

## Universalism in Film– Remarks Based on the 2023 Film *Chłopi (The Peasants)*, directed by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman.

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Władysław Reymont wrote the novel *Chłopi (The Peasants)* before World War I, but won the Nobel Prize for it in 1924. It is believed that the concept and narrative of this book were a polemic against *La Terre*, written by Emile Zola (although Reymont could not have been familiar with it, as he did not know French well enough). The artistic premise of Reymont’s novel was not a realistic tale of a Polish village – it was to create a universal peasant epic, describing the peasantry as a specific state of consciousness of various European peoples. To this end, he utilised the genre of the novel, which at the time offered the greatest possibilities for combining multiple spheres of human activity: physical labour, interpersonal interactions in a quasi-closed community, entertainment, politics, religion, love as a feeling, and love understood as a guarantee of formal social relations. Reymont did not use a realistic description of folk clothes – he combined elements of costumes from different regions, employed a mixture of folk dialects, and even the topography of the village of Lipce in the novel does not correspond to that of the actual settlement. Today, we would describe the premise of Reymont’s work as a panorama of broadly defined peasant culture.

The novel *Peasants* has been filmed before, but the primary focus was on its realistic portrayal and the “sinful” love story. Nearly a century after *The Peasants* was awarded the Nobel Prize (2023), a new film adaptation of the novel has appeared, produced using painted animation. It not only presents the perennial themes of love, hatred, sacrifice, and conflict between blood ties and cultural customs in a peasant setting, but also seeks to underpin this content’s universality with formal universality. Bringing to life over 30 outstanding paintings by European artists (in addition to Chełmoński, Wyczółkowski, Fałat, Ruszczyk, but also Breughel, Vermeer, van Gogh, and Millet), translated into over 1,800 painted frames produced picture by picture by over 100 artists (over 40,000 frames hand-painted), is the pictorial power of this project. The result is a true *Gesamtkunstwerk* for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Finally, the film’s strongest point, in terms of its universal appeal, is its soundtrack. The music creators—led by Łukasz Rostkowski (L.U.C.)—have meticulously blended elements of Polish folk music with Balkan, Slavic, and Baltic folklore, early musical instruments, and even contemporary elements such as rap, club rhythms, and so-called “shamanic rhythms.” As a result, diegetic music in the film’s world is perceived as universally “authentic”—without defining what that means. A prime example is the universalised “ocepiny” ritual ([wedding capping ceremony] emphasised by the song *Rozczesata, rozpuściła* [She combed and let her hair down]). At the same time, nondiegetic music appearing in key scenes (e.g., the frenetic *Wedding Mazur* or the hit song *Jesień – tańcuj* [Autumn—dance]) imbues the story with a surreal, comprehensive meaning. This essay will demonstrate and discuss these examples of musical universalism in the film *The Peasants*.

Keywords: Universalism in film, *The Peasants (Chłopi)*, Painted animation, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Musical universalism