

Dr Dorota Sajewska

Memory as an archive of performances. World War I in contemporary Polish theatre and visual arts

World War I is seldom, if ever, dealt with in Polish performing arts practice and history. While the years 1914–1918 have left us a great deal of visual records (photographs, films, postcards and posters), texts (soldiers' journals, frontline bulletins, legal documents), and artefacts (weapons, uniforms, military cemeteries), the actual war has been almost entirely repressed in Polish cultural and collective memory. According to the (often nationalistic) discourse dominating in Poland, the Great War was merely a necessary stage in the process through which the country regained its statehood after 123 years of being colonized by Russia, Prussia and Austro-Hungary. Moreover, the Great War has never really inspired the feelings of self-importance and victimisation that World War II does.

In my presentation, I would like to take a look at two exceptional, and symptomatic, attempts at representing, or rather theatralising, the experience of World War I by way of performing visual and textual documents: Tadeusz Kantor's legendary production *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* (1980) and the visual artist Karol Radziszewski's film *MS 101* (2012). I would essentially like to compare the work of two visual artists who have used the singular medium of theatricality to reinstate World War I in Polish culture by either calling attention to its absence or by giving it a phantasmic presence. While acknowledging the differences that become apparent when examining the way both works' utilise media and theatre, the direction of the actors, and their disparate aesthetics, scriptwriting techniques and narration, I would like to focus on the essentially similar way in which they attempt to draw out and showcase themes related to the Great War. In both instances, the war is recalled as a performance of a soldier's body augmented with historical documents.

In the vast literature on the work of Tadeusz Kantor, there has been no attempt to address the issue of the memory of World War I let alone the phantasm of the soldier as a distinct yet key element in his theatre work. That being said, the documentary or factographic presence of the year 1914 in his productions has, of course, been pointed out repeatedly. Most analyses of his Theatre of Death tend to universalise the experience of death, the category of individual memory and the identity of the artist, or – in line with the Christ/victim paradigm which dominates in Polish history – to transfer the weight of the First World War onto the Second World War, which, by way of its multi-million civilian casualties obscures the recollections of the often-equally-fratricidal battles of 1914-1918 experienced by Polish soldiers fighting in the ranks of the three partitioning nations.

This process in which the experiences of World War I soldiers are deprived of their autonomy, and through which these soldiers are rendered subordinate to the civilian deaths of World War II, as well as the not-entirely-warranted tendency for Poles to identify with the fate suffered by the Jews is wonderfully illustrated in a fragment of Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz's analysis of the concept and function of historical time in Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class*. In his book, titled *The Dead Memory Machine*, we read: "The historical time of the photographic plate of dead memory is made present by only two facts: the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the Kaiser's mobilization proclamation. These tidings of war are read from an old newspaper by the Cleaning Women, after which the "live" Beadle sings a fragment of the Austro-Hungarian national anthem. The First World War Soldier with his unending bayonet charge soon joins the procession of pupils around the school benches. Perhaps less literal but equally important to the performance are the references to the memory of victims of the Second World War: a kind of homage to the dead world, to the no longer existing community of Central European Jewry whose fate less than thirty years after

Sarajevo would be the Holocaust. The year 1914 from the dead newspapers foreshadows the years 1939–1945 – the time when the 20th century Golgotha was fulfilled...”¹

From that perspective, a historical document such as a newspaper from 1914 becomes merely a metaphor for future time. And since time ceases to be understood in a concrete and literal way it becomes ever easier to blur the categories of accountability, guilt and punishment, as well as the identities of the perpetrator and the victim. Similarly, by using the fate of Jewish Holocaust victims, Polish people mythologize the past and acquire the possibility of collective redemption for their own nation. This possibility also works in reverse – likewise applying to the “sin” committed during World War I. That is how, as Barthes would claim, myth takes hold of the sign and deprives history of its casual and material dimension. History subject to mythology enables meaningful shifts to take place: it allows us to relegate our won offenses into obscurity and/or appropriate obscurity as a means of realising our own phantasms.

This process of myth taking hold over the experiences of the Great War applies also to the discourse concerning *Wielopole, Wielopole*, even though the rank-and-file soldiers in period uniform huddled in the corner of Kantor's childhood room serve as a *deus ex machina*, setting memory in motion and catalysing the action on stage throughout the performance. To Kantor, as he reminisces on childhood, his childhood room becomes a *pars pro toto* for war, and the army a synonym for memory. In formulating the thesis that our memories reside in “a poor place,” “somewhere in a corner,” “behind a door,” and “in the back and on the peripheries of the room,”² and simultaneously placing the soldiers in just such places on the stage, Kantor shows the initially-fundamental obscurity of history and the power of memory’s gradual appropriation of the present inherent in that obscurity.

¹ Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz, *The Dead Memory Machine. Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death*, trans. William Brand, cricoteca, Kraków 1994, p. 78.

² Tadeusz Kantor, *Wielopole, Wielopole. Partytura teatralna*, in: Tadeusz Kantor, *Wielopole, Wielopole*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1984, p. 33.

Significantly, this collective body was taken from a photograph in Kantor's possession – a family heirloom, and a visual document left behind by History. In a way, the “Photograph of Recruits” at the roots of *Wielopole, Wielopole* encapsulates the entire structure of the piece, embodying as it does the Theatre of Death in the dual sense of Barthesian *punctum* and a representation of those who – being eternally dead – can always come back to life and continually set in motion performances of the memory. In reference to the “Photograph of Recruits,” so crucial to this analysis, Denis Bablet writes that even though it served Kantor as a “source of inspiration for *Wielopole, Wielopole*, it does not appear anywhere in the play; Kantor keeps it close to his chest, in his closet of privacy.”³ Though this precise and actually-extant photograph – inscribed on the back with the date 12 September 1914 and depicting Kantor’s father Marian seated in the left corner – never appears as a material object, it is present throughout the entire play, even dictating the play’s staging, and, above all, giving rise to a concept of memory as a sort of depot or archive of performances.

In his article *Metaphor for Memory*, Günter Butzer indicates that the depot metaphor represents one of the foremost functions of memory, namely “memory’s ability to collect and, consequently, faithfully retain content,” while at the same time implying an “externalization of memory, presenting it as a product of technology, albeit one that is rooted in the corporeal.”⁴ The link between the body and technology brilliantly demonstrates the kinship between the act of recalling historical events and performance. Memory can be thought of as a depot of performances which are recalled as necessary and re-enacted as a repeat action – a sort of “re-performance.” It is worthwhile to mention here that a fundamental quality of *Wielopole, Wielopole* is that it was never a reflection, and hence a representation, of something that existed before-hand, but rather a “re-performance” – a repetition of a body’s

³ Denis Bablet, *Tadeusz Kantor i fotografia*, przeł. Oskar Hedemann, in: *Fotografie Jacque Bablet*, ed. Anna Halczak, Ewa Ryżewska, cricoteca, Kraków 2009, p. 26.

⁴ G. Butzer, *Metaforyka pamięci*, przeł. Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, in: *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, ed. Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Universitas, Kraków 2009, p. 185 i 186.

virtual presence in seemingly defined spatial and temporal conditions but actually ones that are in dynamic flux as a function of the memory being a depot, or more specifically, an archive. This notion is doubtlessly already made problematic by its assumption that an event is documented in the memory; that an event can be stored.

Really, the only material to showcase (or, perhaps, to preserve) this potential of a document to be a basis for a bodily performance in *Wielopole, Wielopole* is Andrzej Sapija's film recording of the play. Among the five recordings of *Wielopole, Wielopole* in existence, Sapija's is characterised by a very specific perspective – it was produced not as a potentially “objective” recording of the play but as a film, a distinct work of art, and simultaneously an artistically-treated documentation of a no-longer-existing performance. Sapija created his film on the basis of two recordings of *Wielopole, Wielopole* – one which took place in the Wielopole Skrzyńskie church, to which Kantor returned after a prolonged absence in 1983, and a performance in Sokoła Hall specifically held for the purpose of making a recording for television broadcast (1980). The film, therefore, combines two versions which are drastically different with respect to the space, context and audience, and especially in their energy. Moreover, Sapija makes use of other source materials in his film, expanding *Wielopole, Wielopole's* documentary basis. These include a fragment of a genuine World War I documentary film depicting soldiers marching along to the song *Piechota ta szara piechota* which Kantor incorporated into his play; the already-mentioned “Photograph of Recruits;” outdoor photographs portraying Wielopole landscapes and ones showing local military cemeteries with World-War-I-era graves; Tadeusz Kantor's family photos depicting people who were prototypes for the characters appearing on stage; and finally, the artist's records from rehearsals which comment on and sometimes explain the status of the characters, meanings and stage behaviours. All of these materials edited into the film constitute an accompanying narrative that runs parallel to the one on stage. Additionally, as asserted by

Andrzej Sapija, the act of playing back the documentary film in stop-motion spawned the idea for the structure of Kantor's later play *Today Is My Birthday*. It can therefore be said that the method of archiving the production became an inspiration for Kantor's further ruminations on the issue of "photographic plates of memory."

The notion of a "photographic plate of memory" is obviously one of the predominant philosophical categories in Kantor's theatre; indispensable, according to the artist, to comprehending the specifics of the performative aspects of memory: "Memory is like a card index of photographic plates. We never recall an activity because you need a special psychological makeup to imagine an action. But when I recall something, it is a static image, though one that does have its movement: it fades and reappears; what I call "pulsing," "memory plate pulsing," the result of which was my method of repetition. It was a repetition of a movement or a situation to the point that it eventually disperses into space."⁵ We should recall that this idea was born out of photographic experimentation, or more precisely, out of attempts to make photos and the photo camera an integral part of a stage performance. The camera appearing in the first scene of *Wielopole, Wielopole* is meant to signal a manipulation of time, to expose a certain way of "creeping up on its mechanisms from behind."⁶

In *Wielopole, Wielopole* we witness a congenial condensation of historical and subjective time, and of collective and individual memory through a soldier's bodily performance. The army constitutes a collective body; a gigantic human machine subordinated to a "monstrous penal geometry." Being radically strange, soldiers are reduced to "base level" – to the realm of instinct, animality and primality tightly concealed under a uniform of culture. This aspect is astutely illustrated by the play's most brutal scenes, like the one in which Polish soldiers transform into a firing squad that sprays the Little Rabbi with bullets to

⁵ *O fotografii z Tadeuszem Kantorem – Tadeusz Kantor on photography*, interview with Tadeusz Kantor by Andrzej Matybia, „Projekt“, 3, Warszawa 1987, p. 20.

⁶ Andrzej Węmiński, *Miedzy Umarłą Klasą a Wielopolem, Wielopolem*, in: *Teatr Pamięci Tadeusza Kantora. Wypisy z przeszłości*, ed. Józef Chrobak, Marek Wilk, Muzeum Regionalne w Dębicy, Dębica 2008, p. 28.

the words of a well-known soldier's song ("and for our Poland they go to battle"). Kantor takes another approach in addressing the common perception of legionnaires fighting for independence in another scene, where the soldiers commit a gang rape of the mother Helka.

In this general manifestation of the distinctness of the human species that is the military, we notice coming to the fore Kantor's feeling of strangeness towards the soldier Father. It is he who (as a soldier in the Austrian army from 1906) departs for the front on 29 July 1914 to never again return to his wife, who is at that time carrying their second child. He gradually attains the rank of a character reduced to the uniform he wears, one that is animalistic, brutal and in stark contrast to the civilians, including Tadeusz Kantor himself. As he paces the childhood room, the Father is without a doubt the most ghastly character in the play. On the one hand he demonstrates the legion's political dependence on the Austrian army by clearly performing the Austrian parade step, while on the other hand being that element of the collective body which is the most insubordinate – he often breaks from the rhythm and regularity that lends organic unity to units of soldiers; he falls out of this regularly-timed mechanism like a piece that is broken, like a dilapidated part. The Father finally embodies the concept of psychological time permeating the play, the kind that is associated with individual, emotional-corporeal memory, which, as it turns out, works in exactly the opposite direction than the historical narrative that represses World War I through experiences of World War II.

Marian Kantor appears in the play as a deceased legionnaire, though in reality the artist's father died only in 1942, in Auschwitz. In the father's "premature" death we see a gesture that is characteristic of Kantor, in which he places the status of Deceased on all of the figures in his Theatre of Death. Moreover, in this gesture we can also detect a certain "patricide" committed in the symbolic realm by a yet-unborn son. So, what does it mean if we suppose that the hero of *Wielopole, Wielopole* is the yet-unborn son? Could it be that the exercises in memory we are faced with in the play are in reality a more radical concept than

we might assume? So, let us try to radicalise it even further and see in the figure of the returning dead soldier Father a histrionic reflection – a sort of mirror-image of the unborn son. Such an interpretation is hinted at by Kantor himself when he beckons us to discern ourselves in the strange and uncanny organism that is the army: “It is us! But STRANGE! As if we were looking at ourselves for the first time, but from ‘the side’, meaning dead. That is why the (marching) ARMY attracts us so strongly. Its strict and implacable-as-death condition reveals a picture of us ourselves.”

In Klaus Theweleit wonderful book *Männerphantasien*, which analyses the concept of the man-soldier (“der soldatische Mann”), we encounter the term “not-yet-fully-born” as a reference to an ego which “explodes beyond the boundaries of the family, to find itself confronted by molar unities – others, its country, the universe. It attempts either to incorporate these into itself or to be assimilated into them.”⁷ Employing psychoanalytic interpretation tools, Theweleit applies the term to people who have experienced painful ordeals in childhood, which in turn strongly determine or even replace their adult life. The “not-yet-fully-born” is therefore incapable of overcoming the feeling of bodily fragmentation and disintegration that is normal in childhood. The consequence of such a dysfunctional process in the formation of the “I” in which the “pain principle” (*Schmerzprinzip*) replaces the “pleasure principle” (*Lustprinzip*) is, according to Theweleit, an inability in adulthood to recognize work, love, birth and cognition as separate from acts of violence.

The effect of this inability to forge an adult identity and the permanent compulsion to return to childhood is – as is characteristic of Kantor’s works – a mounting fear of life accompanied by a celebration of death. In *Wielopole, Wielopole*, a key function in this fear of birth is played by the photograph, which, while taking the place of rituals that are dying out in contemporary society, cannot fully replace them, and, moreover, does not trigger – as

⁷ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, transl. Erica Carter, Chris Turner, Stephen Conway, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, s. 252.

suggested by Sławomir Sikora – the ability to convert “suffering into grief.”⁸ In *Wielopole, Wielopole*, this secular ritual of repeated suffering without the ability to work through it becomes manifest by the inclusion of the act of taking photographs in the play. This act is accompanied on stage by both the personage and the perspective of the photographer (in *Wielopole, Wielopole* this is the photographer’s widow), the medium used in the act (meaning the photo camera), and finally, the persons being photographed, whose corporeality becomes somewhat formatted, skewed and subjugated by the camera as they appear in this setting. Astutely pointing out this bodily transformation carried out by Kantor, Denis Bablet writes: “these are not action shots but poses [...] in which the figures stand motionless, embarrassed or astonished, or make faces expressing displeasure, aggression, politeness, or simply the typical look of someone posing for a picture for posterity. [...] The person captured in them in fact does not exist, yet they live somewhere between the present and the future, in a moment that has been brutally frozen.”⁹ In *Wielopole, Wielopole*, this brutality is expressed in a two-fold way: the camera literally becomes a machine gun, revealing a strong connection between the violence of taking a photograph and the act of killing, while the photographer’s widow, who inherits the implements of death after her husband’s passing, herself becomes a metaphor for death, as we often encounter among female characters in Kantor’s plays.

Denis Bablet identifies another significance in a photo camera being held by a woman: “The object which she operates is an ersatz photo camera. It is threatening, made entirely of metal and patterned after implements of warfare, which are as threatening as they are primitive: this thing resembles both a machine gun and a bazooka. But it also resembles a “sexual” weapon, like a sudden erection.”¹⁰ This doubly aided (by the woman and by technology) simulation of the sexual act, male masturbation performed by female hands, is

⁸ Sławomir Sikora, *Fotografia: pamięć i egzystencja*, w: *Fotografia. Od dagerotypu do galerii Hybrydy*, ed. D. Jackiewicz, Z. Jurkowlaniec, Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, Warszawa 2008, p. 9.

⁹ Denis Bablet, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.19.

reflected in the fellatio scene which opens Karol Radziszewski's film *MS 101*. Here we see soon-to-be World War I soldier Ludwig Wittgenstein in a Vienna park having his homosexual desires fulfilled by an anonymous man to a serenade by Franz Schubert ending with the words *Come delight me / Come delight me / delight me*.

Both scenes support Klaus Theweleit's thesis on the self-reflective nature of discourse on war, based on the fact that the one given centre stage in war is the man who writes about it: "He is either the source of, or is in some way connected to, every explosion; the end of the world is staged on his behalf and from within him. The arena of war is first and foremost his own body; a body poised to penetrate other bodies and mangle them in its embrace."¹¹ It must be underscored here that this diagnosis is completely transparent in Kantor's work – the story of the man-soldier who appropriates the space of discourse on collective memory unfolds here within a traditional family structure, which is characterized by multigenerationality, authority of the elders, the central role of religion, and ultimately the perspectives of Kantor/Artist as they dictate the reality on stage. In the case of Radziszewski, the awareness of man's privileged position in the shaping of history and the masculine character of historical narrative becomes a jumping-off point for this artist's methods in utilizing and presenting historical documents.

Unlike Kantor's play, which is derived from an image, Karol Radziszewski's *MS 101* was inspired by an anecdote jotted down in a wartime diary. It concerns the possible encounter, in Krakow during WWI, of two great figures of European culture: the soldier-philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the wounded poet Georg Trakl. Radziszewski's account of their potential, yet never consumed relationship with (homo)sexual overtones set against the backdrop of History relies on Wittgenstein's *Diaries* and letters between Wittgenstein,

¹¹ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, *op.cit.*, p. 191.

Trakl and the former lover, David Pincet, but also on a number of other text documents from the period, including works by Sigmund Freud, Otto Weininger and Thomas Mann.

Only on the surface does Radziszewski's work comply with the conviction of post-Derridist memory theorists that in essence "the actual and final location of memory is in textuality, or rather intertextuality."¹² Of course, for Radziszewski there is no such thing as a pure, unmarked body – it is always a vessel or a tool for knowledge/power. That is why, from the outset, the spoken narration addresses the idea of the discursivity of the body and its embroilment in a series of linguistic apparatus: sexual, psychological, political. What is interesting is that this narration is provided by an unseen woman who functions in the story as something of an unseen though ever-present Great Gay Mother, who stands as a mirror image to the figure orchestrating the stage proceedings, i.e. Kantor – Great Male Artist.

Additionally, *MS 101* reveals a polemic tone towards Foucault's thesis in his *The Will to Knowledge* that discourse on sex equals nothing more than sexual repression. To examine the functioning of discourse more closely, Radziszewski places the male body of the soldier in a warzone, and thus, in an exceptional situation where biopolitics is at stake. By placing the body in spaces or institutions that exert a strict discipline on them, like a military hospital or psychiatric ward, he surreptitiously explores their emancipatory potential. This transformation is carried out in *MS 101* through specific use of text documents, historical spaces and museum objects. For Radziszewski, these real places ("military hospital, ward number 5 for psychiatric and kidney disorders") and objects (military uniforms, weapons) undergo an instantaneous process of theatricalisation and become nothing more than decorations, stage dressing, props.

This open theatricality, and especially the methods used to achieve it, i.e. the strategy of revealing what is behind the scenes or utilising the *blue box* technique, can be interpreted as intertextual allusions to the films of Derek Jarman (*Wittgenstein* and *Blue*). However, we

¹² Butzer, s. 193.

can also identify in the theatricality a medium for the realization of emancipatory potential through making the phantasm into the main axis in the creation of the story as well as a narrative on it. The phantasm – hence, a certain dramatised imaginary scenario – is the principle reason for utilizing theatrical masks, costumes and illusion as methods for incorporating historical documents. Only when the document and biography clash with theatricality does incompatibility emerge, as well as the relativity of these representational codes.

“It seems that... my coming to this world must have been... a hard blow. Nothing will ever come of me” – these words by Wittgenstein are reminiscent of the words spoken by Kantor’s Father to his son Tadeusz in Kantor’s final play *Today Is My Birthday*: “I always said nothing would come of him.” The spirit of the Father also looms over Ludwig Wittgenstein. The domineering figure of the Father surfaces in Ludwig’s recollections on his family, on his brothers, who resorted to emigration in an effort to escape the father’s repressive influence, with two of them eventually committing suicide. Rudi was a homosexual like his brother Ludwig. The Father, however, appears above all as a certain cultural ideal. This is well illustrated by a moment when Wittgenstein performs his transformation from a civilian to a soldier – he removes his civilian clothes and puts on his uniform and jackboots. This ritual transformation is set to the characteristic words: “If you write nice now, father will give you a nice horse. Horse! Horse, horse! Repeat after me: I want to be a gallant rider, like my father was before me. Remember! I want be a gallant rider, like my father was before me. Father!” The dual father figure – of the head of the family and of God the Father – eventually becomes the reason behind the converted Wittgenstein’s obsession with death as well as Trakl’s self-inflicted death. Placing the pistol in his mouth, Trakl recites these characteristic words: “Dear Lord, if you let me return home safely from the war, my son will not be a priest, but a prelate, a bishop, a cardinal or even the Pope!”

The story told in *MS 101* is not aimed at any single father in particular but at the central patriarchal figure, at the phallus-father, who is responsible for war at large. As a homosexual soldier in the war and as the lover of Pincet – a soldier in the enemy British army – Wittgenstein eschews actively doing battle on the frontlines in the name of the Father in favour of leisurely creating phantasms of his lover's nude body, of sexual fulfilment. But due to being at the front, this fulfilment can only be realised through the recurring motif of “rubbing sperm into his uniform.” That is why, when the possibility of a rendezvous with Trakl arises, Wittgenstein goes to see him in the hospital, to carry out in full – though not without reservations – his homosexual desires: “I am thrilled with the anticipation and hope of meeting Trakl. For a few months now I have been having blood in my stool again and also have some pain.”

In its celebration of the anus alone, male homosexuality is at odds with the rules of phallogratically organised social and military structure. “The first organ to be excluded from the social domain, the first to be made private was the anus. Just as money created the new state of abstract circulation, the anus provided the model for privatization,”¹³ write Deleuze and Guattari in *The Anti-Oedipus*. Bringing the anus to the phallus-governed field of battle signifies a breaking down of social barriers, an encroachment on restricted terrain, an invasion by the spirit of revolution. The homosexual soldier's body radically privatizes a strongly public function, demolishes the existing hierarchical model of identification that is centred on the figure of the Father projecting from the summit of the pyramid of power like a Great Phallus. “Ours is a phallogratic society,” asserts Guy Hocquenghem in *Homosexual Desire*, his shrewd interpretation of Deleuze's and Guattari's views, “inasmuch as social relationships as a whole are contracted according to hierarchy, which reveals the transcendence of the great signifier. The schoolmaster, the general and the departmental manager are the father-phallus;

¹³ In: Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Danielle Dangoor, London: Allison and Busby, 1978, p. 96.

everything is organized according to the pyramidal mode, by which the Oedipal signifier allocates the various levels and identifications. The body gathers round the phallus like society round the chief.”¹⁴ In *MS 101*, the war turns into a struggle between the phallus and the anus, a battlegrounds for opposing constructs of masculinity, a homosexual man’s attempt at finding his place in the patriarchy, and finally, a frame in which the emancipation of homosexual identity can transpire through the effect of strangeness elicited by the tension between the cultural and disciplined image of the man-soldier and the sexual openness of the film’s main characters.

On a visual level, Radziszewski’s film is above all a series of bodily performances – ranging from the little death to actual death (from fellatio to numerous instances of masturbation to Trakl’s death by suicide and, finally, to Pincet’s death from a war wound) – which, however, do not claim a right to the radical directness of genuine performance but rather reveal their own falseness, similitude and manifold dependencies. Undoubtedly, the openly exhibited theatricality plays a role in raising the curtain on the politics behind Polish memory by telling non-heteronormative stories and creating alternative representational codes and memory images. Through the prism of a melodramatic story of soldiers’ homosexual fantasies, the war is presented in an entirely different way than in the functioning memory plates on the subject. Here, we do not find the common visual framework of the Great War: the images of trenches so well known from films and photographs, with their rats and lice and filth and gas and piles of dead bodies. The war is not depicted from the perspective of the battlefield but from the borderlands that were partly in and partly out of bounds to warfare, to the dynamics of war, such as woods or a military hospital. Here, these places become *de facto* shelters from the battlefield, they afford men a temporary escape from the soldier’s identity and act as a sort of wartime liminal zone (no longer a soldier but not yet a civilian). It is this

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

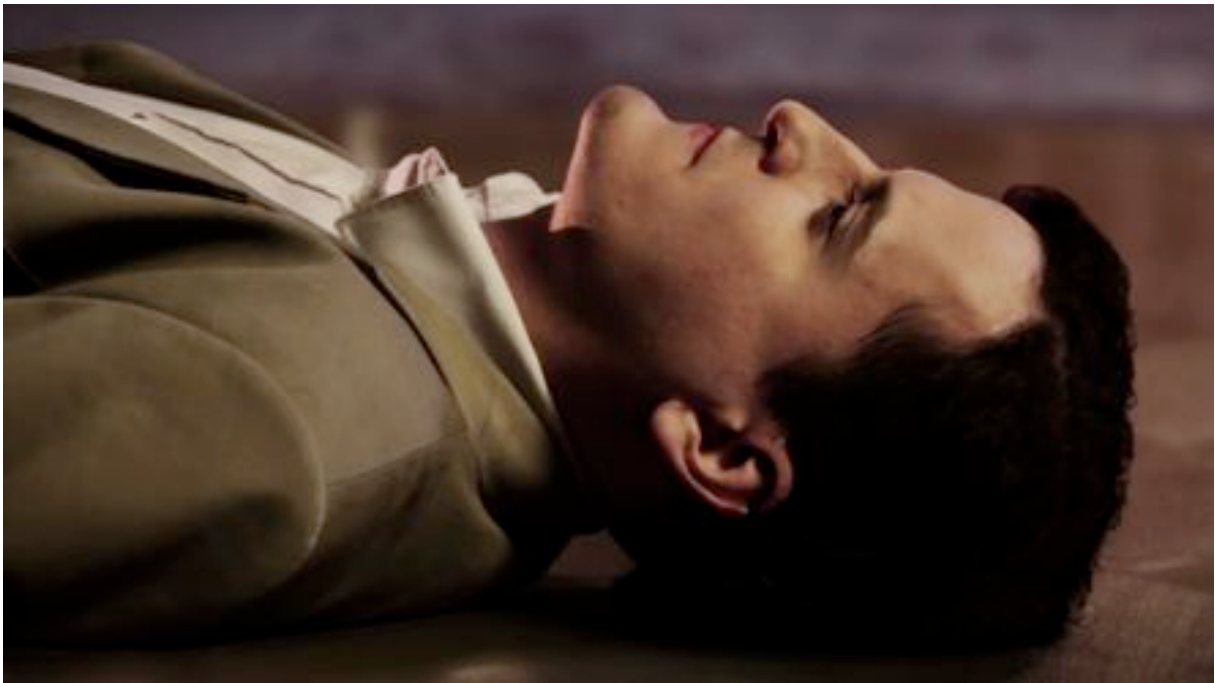
very liminality that enables a momentary suspension of military laws and regulations, as well as a removal of the uniform towards nakedness – a shedding of this masculine girdle and at least a partial exposure of what's beneath.

“By means of a double negative the liar is forced to tell the truth. Thanks to double negative the liar is forced to reveal his own identity” – are the words uttered at the end of the film alluding to the story of the village of truth-tellers and the village of liars in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. At the same time, these words sum up the story told in *MS 101* – from the perspective of a double negation we arrive at – despite a lack of historical documents – a possible (and credible) identification of a Polish artist with the depicted figures of soldiers (and simultaneously artists/philosophers) belonging to an opposing army, as well as Radziszewski's identification as an openly gay Polish Catholic with an Austrian homosexual Jew. This double exclusion in the context of the phallocratic system responsible for the war becomes a double overcoming in Radziszewski's film: in creating a common front between those about whom Polish history is all too silent or those who are deprived of a voice – Jews and homosexuals. Lying in a hospital bed, Trakl says these words on the matter: “The theatre of masks. The theatre of masks, as I mean it, is of a spiritualist character. Therefore it is perhaps also that only Jews will tend towards this theatre”.

The author of the screenplay, Wojciech Szymbański, suggests that merely the violation of “the (hetero)normative aesthetic rule of *decorum* governing all narratives on war, this ‘extract of Polishness,’” constitutes a kind of breakthrough in Polish cultural history. Though he rightly adds that “this nevertheless does not mean that the *decorum* governing war stories based on texts and images that form Polish memory does not address certain subjects because they simply do not exist. It means that, as we read in the final statement of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must

be silent.”¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason why the story told in *MS 101* turns to Austrian and British artist-soldier figures, indicating that Polish memory of World War I includes no alternative stories at all because it is devoid of any sources documenting erotic relations between soldiers or continues to cover up such sources.

¹⁵ Wojciech Szumański, *Obraz Wielkiej Wojny. MS 101 i homoeroiczna pamięć figuratywna*, in: *Grolsch - ArtBoom Festival w Krakowie, Twierdza Kraków, 15-29 czerwca 2012*, Krakowskie Biuro Festiwalowe, Kraków 2012, p. 43.

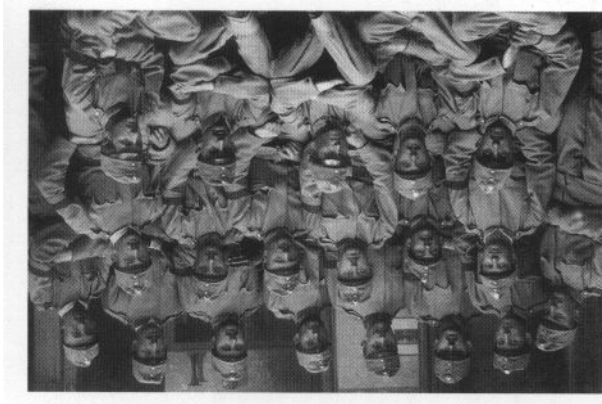












Credits: Tadeusz Kantor archive, MS101 by Karol Radziszewski