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People's rethinking Polunin's pantomime act *10,000-meter race* (1981)
after reviewing the materials about "The Death Run" (1959):
an empirical study

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Переосмысление пантомимы В. Полунина
«Забег на 10 000 метров» (1981)
после ознакомления с материалами о «Забеге смерти» (1959):
эмпирическое исследование

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In the initial stage of our study, participants were shown Polunin's pantomime *10,000-Meter Race* (1981), in which he portrayed a runner growing increasingly exhausted through different stages of the race. In individual interviews, participants were asked about their impressions of the pantomime. Then an emergent turn in the research occurred. One of the participants found and sent the interviewer information about a real competition between American and Soviet runners during the Cold War (Philadelphia, 1959). In that 10,000-meter race, held under conditions of extreme heat and humidity, athletes – striving to defeat their opponents – pushed themselves to the point of collapse. In Polunin's 1980s pantomime, his movement patterns so strongly resembled the athletes' disoriented movements that it was difficult to consider this a mere coincidence.

The emergent turn in the research consisted in conducting a second series of interviews. After watching the pantomime and discussing it, participants were later presented with print and video materials about the 1959 race. They were then asked again about their impressions of the pantomime, their attitude toward it, and its meaning. The variety of responses and emotional reactions ranged from radical shifts in attitudes toward the pantomime and the performer (both positive and negative) to no change at all in previously expressed meanings and impressions. This variety encompassed reinterpretations of the pantomime and reflections on the interaction between art and life, the way sport and duty to the state can be interwoven in international competitions, ethical concerns, the influence of the political climate on sport and everyday life, the pursuit of goals at great personal cost, and reflections on the meaning of life.

Key words: pantomime act, flashback, plot twist, sociocultural context, meaning, emergence

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I. Introduction

Imagine that you are watching an episode of the regular humorous television program *Around Laughter* (1981)¹. Among other things, you are shown a pantomime in which the mime depicts running at high speed, by the end reaching the state of becoming groggy from fatigue. The camera also captures the reactions of the audience. You see people's faces, their smiles, you hear laughter. (The recording was made in the USSR in 1981, when canned laughter was not yet widespread – thus, the laughter was a genuine reaction to what was happening.)

Then you are shown newsreel footage of an actual sporting competition (a fragment from Elem Klimov's film *Sport, Sport, Sport*), in which some of the runners' movements resemble those of the mime in the pantomime act². You also learn that the long-distance runner whose movements are recognizable in the pantomime eventually lost consciousness and experienced clinical death, which damaged his health for life. Would your attitude toward the pantomime in the humorous program *Around Laughter*, which you had been shown originally, change? And would your interpretation of its meaning change?

It was precisely this question that arose during our study of the perception and interpretation of a pantomime act. Initially, respondents were shown V. Polunin's pantomime *10,000-Meter Race*. We subsequently asked them to share their impressions of it. Following one such discussion, a participant (R22) unexpectedly sent us additional information which she had found after the end of our meeting. (From here on, R stands for Respondent, and I for Interviewer.) When we asked what had motivated her to delve deeper and spend her time looking into the facts around the pantomime act she had been shown, she replied: interest and curiosity. The information she provided, following the logic of a flashback, added unexpected nuances to the informational field of the material presented in the first series (Seger, 2010).

The information included a newspaper article and video footage of real events.

¹ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-mcZ1hO4Kk>, https://vk.com/video-105973078_456239351

² Available at <https://youtu.be/FUTA12nJ7pY?t=4172>, https://vk.com/video-38279446_456239509?t=1h9m33s

The newspaper article concerned 10,000-Meter Race that took place in 1959 (Imamov, 2019). The race (called “Death Race”) was held in Philadelphia under conditions of abnormally high humidity and heat, creating the effect of a steam bath (Adamov, 2005; Cobley, 2012; Imamov, 2019). Four athletes took part in the competition – two long-distance runners from the USA and two from the USSR. All the runners were strongly aware of the rivalries between the countries, and the desire to beat the ideological opponents strongly contributed to their motivation to win (Ibid.). In Western culture, the 1959 Philadelphia “Death Race” is also regarded as part of The Cold War Track Series (Cobley, 2012).

The video contained footage of the real events of this race (frames from Elem Klimov’s 1970 film *Sport, Sport, Sport*). The movements of the athletes collapsing from fatigue and exhaustion resembled the mime’s movements in one of the pantomime’s fragments. As we discovered later, the author of the pantomime most likely used the film as one of his sources of inspiration while creating it.

This gave us the idea of conducting a second series of the study, in which participants were given information about the real marathon and shown the video report and newspaper article. After familiarizing themselves with the new information, respondents were again asked to share their impressions of the pantomime they had viewed.

Thus, the distinctive feature of our study is its emergent character (see Gaver et al., 2022) on emergent studies). After receiving the information about the real race of 1959, we set the following question. How can the new context (information about events preceding the creation of the pantomime act) influence the respondent’s attitude toward the performance and the meaning which emerged in the first series?

Let us now describe the historical context of the Polunin pantomime under consideration.

II. Polunin’s pantomime act *10,000-Meter Race* (1981), and its cultural-historical context

Below, we describe the course of the pantomime. Inevitably, this is our interpretation. Yet, a significant portion of respondents understood what was happening on stage in much the same way (Klarina & Poddiakov, 2024).

The mime assumes a posture, supporting himself on hands and feet (in our interpretation – depicting the tense starting stance of a runner). Then he runs, moving his legs very rapidly (in our interpretation – overtaking his competitors), waves his hand (in our interpretation – in greeting, with a smile on his face). Then his movements gradually slow down (interpre-

tation – fatigue, exhaustion sets in), he begins to stumble and fall, and the smile vanishes. He stops, begins spinning in place, going on tip toes, looking around (interpretation – he is lost and tries to understand where he is). His face displays various emotions (interpretation – apprehension, fear...). He notices something on the ground before him, “plucks” it (interpretation – a plant with a berry), puts it in his mouth, and with a smile walks away in the opposite direction from the one in which he had originally been “running.”

In 1981 this pantomime act could have carried a message with at least two layers.

The first possible level of message is for the people who were not aware of the real, tragic 1959 race, nor about the film *Sport, Sport, Sport*, in which this race was shown and commented on. For them, it was simply a vivid grotesque pantomime with no backstory in the program *Around Laughter*.

The second possible level of message of Polunin’s pantomime act could be for people who knew about the real 1959 race and about Klimov’s film *Sport, Sport, Sport*. Klimov was a famous film director, and some Soviet viewers of Polunin’s pantomime act could previously have seen Klimov’s 1970 film *Sport, Sport, Sport*. They could easily grasp the similarities between the mime’s movements and those of the real runners in the film.

We contacted the author of the pantomime to inquire about the correspondence between his miniature (the pantomime act) and the real events depicted in the film. Sophie, the communications attaché, replied:

“While preparing, together with his partner Alexander Skvortsov, a new production around the 1980 Olympics, Slava [Vyacheslav Polunin] was gathering materials and coming up with possible storylines. Remembering the footage from a documentary film showing a runner with faltering legs collapsing at the finish line, he decided that one of the possible storylines could be a race. At the same time, it is of course very important that Slava follows his teacher Meyerhold, who said that when preparing a production, an actor must completely fill the room with every possible piece of information on the subject. Everything comes into play: slippers, stories, smells, tales – everything one can find – starting a year before the performance is born. One must search endlessly on the theme, absorb countless impressions, saturate yourself like a sponge, gather a thousand different keys, hints, and stimuli – and it remains unknown which one of these thousand things will ignite and become the seed from which everything will emerge.”

We conducted our study in a very different historical context – more than 60 years after the actual “Death Race” of 1959, about 50 years after the release of the film *Sport, Sport, Sport*, and about 40 years after the first television broadcast of Polunin’s *10,000-meter race*. The respondents reflect-

ed on historical allusions, engagement with the theme of the purpose of life, and so forth. But before describing the study in detail, let us turn to the general theme of pantomime.

III. Pantomime in real life, games, arts, and pantomime studies

In various countries, the game of pantomime is popular, with many variations in its rules. Pantomime both permeates our everyday life and exists as a form of performing art, while also featuring in a number of scholarly fields: theater studies, narratology, semiotics (Żywicznyński et al., 2018).

In psychology, the theme of pantomime is explored from different perspectives, for example, in psychotherapy with both children and adults, and in neuropsychological testing to diagnose syndromes, such as apraxia (Brown et al., 2019). But most often, it is discussed in the context of theories of language origin (Żywicznyński et al., 2018). We, however, are interested in another aspect, namely, how the meaning of pantomime performed by an artist is perceived by an individual (person) in different contexts.

A pantomime performance belongs to narrative arts (Brown, 2019). Writer with a background in philology, actor and mime Evgeny Grishkovets, when asked in an interview, “So what brought you to pantomime?” replied: “Firstly, I was passionate about poetry, and therefore metaphor was the most important means of expression for me, and pantomime is nothing other than a metaphorical language. Back then, in the late 1980s, it was a very productive and important language” (Timasheva, 2002).

“In a certain sense, pantomime is always a game between the mime and the audience: the mime is constantly posing plastic riddles to the viewer, making them exercise their creativity and imagination. The spectator is constantly engaged in solving these riddles and thus becomes involved in the process of imagining together with the performer” (Bogdanov & Vinogradsky, 2009, pp. 152–153).

Thus, understanding a pantomime act as a work of art requires of the viewer imagination and the ability to decode certain conventions, symbols, metaphors, the author’s intended play with the audience, and more – all of which create the meaning (polyphony of meanings) of this dramaturgical performance.

Pantomiming is characterized by imagery and metaphoricity (McNeill, 2005), symbolism (Tomasello, 2008), representativity and the social intention of transmitting necessary information (Tomasello, 2008; Żywicznyński et al., 2018), abstraction, the absence of a conventional fixed meaning, naturalness in its origin/nature (Tomasello, 2008), spontaneity, and integration of bodily movement.

“Pantomime is a whole-body process” (Żywicznyński et al., 2018). It is holistic and communicatively complex (Ibid.), open-ended and having a broad semantic potential (Brown et al., 2019). The latter is of particular interest to us, since the broad semantic potential of pantomimic gesture entails variability in possible interpretation and, consequently, differences in the understanding of meaning by those to whom the pantomimic message is directed.

For the participants to understand a pantomime act, they have to share a common conceptual ground, which is one of the fundamental components of communication (Tomasello, 2008, p. 75). Equally important is the communicative context (Ibid., p.74).

According to Guseltseva (2023), the sociocultural context determines the nature of the socializing functions of art that influence the individual, as well as the quality of art interpretation. By analyzing two components – contextual and subjective ones – Guseltseva reveals the connection between them. Context determines the norms and practices of interaction with works of art. The subjective state of a person conditions the quality of this interaction.

Behind the search for meaning, according to Frankl, there is always a connection with context. Meaning is closely tied to the situation. Längle (2005), following in Frankl’s footsteps, highlights the dynamic concept of meaning and the importance of embedding a concrete situation within a broader context. This is important for our study, since each respondent has their own life context, which our meeting, dialogue, and the discovered meaning are integrated into.

IV. An empirical study of rethinking Polunin’s pantomime act *10,000-Meter Race* (1981) after reviewing the materials about “*The Death Run*” (1959)

Method

The research questions of the first and second series led us to select a qualitative research method, as this allows the integrity, complexity, and multidimensionality of the studied phenomenon to be revealed (Murnikov, 2022). In both series, the method of semi-structured interviews was used to collect data. In the first series, the main objective was to uncover the process by which the meaning conveyed through pantomime is shaped and understood (Klarina & Poddiakov, 2024). The core questions forming the basis of the first-series interviews aimed to uncover how the clip resonated with the participants emotionally, how they formed their understanding and

initial impressions of the clip. In the second series, the main goal was to study the influence of materials about “The Death Race” (1959) on the participants’ opinions about Polunin’s pantomime act *10,000-Meter Race* (1981).

The study was approved by Ethics Committee of Department of psychology of HSE University. Written invitations were sent to potential participants interested in the topic of body language and pantomime. The invitation contained a short description of the study (viewing a video of a pantomime act and interviewing about it) and explanations of participants’ rights: they were informed of their right to refuse to answer questions and to withdraw from participation at any time. The participants were guaranteed anonymity: each interview was assigned a code by which the session was later identified during analysis. All interviewees gave verbal informed consent to participate before being interviewed.

Participants

Thirty respondents (16 women and 14 men, 30–44 yrs) participated in the study. All participants represented different professions, and their professional lives were not connected with psychology or theatre. What united the participants was their interest in the topic of body language and pantomime.

The emergence of the second series was unexpected for the participants from the first pool, R1–R21. Thirty people participated in the first series (without the information about the real race of 1959), of whom 10 did not take part in the second (with introduction of this information). Each respondent had the opportunity to decline participation. Taking part in the second series required respondents to allocate additional time.

Materials

(1) In the first series, a video recording of Polunin’s pantomime *10,000-Meter Race* was used.

(2) In the second series, the following materials were used as addition to the video.

(a) A newspaper article dedicated to the 1959 race, including excerpts from interviews with athletes and descriptions of the events related to the race. The article was titled “Sixty Years Ago the ‘Death Run’ Took Place” (subheading: “Only two reached the finish, the others ended up in a coma”) (Imamov, 2019).

(b) A video recording with documentary footage of the 1959 race, showing the movements of the athletes (fragment from Elem Klimov’s film *Sport, sport, sport*).

(c) Information from Polunin's communications attaché (see the contents of the letter above).

Procedure

(1) The first series (without the information about the real race of 1959)

(a) Instruction: "I will ask you to watch the pantomime. After you've watched it, we will discuss it." The aim of this instruction was to minimize the researcher's influence on the respondent's understanding of the performance and their attitude toward what they had seen.

Viewing Polunin's pantomime *10,000-Meter Race* by the participant.

(b) Semi-structured interview (about 80–90 minutes) with the participant. Some typical questions included: "Please tell me, what is this pantomime act about?", "Could you tell me what emotions the pantomime act evoked?", "What is your general impression of the pantomime act?", "What stood out most vividly for you in the pantomime act?". The order or wording of questions could be changed, and new questions could be added depending on the respondent's answers.

(2) The second series (with introduction of the information about the real race of 1959)

Due to the specificity of emergent research, not all participants were informed of the second series in advance – only those scheduled after the interview with respondent R22. For respondents R1–R22, the second series came as a surprise, which they could decline. Respondents R23–R30 also had the option to refuse participation in the second series, and they were notified of it in advance. The interval between the series ranged from three to five months.

The second series was organized as follows.

(a) Repeated viewing of Polunin's pantomime *10,000-Meter Race*. After viewing, respondents were asked questions to clarify their impressions of the pantomime and the meaning which they had previously identified.

(b) Presentation of materials about the "Death Race" of 1959 (described above).

The questions posed after the presentation of these materials aimed to clarify impressions of the pantomime, the participant's attitudes toward the pantomime act as a whole, toward the actors' gestures, toward the author, and toward the meaning previously identified ("Please tell me, what impression of the pantomime do you have now?" "How did the material influence the way you understand the meaning of the pantomime act?" etc.). The second series lasted about 60 minutes.

The interviews were video-recorded, transcribed, and presented in text form for further analysis. Following the analysis of each interview, an individual report was prepared.

Data analysis

Each interview was analyzed using two qualitative approaches: (1) phenomenological analysis and (2) interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2008). In both series, three experts participated in analyzing the collected data (Klarina, 2025). The requirements for the experts were: (a) a completed higher education degree in psychology; (b) at least 15 years of professional experience as a psychologist. First, the experts analyzed the interview transcripts of each respondent individually, then met to discuss the texts collectively, following Kvale's recommendations for conducting phenomenological analysis (Kvale, 1996). As a result, categories were identified, which served as the basis for forming four groups (see the chapter devoted to results). Interpretative phenomenological analysis was also applied. Using it, clusters of themes were identified in both the first and second series. In the second series, a new theme cluster emerged, distinct from the first series. In this article, we focus on the results of phenomenological analysis.

Results and discussion

The new materials provoked a strong emotional response in almost all respondents (except for R11, who focused instead on comparing their own experience of being in Philadelphia with the weather conditions of the 1959 race). We identified several general trends, which will be presented below, while also attending to the uniqueness of each response. One interesting observation: although no question about the author was asked during the interview, analysis of the responses shows that some participants changed their attitude toward the actor – both positively and negatively.

After the change of context and the introduction of additional material, the respondents' answers can be grouped as follows.

(1) A change in attitude toward the pantomime and the author/actor, while the meaning remained unchanged or received only minor clarifications.

(2) Attitude toward the pantomime remained the same, but the previously identified meaning changed.

(3) Both the attitude toward the pantomime and the identified meaning remained unchanged.

(4) A change in both attitude and understanding of the meaning, or a change in attitude and the discovery of meaning in a situation where the respondent had not identified any meaning in the first series or after the repeated viewing.

Let us now look at each of these groups in detail.

(1) Change in attitude toward the pantomime and the author/actor, with the meaning unchanged or only slightly clarified.

(a) Negative dynamics in attitude toward the pantomime.

This subgroup included two respondents (R5 and R29), both of whom considered pantomime to be a comic genre. Accordingly, in their view, its meaning lay in making the audience laugh.

(b) Constructive dynamics in attitude toward the pantomime.

This subgroup is represented by one respondent (R10): “For me the meaning hasn’t changed. It’s just the same situation, but you perceive it emotionally from different sides”.

R10 saw connections between the factual material and his own experience: “And I perfectly understand what this is about, because I’ve been in those situations myself, including in sports. You try for something, try to prove something to someone, for some reason – and then when your body punishes you for it, you think: what the hell did I do all that for? Why? That’s very close to me”.

After learning the new information, the respondent changed his representation of the symbolic meaning of one of the actor’s final movements (plucking a berry from a plant on the ground), and refined the meaning he had found earlier: “The little berry is a symbol that you’ve been given a chance, and maybe you should reconsider, maybe you’re doing something wrong. Here’s your chance. Try choosing another path. (pause) To look at things a little more broadly, simply to view your values differently”.

According to R10, the real facts changed his perception and understanding of some of the actor’s gestures and movements, and stirred compassion and empathy for the pantomime’s protagonist.

Thus, after encountering the factual material, R10’s attitude toward the pantomime changed: compassion for the protagonist emerged, and the meaning was somewhat refined.

(2) Attitude unchanged, but there are changes in understanding of meaning.

In this group, as in the previous one, both positive and negative dynamics were observed. Each subgroup is illustrated by a single case.

(a) Negative dynamics (a shift from abstract analysis of the pantomime to a concrete interpretation of what happens in it).

This subgroup is represented by R11. The respondent focused on reflections, comparisons of Russian and Western social attitudes, contrasts of eras, and an overview of the historical context:

“Here’s the difference between the modern approach and the Soviet one: ‘You must run to the end’. Now they say: ‘You don’t have to run to the end’ (R11 smiles). I mean, from a modern perspective... I think now Western philosophy is spreading everywhere, including in Russia. About downshifting – that you don’t need to make career leaps, you should be happy even if you’re just a shop assistant”.

R11 identified a change in her understanding of the pantomime’s meaning. A regressive dynamic was observed: she moved from a metaphorical interpretation back to a concrete one: “To look back and show that the Americans are lying there dead, to be horrified, and then to convey some message that the finish line has been crossed and he is the winner”.

She linked her interpretation with the social context of the time: “Because if they didn’t finish, and at the same time they didn’t die, who knows what would happen to them at home. Maybe they’d be banned from continuing their careers anyway”.

She compared the real facts with the gestures in the pantomime. From her perspective, the actor’s task was to depict the real events, which he failed to do: “I suspect that Polunin tried to reproduce the real events without changing the plot. But it turned out that for me, he didn’t reproduce them”.

She noted that her attitude toward the pantomime had not changed.

Thus, the information about the real events brought the respondent back to a concrete interpretation of the pantomime.

(b) Constructive dynamics.

R16 shared that the real facts impressed him more than the pantomime: “The pantomime for me is already some kind of secondary act”.

He noted that his attitude toward the pantomime had not changed, explaining this by saying that the pantomime is based on real material but does not coincide with it.

“Maybe that they came to terms with the fact that sport was lost to them forever, and started doing something else. Came to terms with the defeat in the struggle with their own life... Acceptance of fate. <...> When a person becomes disabled, he is lost both to himself and to others. Well, he can find some meaning for himself, discover himself in something else. But not everyone can do that. A very small percentage of all those unfortunate ones (R16 smiles) <...> I think he lost the race, but he didn’t despair. He continued living (R16 smiles). He found something new for himself.” In the first series, the respondent had spoken of finding a new meaning, but this

was in the context of being in a rush in life: “He finds a new goal in life and goes on more calmly.”

Thus, the factual information contributed to a deepening of the meaning identified in the first series.

(3) Attitude toward the pantomime and the identified meaning unchanged.

This is the largest group, comprising ten respondents. Despite the overarching commonality – that most participants reported no change either in their attitude toward the pantomime or in their understanding of its meaning – there were significant differences in the details. Let us consider them.

Some respondents noted that the pantomime was an interpretation of facts or a reworking of real events. For example, R1: “It’s an interpretation of real events”; R6: “This [pantomime] is an artistic reworking”. R3, however, on the contrary, believed that the facts and the pantomime did not correspond to each other: “The pantomime is about our inner world <...> And for me it still remains a bright moment, because it leads TO SOMETHING GOOD. It still teaches what’s right, what’s good, what can help us in life... But as for that information I received about the athletes... once again I linked it with ideology... how they can change us, how they can program us, and how easily we can be programmed”.

R24: “The pantomime itself isn’t about those events. It [the attempt] maybe helped to prepare him to convey the tension that athletes feel on the track, but no more than that”.

(4) Change in attitude and discovery of meaning or change in understanding of meaning.

In this group, as in the first two, both constructive and negative dynamics were represented.

(a) Negative dynamics. This subgroup included two respondents: R8 and R23. For both, the factual material elicited a strong emotional response. R8 restrained its outward expression, unlike R23. R8 shared that her attitude toward the pantomime had changed: she felt disappointment. “In that situation, when I analysed it, and on the one hand I recognized (pause) the author’s idea, and not the idea that had once been planted somewhere in my head, or what I thought myself... The disappointment came from comparing these two situations”. She explained the reason for the transformation of her attitude and noted a change in her understanding of the pantomime’s meaning. In her view, the author’s concept turned out to be rather superficial, which caused an acute reaction, since the meaning she had found earlier was valuable and the pantomime had seemed profound. The factual material devalued the previously discovered meaning and brought

her back to a concrete interpretation of the pantomime: “[The meaning] well, probably exactly what its title says. A 10,000-meter race”.

R23 actively shared his emotions, which were mainly negative, along with significant doubts about the ethics of the pantomime author’s position: “Since for me the person – I don’t know his background, and if the person made something comic out of a non-comic situation, then my attitude is tense, maybe even negative. Yes. Negative. Dismissive.” After seeing the factual material, his mood declined, and confusion arose about the author’s intention: whether he wanted to mock, or to show the truth of life with some kind of bright ending. “What did he [the author] want? Did he want to mock someone, or to offend, or did he not? Probably not, but who knows?”. A sense of wariness and mistrust set in – something that had fleetingly appeared in the first series, but which had then been overridden by his search for meaning and reflection. In the second series, however, the question of the pantomime’s meaning arose again, more forcefully: “I don’t know what the author wanted to say. For me it remained the same. The story here at least ended somehow, I would say, although it’s still unclear, but I hope in a good way”.

Thus, after being presented with the factual material, both respondents took a negative view of the pantomime: in one case, disappointment; in the other, wariness. Overall mood declined. Both lost the meanings they had previously discovered.

(b) Constructive dynamics.

This subgroup included three respondents. In addition to constructive dynamics, what united them was a high level of engagement in the second series. For R7, this was a change: in the first series engagement had been low. After being introduced to the factual material, she shared that the facts gave her a different perception: “You believe more, you empathise more with his feelings, his emotions. You feel his fatigue more... [the situation] becomes more vivid and real”. In other words, the facts inspired trust. The cognitive dissonance she had experienced in the first series – arising from the conflict between her assumption that the actor’s intent was to amuse and the emotions the pantomime actually evoked (pity, rather than laughter) – was successfully resolved. In the first series, and even after the second viewing following a break, R7 had not found meaning in the pantomime. In the second series, however, by engaging her imagination, considering alternative scenarios for the pantomime, and comparing the real facts with the performance, she found meaning: “Life and health are more important than prestige and everything else”.

For R17, engagement also changed in the second series – from moderate to high. The factual material elicited a strong emotional response. Reflecting on the context and on the audience of the time, she appreciated the author's message and admired its boldness, given the context in which the pantomime was created: "It's just that, when you know what it's based on, your perception changes. And of course, his message, if people KNEW, then it was very brave." She noted that the context gave the pantomime more substance, and that knowledge of the real events added depth: "Pol-unin probably embedded more far-reaching thoughts here... about values. What I said before – that it's not just about dealing with some FAILURE, some LOSS, but about the absurdity of everything that was happening. I didn't see that context at first".

The central meaning of the pantomime shifted – from "extracting something good from any situation" to the futility of sacrifices for ephemeral goals. She also emphasized that her perception of the gestures and of the pantomime itself changed after seeing the factual material: "When he was stumbling <...> when a real person runs like that, it's almost painful to watch... knowing the context, the harshness, but also with a certain justification. Now I no longer see it as dark humour".

R19 maintained a high level of engagement after the first series. He analyzed the behaviour of the athletes from today's perspective, noting an ambivalent attitude: "They're all the same in my eyes. All of them (pause) heroes, but on the other hand – excuse me – all idiots". While in the first series he had described the pantomime as communication with meaning, containing a certain entertainment value, in the second series he viewed it differently: "Now it really is a mini play – a tragedy," noting that "it's very true to life".

He took into account the values of that society and the context in which the events took place, reflecting on the opportunities and limitations the author faced in the USSR because of censorship: "When he performed that sketch, it was the Soviet Union – he was subject to censorship... he couldn't push the sketch all the way to the end and show: 'Guys, it's absurd that you're dying for a country that doesn't even need this, that it's all a game of ideology. And it doesn't value you, even if you finished the race. It's a double, triple absurdity. Yet you believe in it.' He couldn't say that. That would have been a pantomime-style Vysotsky. They would have shut him down immediately. So he put in that light ending, sort of playing down the situation, making the sketch watchable under the given restrictions".

His understanding of the meaning changed because of the context: “When you watch it without context, it seems like it’s about human foolishness, each of us getting carried away with something... But when you understand that society forced him to do it, that he knew he’d collapse and die, but still ran, believing that the value he’d achieve – even at the cost of his death – was greater than his own life... Of course, the context changes everything. (pause)... He ran FOR THEM. In running, he DIED FOR THEM, FOR THEIR SAKE – they saw themselves as warriors... He returned to them as someone who had GIVEN EVERYTHING for the ideological-sporting defense of his people”.

He also changed his view of the author, reevaluating his role: “Before, I admired him just as a Master, someone who did this very well at the level of body and movement. But now I see more of a philosophical mime, attempting a social, even a political, creative statement. He’s deeper than I thought the first time I watched him”.

Thus, all respondents in this subgroup changed their perception of the pantomime and their attitude toward it, and R19 also changed his view of the author. After being presented with the real events, R7 resolved her earlier cognitive dissonance and discovered meaning. For R17 and R19, their understanding of meaning changed. All respondents in this subgroup highlighted the role of context, with R17 and R19 explicitly emphasizing it.

Discussion of ethical issues by participants

Some participants posed ethical questions about the organizers of the actual race.

R1: “Why didn’t they stop it? I just don’t understand. Yes. I remember that it was the Cold War. And that our athletes were conditioned that it was important to run, to CRAWL, DAMN IT, anyway, ANY WAY TO CROSS THAT FINISH LINE. But in terms of attitude toward people (pause), toward HUMANITY, this is completely incomprehensible... It’s inhuman. It’s abuse <...> Especially after watching the video, it’s just incomprehensible why people did this, and why other people watched it all and didn’t stop it. Horrible”.

R7: “It’s madness when people organize such events. They should first of all think about safety, about the athletes, about everything. You know, a 10,000-meter race in 40-degree heat is basically premeditated murder, in essence”.

R10: “In the documentary film you can see that the judge wasn’t allowing the doctors in. That’s very strange, really. The principles were considered more important than human health, so... Rather, there should have been some kind of karma and punishment for those organizers”.

Participants' attitudes toward the author of the pantomime performance

The attitudes were different in different participants. Some respondents expressed admiration for the author. For example, R12: “I just noted that this genre, seemingly so lightweight, an acting genre, an acting performance – it’s actually not so lightweight. It is indeed full of those same inner meanings and layers we don’t see. If he also came up with all of this himself – the script, the direction – then I take off my hat to Vyacheslav Polunin (pause). I can only applaud him”.

R21: “He’s such a talent, who managed to show this, to work it through so deeply. It only improves my impression – I understand: wow, it wasn’t just random. He didn’t just sit, work, clown around. He also did research into something. Such hard work... A two-minute sketch, but how much work is really behind it”.

At the same time, there were critical remarks – for example, from R30: “It turns out that he’s mocking a little bit. <...> A question to Polunin – was it worth doing this at all?”.

V. Conclusions

(1) The demonstration of materials of the real race of 1959 (the video fragments of the “Death race” and the articles about it) after the demonstration of Polunin’s pantomime act of 1981 created a kind of plot twist via flashbacks for participants. The range of the participants’ responses and emotional reactions varied from a sharp change in attitude toward the pantomime and the actor (both positive and negative, depending on the participant) to previous attitudes and meanings unchanged. This variety included rethinking the pantomime and reflecting on the interaction between art and life, the link between sport and duty to the state in international competitions, the influence of the political climate on sport and human lives, striving for goals at a very high cost, ethical issues, and reflections on the meaning of life in the face of changing circumstances and turning points of fate.

(2) Opportunities for further research are linked to two directions:

(a) Conducting the methodology with participants who are studying pantomime and with experienced actors (ideally, masters of the genre) – it would be intriguing to see how they would formulate the meaning of this pantomime, and what they would perform using pantomimic gestures instead of words.

(b) Including in the analysis respondents’ use of gestures that help them express what is happening and what they feel internally (reflection, mood, attitude). It would be interesting to compare the nature and number of gestures different participants use in the context of discussing the

pantomime act. What and how do participants consider important to show with their bodies and gestures when dialoguing with the interviewer about this pantomime? And about other pantomimes?

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Поддьяков А.Н., Кларина Е.М.

Переосмысление пантомимы В. Полунина

«Забег на 10 000 метров» (1981)

после ознакомления с материалами о «Забеге смерти» (1959):

эмпирическое исследование

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Изначально в нашем исследовании участникам показывали пантомимический номер В. Полунина «Забег на 10 000 метров» 1981 г., в котором он изображал всё более утомляющегося бегуна на разных стадиях бега с последующим уходом с дистанции, остановкой и далее развивающимся сюжетом. В индивидуальных интервью участников спрашивали о впечатлениях от пантомимы, отношении к ней, каков, с их точки зрения, ее смысл. Затем в исследовании возник эмерджентный поворот. Одна из участниц нашла и прислала интервьюеру информацию о реальном соревновании американских и советских бегунов в годы Холодной войны (Филадельфия, 1959 г.). Во время забега на 10000 метров в условиях аномальной жары и влажности спортсмены, стараясь выиграть у команды-соперника, доходили до крайнего изнеможения. Перед потерей сознания и падением некоторые начинали совершать странные дискоординированные движения. В пантомиме 1980-х паттерн движений мима В. Полунина, видевшего фильм о забеге 1959 г., слишком напоминал эти дискоординированные движения реальных спортсменов, чтобы счесть это случайным совпадением.

Мы провели вторую серию интервью, где участникам после просмотра пантомимы и вопросов о ней через некоторое время предлагались газетные и видеоматериалы о забеге 1959 г. Затем их опять спрашивали о впечатлениях от пантомимы, отношении к ней и ее смысле. Разнообразие полученных ответов и эмоциональных реакций участников варьировало от сохранения прежнего отношения и смыслов неизменными до резкого изменения отношения к пантомимическому номеру и к актеру (в положительную и в отрицательную сторону у разных участников). Это разнообразие включало переосмысление пантомимы и рассуждения о взаимодействии искусства и жизни, стремлении к цели очень дорогой ценой, смысле жизни при изменении обстоятельств и поворотах судьбы, связи спорта и долга при участии в международных соревнованиях, этические вопросы.

Ключевые слова: пантомима, флешбэк, поворот сюжета, социокультурный контекст, смысл, эмерджентность

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