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Przypadek. Kategoria egzystencjalna i artystyczna w literaturze i filmie.

(Summary)

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SUMMARY

CHANCE. EXISTENTIAL AND ARTISTIC CATEGORY IN FILM AND LITERATURE

Chance is a category hitherto described in natural sciences (particularly in quantum physics and chaos theory) and philosophy, but which has not been systematically described in literature and film studies – particularly those based on modern philosophy. Yet chance, apart from having often been a creative principle in twentieth-century art, has also been the subject of books and films, not only within popular culture. Today, chance is seen as one of the basic categories of ontology and epistemology.

The present book is inspired by broadly understood interdisciplinary studies, linking three research perspectives: philosophy, literature studies and film studies, topped by a metatheoretical reflection on so-called interdisciplinarity (with its inherent diversity and methodological clashes). These perspectives are used to order the selected film and literary material on two levels which are summed up in the book's title. The first, purely theoretical level aims at formulating a *theory* of chance, pertinent to both narrative arts (from Ancient Greek tragedy through all narrative types up to modern popular art forms) and its reflection in the language and form of a work of art (destabilising forces within linguistic systems, hypothetical mode, collage). The second, more interpretative level addresses chance as *subject* of a work of art, offering a philosophical reflection and aiming to formulate a 'philosophy of chance', no necessarily common to all realizations. Both levels show an obsession with chance of modern artists; analysis of their works indicates that the paradigm of human condition is based on chance: chance conditions life, changes the character, governs destiny. Chance becomes the catalyst or inhibitor of destiny.

Major introductory issues (addressed in Chapter 1) include discussing the key philosophical traditions, such as Gottfried W. Leibniz, whose rational thought pushes the fundamental question: how is chance possible on the best of worlds? Leibniz's answer is the 'sufficient reason' – a necessary being that embraces all possibilities, thus also chance. Chance, as opposed to reason, never appears without cause and is always a part of the chain of being. Leibniz's philosophy allows a reflection on chance as metaphysical category, a fact that was subsequently referred to by other scholars (such as Saul A. Kripke, David Lewis and Umberto Eco), but also writers and directors in their construction of 'possible worlds' and other theories. The modern concept most often quoted in the present book is Odo Marquard's 'defence of the accidental' ('Apologie des Zufälligen'), which may also be described as an existential project. This philosophical current is particularly relevant for the analysis of artistic phenomena at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century, for several reasons. Firstly, Marquard

formulated the eponymous ‘defence of the accidental’ with its key premise: “It is necessary to save what is accidental, because only to this man owes his reality”. Secondly, Marquard opposed his concept (at the same time negating it) to the ubiquitous ‘programme of absolutization of man’, according to which “persons are not the effect of accidental circumstances, but solely of their own, absolute choice”. Thirdly, Marquard suggested a compromise definition of destiny which he called a ‘randomly accidental stroke of fate’. A large portion of this chapter is devoted to the analysis of the phenomenon of ‘chance in interpretation’, as advocated by Stanisław Lem. His famous *Philosophy of Chance* gave a theory of chance as a decisive category for all cognitive processes. Lem’s treatise, in fact a concept of perception poetics, proved particularly useful in the context of chance and interpretation studies.

The ‘existential category’ mentioned in the present book’s title is treated not only as a motive in literature and film, but also as a crossroads of several representative theoretical issues, linking poetics to existence and related statements about the status of chance in modern culture. Hence the composition of the three central chapters (2–4) reflects the order of issues selected from a wide range of possibilities. The employed methodology pictures conventional wisdom, often mirrored by art, but also points out to specific philosophical issues in specific artistic creations. These are not seen as illustrations of philosophical premises, but as independent attempts at solving the mystery of chance. In interdisciplinary discourse, both forms of expression – art and philosophy – may be examined on equal rights; accordingly, purely analytical sections of this book run parallel to reflection on selected philosophical concepts. In looking at various issues and ‘common points’ of philosophy, literature and film, I start with generic methodological reflection on the relationship between discourses, while my target point is a characteristic of those processes which – influenced by chance studies – change these relationships. Literature and film directly refer to reality. In this sense, as disciplines of art, they are privileged. Analysis indicates that chance is a category particularly useful in such attempts to order relations between literature/film and philosophy. Chance may be treated not only as *tertium comparationis*, but also as a factor changing the way of thinking and initiating new relations between philosophy and art; speaking more generally, the former’s certainty is weakened, while the latter is ennobled.

Chapter 2, *Poetry and philosophy*, opens with a theoretical interdisciplinary introduction and follows with Stéphane Mallarmé’s famous poem *One Toss of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance* (*Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*), whose form and content show destiny ‘shattered’ in the face of chance. The following section on surrealism addresses the relationship between creative principle and creation subject, examined through the category of chance. My thread of reasoning runs between remarks on the game of ‘playing a cadaver’ (‘cadavre exquis’) and the analysis of the ‘objective chance’ phenomenon, supposedly an evidence for the existence of surreality. This chapter also discusses selected poetic images of chance that could be called topical, but in the work of various poets become distinctive philosophical suggestions

(such as the subject of 'love at first sight' in poems by Wisława Szymborska, Stanisław Barańczak and Jacek Podsiadło). The chapter concludes with an extended discussion of the poetic work of Wisława Szymborska, whose deep interest in randomness is a unique phenomenon in world poetry.

Chapter 3, *Chance in the art of the novel*, focuses chiefly on the major literary form of the novel, within which chance is seen as a prerequisite of any events. The starting point here are 'coincidences', which are stable elements of the language of novel theories (mostly from the eighteenth century), usually described with the same words: chance, case, adventure. Within this tradition coincidences (always in the plural) add up to one narrative, become synonymous with it. The key premise here is that chance is a prerequisite of plot, and that this plot represents a vision of the world. My reflection on the novel unconventionally starts with Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus the King*, in which the character's 'non-culpable guilt' may also be read as accidental guilt. I follow with a discussion of existentialist philosophy and its main representatives: philosophers and writer (Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus). In more recent times, the interesting phenomenon of overlapping fiction and reality appears – the example of Paul Auster' work shows that chance is a category that blurs the boundaries between the two levels. Three unusual detective novels, addressing the issue of Chance as vehicle of events (*Cosmos* by Witold Gombrowicz, *The Chain of Chance* (original title *Katar*) by Stanisław Lem and *The City of Glass* by Paul Auster) form an interesting trend, which I examine from the genealogical point of view. Next, I discuss selected threads from novels and essays of Milan Kundera (in relation to the philosophical approach of Richard Rorty and Odo Marquard), concluding with the issue of chance as a turning point in novel (on the example of Ida Fink's *The Journey*) and as Heideggerian 'event' (*das Ereignis*).

Chapter 4, *Film and the 'philosophy of chance'*, opens with a generic discussion of randomness in film. The main object of my analysis is a tendency in modern cinema, illustrated by a series of related movies that create a sort of genre. I discuss, among others, *A Blind Chance* by Krzysztof Kieślowski, *Groundhog Day* by Harold Ramis, Krzysztof Zanussi's *Hypothesis*, *Run Lola Run (Lola rennt)* by Tom Tykwer. Apart from focusing on chance, these movies in a way suspend mimetic narrative and do not try to imitate life. They can be understood either as 'impossible stories' or as 'intentional stories'. Thus, giving up mimetism underlines form. In this metatextual gesture, the true nature of these movies is revealed: they belong to texts-lectures, conceptual takes of the 'philosophy of chance'. An opposite tendency may be observed in the romantic comedy genre, which is based on 'imitating chance'. A separate section (*Chance and mystery*) is dedicated to the work of Michelangelo Antonioni and the role of chance in the construction of his plots and personalities of his characters. One of the premises of this chapter is that in modern art, the tragic element is weakened and transformed into irony of fate. I discuss this on the example of two film genres: melodrama and romantic comedy. Irony of fate, through its presence in everyday language, becomes a category encompassing every human story. Thus the line of life

(existence) is drawn by elements of the work's construction and literary devices (poetics). Another issue is the role of chance in the film theory of possible worlds, touching other issues such as fiction, probability, 'possible worlds' within the movie, conditional mode of film narrative, and bi- or tripartite composition of selected movies that narrate possible versions of the character's life. The last section of this chapter (*The same and other. On the identity of the character/viewer/film*) is dedicated to the interpretation of one movie crucial to my reasoning: Kieślowski's *A Blind Chance*. Here I conclude my reflection on the role of the category of chance in the evolution of film and thinking about film.

My analyses show that the majority of artists have addressed not only the issue of 'how to write about chance', but also 'how to show chance' within the ontology of the represented world. I aim to show the inner diversity of my title category: in the work of art, chance is not any event, but the starting point of the plot, the turning point of destiny, the axis of life. The question, 'how to order events?' points to their existential meaning, available to both the characters and the reader/viewer.

Such vivid interest in the category of chance may be linked to past narratives and autobiographical tendencies, together with theories of these forms of expression, present particularly in narrative studies (from Greimas to Ricoeur). Any fiction and true story is ordered on the level of narrative, and only from this point of view an event may be qualified as 'random' when no explanation can be found for it. In looking at how a plot narrative is shaped, however, we may ask what a given event means and what is its role in existence. The relationship between fiction and reality (or rather literature/film and life) proves particularly important. Chance turns out to be a medium between these two spheres, differentiating them, and more often complicating relations between them. Through its presence in art, chance discloses the rules of shaping reality, thus also the rules of reality itself.

Art also brings various images of human reaction to chance: from horror (in Mallarmé's *Toss of the Dice*) and helplessness to apology or at least acceptance, expressed, according to Marquard, by laughter and tears. The role of the existential category of chance in art may also be interpreted as a reaction to any system; in this meaning, it has been particularly relevant on the Polish cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, whose major topic was freedom. In movies by Kieślowski or Zanussi, chance became a useful weapon against politically understood determinism, and a source of alternative thinking (relationship between 'possible worlds' and 'current world').

When trying to answer the metaphysical question of the structure of the world, chance may prove to be a useful door opener. It has also caused these answers to represent a non-fatalistic vision of the world, already evident in surrealism, then in existentialism, but also noticeable today in popular culture. Random-characterised processes indicate a certain 'weakening' of philosophical or aesthetical categories. For example, theodicy is today called 'tribunalization' (man accuses God and other men of the world's evil), while tragedy becomes irony of fate (a non-axiological category). The latter shift seems particularly important, related to the disappearance of tragedy,

the crisis of 'philosophy of fate' and, proportionally to this disappearance, the rising feeling of randomness of existence, substantiating the hypothesis of the 'disenchantment', secularization of the world.

The present book's various chapters do not so much attempt to define chance, but rather to show it as it is represented in works of art and opinions of their authors. This plurality of definitions is best changed into a kind of paradoxicality, stemming primarily from the category of chance existing 'in between': between the perceptive horizon of the reader/viewer and scholarly theories, between conventional wisdom and knowledge, between autcreation ('defence of the accidental') and universality, understood as transcendence, and even elimination, of chance; and finally, between what man in his subjective opinion defines as chance and notions that are opposed (such as necessity, destiny, providence) and complementary (non-culpable guilt, beginning of biography change).

While the metaphysical notion of chance is as old as human thought in general, the two human approaches I draw in this book, that can be summarized as theocentric and anthropocentric together with their new centres: science and technique, do visibly clash only in Leibniz's *Theodicy*. Hence this human approach may be placed between 'naive' and 'tragic' optimism, and the rise of the 'defence of the accidental' may be related to the secularization of culture, philosophy and science. For modern human sciences, chance remains a crucial category. Its interpretation has long lost its unequivocal bond with physics and now falls within the centre of human sciences. Chance has been interpreted 'philosophically' by, among others, Jacques-Lucien Monod, François Jacob and Gilles Deleuze. From today's point of view, chance is both an epistemological (it can be an interpretative key) and ontological category (when it is included in the structure of an examined world). It also becomes a fundamental category in modern philosophical anthropology.

Translated by Wojciech Bońkowski