's work can be perceived, linked to post-secular discourse, as remaining outside the church alternative of privatized religiosity (this spectrum of views is represented by, among others, Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo).⁶ This current of thought stresses the phenomena of searching for *sacrum* on one's own, "the autonomy of the individual in religiously meaningful relations" and the weakening of referring to tradition, institutions, and cultural codes when it comes to religion.⁷ The beginnings of this phenomena reach back to William James's

Rzeszów 2011, pp. 145–186; A. Sobolewska, *Mapy duchowe współczesności. Co nam zostało z Nowej Ery?*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 13–101.

² Małgorzata Szumowska stresses that *33 sceny z życia* is for her the crucial movie, her attempt to express herself without the shadow of her parents' authority. See M. Szumowska, *Szumowska. Kino to szkoła przetrwania. Rozmawia Agnieszka Wiśniewska*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 47, 59, 64.

³ The issue has been recently touched upon in *Wieża. Jasny dzień* (2018) by Jagoda Szelcand, earlier, in the movie *Stacja Warszawa* (2013, dir. Maciej Cuska, Kacper Lisowski, Nenad Miković, Mateusz Rakowicz, Tymon Wyciszkiwicz).

⁴ See M. Lebecka, *Prawie psychodrama. Wywiad z Małgorzatą Szumowską*, "Kino" 2008, no. 9, pp. 16–18; M. Kowalski, *Będzie trudno mi się bronić. Wywiad z Małgorzatą Szumowską*, "Kino" 2012, pp. 15–17; M. Szumowska, *op. cit.*

⁵ See M. Kornatowska, *Metafizyczne tajemnice Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, [in:] *Kino Kieślowskiego. Kino po Kieślowskim*, A. Gwóźdź (ed.), Warszawa 2006, pp. 77–90; F.M. Lis, *Figury Chrystusa w „Dekalogu” Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, Opole 2007; *Kieślowski czyta Dekalog*, M. Lis, M. Legan (eds.), Opole 2014; M. Klinger, *Strażnik wrót*, "Kino" 1990, no. 5, pp. 14–17.

⁶ See R. Rorty, G. Vattimo, *Przyszłość religii*, transl. S. Królak, Kraków 2010; R. Rorty, *Religia jako kres konwersacji*, transl. M. Klebs, M. Jaranowski, "Znak" 2001, no. 1, p. 56; J. Derrida, G. Vattimo, *Religia*, transl. M. Kowalska, E. Łukaszuk, P. Mrówczyński, R. Reszke, J. Wojcieszak, Warszawa 1999; J. Mariański, *op. cit.*, pp. 203–204; B. Guzowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 159–160.

⁷ B. Guzowska, *op. cit.*, p. 150. See A. Wójtowicz, *Współczesna socjologia religii. Założenia, idee, programy*, Tyczyn 2004; J. Sokół-Jedlińska, *Duchowość na co dzień*, Warszawa 2004.

concept of individualistic, private, democratized religious experience.⁸ Spirituality in Małgorzata Szumowska's movies is to be understood broadly, as a form of internal life conditioning the subject's consciousness, which is visible in an existence combining two directions "towards the present and the transcendent."⁹

The phenomenon of *new spirituality* stems from numerous changes influencing culture and the reality of liquid modernity, which are the cause of instability of the individual's condition: confusion, fear, frustration and a feeling of emptiness.¹⁰ These sources are the social-cultural transformations which have influenced Western civilization in the second half of twentieth century and in the beginnings of the twenty-first century as the factors which have had an impact on liquid modernity (e.g. various modernization changes in fields of economics and telecommunications, the liberalization of manners, democratization in politics, and increases in criminality, wars, exterminations, migrations, chaotic urbanization and environmental damage). The status of religion in the modern world is also changing.¹¹ The processes of modernization, secularisation, plurality, and marketization weaken the power of religion and at the same time transform it into a product – an antidote to yearnings and difficulties, a sort of a compensatory tool which is supposed to fit individual needs.¹² This does not result in the disappearance of religion, but with its transformation. Postmodernity and the questioning of meta-narratives carries out a metaphysical deconstruction and announces a new type of religiosity, a moral force consolidating social bonds.¹³ An important role, when it comes to casting doubt on old forms of religiosity and the authority of churches and opening to non-European cultures and religions, is played by the twenty-first century phenomenon called New Age, which is linked to elements of gnosis and occultism.¹⁴ The effect of the changes to spirituality is syncretism and incoherence of forms, and at the same time its privatisation, deconfessionalisation, and blurring of the lines between spirit and matter.¹⁵

The motifs of insatiability, loneliness, despair, confusion, doubt, and emptiness are aligned in Małgorzata Szumowska's seemingly secular movies with the post-secular discourse, opening the diegesis for crypto-theological interpretations.¹⁶ *33 sceny z życia* shows the experience of chaos and confusion when confronting the terminal, the death of loved ones which is of deprived all depth and metaphysical mystery, and has a physiological dimension. The inspiration for the director was Joan Didion's book *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Szumowska emphasizes that "this is

⁸ W. James, *Doświadczenia religijne: studium natury ludzkiej*, transl. J. Hempel, Kraków 2011.

⁹ M. Nowaczyk, *Antynomie nowej duchowości*, "Przegląd Religioznawczy" 1997, no. 4, p. 6.

¹⁰ B. Guzowska, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 54; A. Szahaj, *Ponowoczesność i postmodernizm a religia*, "Przegląd Religioznawczy" 2003, no. 3, p. 37; P. Norris, R. Inglehart, *Sacrum i profanum. Religia i polityka na świecie*, transl. R. Bałbińska, Kraków 2006.

¹² R. Stark, W.S. Beinbridge, *Teoria religii*, transl. T. Kunz, Kraków 2000, p. 339 and *passim*.

¹³ B. Guzowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 97–102.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 108–140; A. Sobolewska, *op. cit.*; *Oblicza nowej duchowości*, M. Gołaszewska (ed.), Kraków 1995.

¹⁵ B. Guzowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–186.

¹⁶ A. Bielik-Robson, „*Na pustyni*”. *Kryptoteologie późnej nowoczesności*, Kraków 2008.

such a specific story that every sign of metaphysics could feel like sentimentalism” and therefore, she consequently pictures these matters contrariwise to Krzysztof Kieślowski’s pattern (*Trzy kolory: Niebieski* [*Three Colours: Blue*], *Bez końca* [*No End*]).¹⁷ When confronting death the characters escape its realisation, and turn to work and drugs as sure sources of pleasure and numbness.¹⁸ The counterpoint is single Julia’s gesture – turning off the apparatus in the hospital immediately following her mother’s death, which symbolizes the need for silence, but the funeral ritual of the parents is yet broken up by elements of dark humour. Helplessness in the face of death is connected with unawareness or neglecting of forms in which spirituality can be articulated. Hence, here is a sentimental, naïve approach to eschatological matters: the desire for an afterlife is expressed by Julia in a manner of simpleminded, childlike images which may be reminiscent of the final sequence of the movie *Bez końca*.¹⁹ It is a fantasy of a happy existence of herself as a child together with all of her loved ones in the afterlife. The condition of the protagonist and other participants in this psychodrama reveals a process of removing the sacral sphere.²⁰ It is connected with the heroes’ focus on the hedonistic aspects of life and the pleasure offered by substance use. This is visible in scenes of feasting, consuming and abusing alcohol to the point of complete inebriation, chain smoking, and ecstatic dance. The heroes of *33 sceny z życia* do not pay much heed to the issues of spirituality; it is absent from their daily reality. This is the verdict the director also passes on our contemporary world.

The only character exhibiting an enigmatic spiritual need is the father; it is he who wants his dying wife to receive extreme unction. This is a reflection of the approach presented by the director’s father, Maciej Szumowski. The father’s attitude in this movie shows the phenomenon of the privatisation of religion, the so-called “invisible religion,” the manifestation of which goes unnoticed by the surroundings.²¹ The father in the film therefore seems to be the last link to the sphere of the *sacrum*, together with its religious rituals. His religiosity is not, however, made specific in any way. The viewer can only infer that it stems from the Roman-Catholic tradition, although the character does not wear any emblems or religious symbols, neither do we see him participating in masses or praying on his own. This portrayal is to a large extent based on the imagined Polish intellectual of the twentieth century – spiritually independent, searching on his own for content and form connected with spiritual needs. In a book

¹⁷ M. Szumowska, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ About the meaning of silence for spirituality, see J. Sokół-Jedlińska, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ In *Bez końca*, freed from suffering and loneliness of suicidal the protagonist wanders through the outside world’s meadow with her beloved, deceased husband. Marek Haltof reminds us that the original title of the movie was *Szczęśliwy koniec* [Happy ending] and, stressing the signs of magical (neo)realism, he marks that the above-mentioned scene is a pastiche of the naive reconciliation in the Hollywood style. See M. Haltof, *Śmierć, żaloba i pamięć w filmach Krzysztofa K.*, [in:] *Kino Kieślowskiego. Kino po Kieślowskim*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63–76.

²⁰ B. Janicka, *Ścinki. Jeśli się dobrze przyjrzeć*, “Kino” 2008, no. 11, p. 105; M. Kornatowska, *Z tamtej strony ekranu. Perfekcja i zamęt*, “Kino” 2009, no. 1, p. 47; P. Wojciechowski, *Obiektyw jako okruch lustra*, “Kino” 2008, no. 12, pp. 54–55.

²¹ T. Luckmann, *Niewidzialna religia. Problem religii w nowoczesnym społeczeństwie*, transl. L. Bluszcz, Kraków 1996. See A. Sobolewska, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

interview Małgorzata Szumowska mentions her father's influence on her religiosity in her youth.²²

The scenes in which both of the parents receive extreme unction evoke the metaphysical context as inherent in the Christian ritual of passage leading to absolution, but at the same time show the participants in this ritual after the religious fundamentals had been uprooted.²³ During the father's extreme unction, the three siblings sit huddled on the floor, their postures signalling weariness, perplexity, and indifference, but also confusion. The sacrament, performed by a friend who is a former priest, brings them no conciliation, as it is not connected to any belief in salvation. It takes place as if without their conscious participation. They are not followers of any church, and their religious indifference excludes them from the ritual, which goes on as if beyond them. Their conduct is not anti-religious but indifferent and awkward. These scenes also point to the symptoms of internal secularisation in the church, through toying with the identity of the ex-priest and the symbolic lack of his attribute – the cassock. The status of the dispenser of the sacrament for the sick is in Szumowska's movie highly ambiguous. He is a boyfriend of the heroine's sister, for whom he had ceased to be a priest. At the same time, when he is asked to, he takes on the role of the priest performing the sacrament inscribed in the Roman Catholic religion in the rite of passage, connected with the belief in salvation. Thus two motifs intermingle in the character of the former priest: the earthly together with the carnal – *profanum* – and the transcendent – *sacrum*. This theme introduces signs of the distortion of the relation between these two spheres.²⁴ It is a process typical of the postmodern world, which Szumowska depicts in the movies examined in this article.

Another example of crossing the boundaries and orders of the sacred and the profane is the scene of the last Christmas Eve of the heroine's mother, who, inebriated, sinks into nervous hysteria. The cinematic commentary deepening the message is in this scene the motif of the Christmas tree. The pure nonsensical convention of the Christmas tree falling three times perversely displays the loss of the sacred in the characters' lives and of the reality in which religious signs cease to be intelligible, and are devalued and contradicted. This is an allusion to the poetics of Krzysztof Kieślowski. Piotr Wojciechowski suggests, however, that the Christmas tree falling three times could be interpreted as an allusion to the Jesus's three falls with the cross.²⁵

Emptiness and confusion also befall the protagonist of *W imię...* – a Jesuit, working with troubled youth in a facility in Masuria, whose name – Adam – brings about biblical connotations. The meaningful title of the movie refers to the Christian utterance used when making the sign of cross. The motif of impossible choice, the cleric hesitating between his calling and his homosexual desires, introduces theological discourse into the diegesis. It is present in Adam's homilies in evangelical references

²² M. Szumowska, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

²³ https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/T/TD/zarys_wiary/sakrament_namaszczenia_chorych.html [access: 30.05.2018].

²⁴ Which also concerns the problem of the commercialization of services provided by the church. See P. L. Berger, *Święty baldachim. Elementy socjologicznej teorii religii*, transl. W. Kurdziel, Kraków 1997; P. Wojciechowski, *op. cit.*

²⁵ P. Wojciechowski, *op. cit.*

with mystical elements: the longing for God and surpassing egoism, faith in the divine element in human nature, loneliness, and wandering in religious pursuits. This is the result of being familiar with the works of authors such as Thomas Merton, Simone Weil, Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, Theresa from Avila, and Saint John of the Cross, as confirmed by an interview with the director.²⁶ The motifs of doubt and spiritual rebirth are immersed in the metaphysical need for purification through confession. The priest receives confession from his pupils and a co-worker, but he himself has no access to this sacrament.²⁷ This motif is also connected to the symbol of the Good Shepherd,²⁸ as Adam, a good man and priest, is unable, due to his spiritual conflict, to save the life of one of his pupils.

His internal dilemmas display not only the “phenomenon of spiritual hunger”²⁹ but also the symptoms of *new spirituality*, the eclectic nature of which is visible in treating its elements in the manner of psychotherapeutic practice (Adam’s compensatory running as penance and meditation).³⁰ Another example of this is “the sacralisation of the individual”³¹ – the consequence of New Era dogma about the divinity of the human is a reinterpretation of the term ‘God’ who becomes the inner, immanent God.³² The narrative develops in a direction which substantiates the claim that “avoiding conflicts in denoting the sphere of identity”³³ is typical of Adam’s character. Thus the love of the heroes, together with the motif of Adam’s renunciation of the ascetic way of life, is depicted at the end of the movie in an unreal bucolic-arcadian manner – as a projection of the impossible.

Theological thought, figures and symbols³⁴ undergo reinterpretation in the movie. One example, the Samaritan gesture of washing wounds, turns into a physical need for closeness with another person. Another interesting example is the allusion present in another scene, reminiscent of the metaphorical “Dark Night”³⁵ of Christian mystics, as the expression of yearning for God takes on a symbolic overtone. The night vision of a bed in a forest in which Adam lies is a dream, from which he is awakened by a mysterious knocking at the door, demonstrating that his carnal and spiritual desires cannot be reconciled. Adam is shown as a person who suffers spiritual hunger and thirst for the experience of God’s presence, hence the allusions to mystical motifs, including the metaphorical imagery of a spousal relation with God. The essence

²⁶ M. Szumowska, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Which is stressed by the lyrics of a song from soundtrack by The Band of Horses *W każdej chwili będę gotowy na pogrzeb* [In every moment I will be ready for a funeral].

²⁸ D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, transl. W. Zakrzewska, P. Pachciarek, R. Turzyński, Warszawa 1990, pp. 317–322.

²⁹ A. Sobolewska, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

³⁰ B. Guzowska, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³¹ *Ibidem*. See also: J. Mariański, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

³² A. Sobolewska, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

³³ B. Guzowska, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

³⁴ Bartosz Staszyszczyn sees in that movie the symbols of the pieta and temptation in paradise. See B. Staszyszczyn, *W imię*, <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/w-imie> [access: 29.05.2018].

³⁵ J.A. Kłoczowski, *Drogi człowieka mistycznego*, Kraków 2001, pp. 30, 43–44, 48; Jan od Krzyża, *Dziela*, transl. B. Smyrak, Kraków 1998, p. 149.

of how the hero is created lies, however, in the clash between those themes and the homosexual identity of the priest, as he is infatuated with a young man. The epilogue of the movie, as discussed above, serves as a strategy of nullifying these identity contradictions.

The other scene of the procession is, according to Tadeusz Sobolewski, “the reverse side of loneliness and despair”³⁶ of a man without God. For Szumowska the church is a lifeless institution: in interviews she talks of “losing religion” and that “this is not a time for religion.”³⁷ At the same time, however, she posits her heroes in the plan of God’s creation, the evangelical message of Caritas and mercy. The participants in the picturesque Corpus Christi procession seem to be “absolved,”³⁸ in the religious sense, freed from their sins. This vision refers to Eucharistic and ecclesiastic mystique.

Szumowska claims that “man cannot live without faith. It’s impossible. Just the body is not enough.”³⁹ From this statement stems the movie *Body/Ciało*. The starting point for the plot is a diagnosis of emptiness, numbness, internal conflicts and yearnings of the heroes. The world of a prosecutor and his bulimic daughter, one devoid of religion, is confronted with the embodiment of *new spirituality* present in the character of the psychotherapist Anna. This character helps to display a wide range of phenomena, such as religious syncretism (of Buddhism and Christianity – in the house and car of the heroine their symbols are next to each other: mala beads and Our Lady of Lichen), supraconfessionality, and transconfessionality,⁴⁰ as signs of belonging to different religions. Another example is provided by Anna’s criticism of the Catholic Church regarding abortion laws. Another important element is the deinstitutionalisation of religion (Catholics are present at the meetings Anna convenes at the Spiritualism Association, even though the church refutes spiritualism). We also find direct references to esotericism, neognosis and occultism stemming from the New Age (the state of enlightenment Anna achieves as spiritistic medium);⁴¹ symbolic travel to the East (a scene of Anna and bulimic girls dancing); and especially the psychotherapeutic role of *new spirituality*, which is key for the plot.⁴² Anna’s character, however, has an evident comic overtone and the attempt at making her attitude more believable is made through a lecture of a famous spiritualist and a story of a Tibetan school guide, both of which serve as a critical commentary on the symptoms of the so-called “macdonaldisation of spirituality”⁴³ which shows how the countercultural heritage and the search for alternative forms of spirituality have been commercialised.

³⁶ T. Sobolewski, *W poszukiwaniu Bożego Ciała*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 2013, no. 220, p. 27.

³⁷ A. Wawrzycka, *W imię: to nie jest czas religii. Wywiad z Małgorzatą Szumowską*, <https://film.wp.pl/w-imie-to-nie-jest-czas-religii-wywiad-z-malgorzata-szumowska-6022783418934401a> [access: 29.05.2018].

³⁸ T. Sobolewski, *op. cit.*

³⁹ M. Radomski, *Człowiek nie umie żyć bez wiary. Wywiad z Małgorzatą Szumowską*, http://film.wp.pl/id,8569,name,Malgorzata-Szumowska,osoba_wywiady.html [access: 29.05.2018].

⁴⁰ A. Sobolewska, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–40.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 20. Anna Sobolewska marks also marginalization of the highly intellectual literature linked to the new spirituality in the present phase of the New Era which has been replaced by popular self-help books. See *Ibidem*, p. 15.

The sequence of miracles in the movies can be read as a postmodern rewriting of the metaphysical model of cinema (these miracles are material phenomena – signs of another dimension and pictures of ghosts of the dead). The irony is, however, neutralised by the belongings of the deceased, which play the role of opening to the other.⁴⁴ This is the role played in the film by pictures of the prosecutor's late wife and her shoes. The symbolism of the spiritualistic séance is a reversed sense of the hypnotic séance from *Bez końca*⁴⁵; reminiscing about Helena and summoning her spirit from the afterlife are supposed to help her close ones rebuild family bonds. Tadeusz Sobolewski points out that both elements of being, the material and the spiritual, “are of no importance one without the other. Through laughter Małgorzata Szumowska arrives at her own definition of faith.”⁴⁶ The miracle of transformation, of healing the bond between the daughter and the father during the failed grotesque spiritistic seance, takes place at a sacral time, on Easter morning.

The shots in *Twarz* in which a particular person or object is shown clearly with the rest remain blurred, evoke similarities to parable, an allegory about misfortune, the affliction of the other, and unhappy love and meeting with the other. At the same time from the very beginning of the movie – the prologue being a caricature of “Christmas sale for naked people” as a display of consumption and pop culture which escalate desires and eliminate spiritual life⁴⁷ – Szumowska shows in a critical light false religious rituals devoid of faith: a sinful pseudo-community convening in a provincial church, deaf to the evangelical message; a parson who is more of a manager than a preacher; a bishop who cannot distinguish someone of his faith – a Roma person – from a Muslim, and creates a triumphal vision of the Church by building a giant statue of Jesus King of Poland. Małgorzata Szumowska observes that in the church the idea of ecumenism and intra-religious discussion is in retreat and one can notice a return to *antes*-Second Vatican Council exclusivism.⁴⁸ Recurring scenes of confessions, in which the priest and the faithful concentrate only on the sin of impurity, show the shallowness of religious consciousness on both sides.⁴⁹ All those motifs go to show that the sphere of *profanum* overtakes that of *sacrum* in the reality presented.

Two characters provide counterpoints to this vision: Jacek and his sister, who is unique in her spiritual openness, straightforwardness, and ardent care for the other. In her character the element of Caritas (the scene of washing the brother in the hospital) is connected with a deep awareness of the freedom of human conscience, and her attitude is backed by her actions. The heroine is an embodiment of an individual version

⁴⁴ E.g. photos, shoes.

⁴⁵ The heroine in *Bez końca* attempts to erase her dead husband from her memory and set herself free from missing him.

⁴⁶ T. Sobolewski, *B/C. Wyzwalający śmiech Szumowskiej*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” z 5.03.2015, http://wyborcza.pl/1,75410,17519840,_Body_Cialo___Wyzwalajacy_smiech_Szumowskiej__SOBOLEWSKI_.html [access: 29.05.2018].

⁴⁷ The machine of pop culture uses also the content referring to spirituality, making out of it pure illusion. See B. Dobroczyński, *III Rzesza popkultury i inne stany*, Kraków 2004.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁴⁹ The phenomena of deficiencies in the religious consciousness also describes Anna Sobolewska, see *Ibidem*, p. 37.

of following Christ in which there is no place for fundamentalism. Such an approach may lead to the choice of religious homelessness.⁵⁰ It is important also to note that in these two Szumowska movies selected portraits of women are linked with the phenomena of *new spirituality*.⁵¹ When it comes to Jacek, he is a long-haired misfit living close to nature, one who listens to metal and drives dangerously in a small red Fiat with gnostic symbols hanging from its sides. These objects are only pretending to be occultist attributes: they do not serve for magical practices and do not lead the hero into a demonic sphere. This is not a sign of anti-Christian rhetoric in the movie, but a sign of an expressive personality. Jacek, searching for his own identity, which could be described as “*homo optiois*,” or a creation of a free man in the understanding of Herman Hesse.⁵² He lives in the local church community, works at the building site of the statue of Jesus, proposes to a girl he loves, and is compassionate towards his neighbours (the begging drunkards he supports call him Jesus).

The title of the movie is reminiscent of Emmanuel Levinas’ metaphor – the face of the Other in which a trace of God can be seen.⁵³ The metaphysical mystery of the image of another human being is confronted with the motif of the strangeness of the Other. Jacek becomes the Other, not recognized by others as their own, as a result of a dramatic accident. He survives, but becomes a stranger with a deformed face, and is shunned by society, his fiancé and even his own mother. His suffering is seen as a punishment and he is subjected to exorcisms, which is the sign of eternal semi-religious conviction that suffering is just punishment for sins.⁵⁴ The grotesque scene of casting the demon out of him shows the faithful’s weak faith, ignorance, and loss of a sense of rationality.⁵⁵ Jacek on the other hand, does not give up in spite of the suffering, and tries to protect the dignity of his fiancé, but rejected by his own people he ultimately leaves the community, which is consumed by distrust and a sense of menace.⁵⁶ Parallel to his deformed appearance is a vision symbolising the distortion of the evangelical message, which we find at the end of the movie – a shot of the statue of Jesus the King with his head twisted according to the bishop’s wish. The inhabitants of a small provincial town do not see Christ in their neighbour crippled in an accident. The image of Jesus as the prototype of the person of the immense monument is also “crippled,” symbolically maimed. The monument itself, as a result of human efforts, seems disconnected from the evangelical message.

Tadeusz Sobolewski’s claim that Małgorzata Szumowska is working out her own “religion of the cinema”⁵⁷ seems to be right. In seemingly secular movies, through

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 44–45.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 37, 43.

⁵³ See E. Lévinas, *Inaczej niż być lub ponad istotą*, transl. P. Mrówczyński, Warszawa 2000, p. 196, 269; K. Tarnowski, *Bóg u Lévinasa i Tischnera*, pp. 356–357 <http://bc.upjp2.edu.pl/Content/2430/tarnowski5.pdf> [access: 29.05.2018].

⁵⁴ A. Sobolewska, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that some sociologists and cultural studies scholars use, when describing the New Era phenomena, terms such as age of no-reason or new middle ages. *Ibidem*, p. 89.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

⁵⁷ T. Sobolewski, *W poszukiwaniu Bożego Ciała*, *op. cit.*

attempting to show the processes of the forming of *new spirituality* and the experiences it entails, she delivers a diagnosis of the contemporary reality as displaying post-secular traits with religious symbolism somewhere in the background. She is helped by the poetics of parables, hybridization of genres and elements of revealing humour. Her characters' attitudes are based on the struggle between the carnal and the spiritual, the rational and the irrational. They are associated with either reaching beyond the model of ritual religiosity – as not satisfying the “spiritual hunger” – or, stemming from the negation of searching for the *sacrum*, they make plain the futility of a life devoid of any references to the transcendental sphere; they show attempts at building a new individual spirituality as a search for a different path among those of dogmatism, fundamentalism and the “emptiness and regression of Neo-Darwinism.”⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ A. Sobolewska, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

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