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Self-transcendence and its ludic substitutes : a cultural developmental Approach

Studia Psychologica nr 7, 231-248

2007

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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SELF-TRANSCENDENCE AND ITS LUDIC SUBSTITUTES

A CULTURAL-developmental Approach¹

Abstract

The category of self-transcendence has many different meanings in psychological theory. It is used in reference to changes in the highest stages of development of the human person (an existential-personalistic approach), as also to overcoming oneself in the four hierarchically ordered levels of consciousness (the stance of transcendental-epistemological realism). The paper aims to show that self-transcendence is an inherent human need which is also being satisfied in contemporary times in a substitutive, ludic way. Analogies were drawn, acknowledging the cultural-developmental approach, between the transcending of *conditio humana* by the man of traditional cultures who participated in the so-called living myth, and the quasi-overcoming oneself of contemporary man participating in a secondary reality created by cultural phenomena and ludic in nature. The common foundation for such distant phenomena is *mythos* – a specific way of thinking and approaching the surrounding world. The paper analyses the ludic substitutes of transcending oneself in chosen areas of young adults' ludic activity on the basis of the presented psychological approaches to the category of self-transcendence and its archaic counterparts, as well as the author's own empirical findings.

„If we take a closer look at the myth of Superman
 it will turn out that it will unveil the hidden desires of
 contemporary man who,
 seeing himself as a fallen and limited being,
 dreams of one day becoming an »exceptional individual«, a »hero«”
 Mircea Eliade

„You can be somebody completely different...,
 [in techno] everyone changes into a superman for their own ends”
 Rave party goer

¹ The article was prepared with financial aid from the statutory research programme 986/46 (Faculty of Psychology, Warsaw University).

1. MYTHOS AS A SPHERE OF OVERCOMING ONESELF

The so called „overcoming oneself” category, if it arises in psychological theory, is usually referred to in psychological theory as „self-transcendence” (Latin *transcendence* – overcoming) and referred to the changes taking place in the highest stages of human development (cf. Frankl, 1984; Opoczyńska, 1996b; Straś-Romanowska, 1992, 1995a and 1995b). The presented text aims to show that this self-transcendence has its substitute forms in the sphere of ludic behaviour. The author refers to these substitutes as **pseudo- or quasi-overcoming oneself**.

The fundamental assumption in the problems presented is that the sphere of ludic behaviour often enables psychological transfer and participation in a **secondary, pseudo-reality**, usually media created and narrative in character. The notion of secondary reality in Polish developmental psychology (cf. e.g. Przetacznik Gierkowska and Tyszkowa, 1996) is attributed to the pedagogue Wincenty Okoń. He writes: „Human playing occurs in a different reality which can be called the reality of playing or, quite simply, a secondary reality (1995, p. 4). However, according to Kazimierz Żygulski (1998), Okoń, by introducing this term into the theory of multiple realities formulated by Leon Chwistek, is referring to the theory, the Polish philosopher of the inter-war period (cf. Leon Chwistek „Philosophical and

Logic Works”, ed. Pasenkiewicz, 1961). Also the eminent French sociologist Roger Caillois (1967) uses the term secondary reality when defining playing and games. He describes them, among others, as fictional activities which are accompanied by a specific feeling of a secondary reality or a complete detachment from everyday life.

The term secondary reality is used in this text in a broader sense and encompasses all the phenomena of symbolic culture in which psychological transfer into an alternative reality like that of a literary depicted reality, theatrical reality, film reality, virtual reality, rave party reality, narrative game reality² etc. takes place. From a cultural-developmental perspective, participation in this form of secondary reality created by the mass media is the fundamental trait that makes the ludic activity of contemporary man resemble the participation in the **‘living myth’** of a member of the archaic cultures (traditional, tribal). The living myth in these cultures is an authentic history that belongs to the *sacrum* sphere, instructive and full of meanings models to follow. It is made of the symbolic matter that is currently being experienced, the reality by which a set society lives and which reflects the specific structure of a person’s awareness and attitude towards the world (cf. Krappe, 1952; Pâques, 1964; Eliade, 1984 and 1998a; Malinowski, 1990).

Participation in secondary reality created by contemporary cultural phenomena can be treated as one of the cultural equivalents of the sphere of social life that was once marked by the living myth in traditional societies. Hence, this participation entails elements characteristic of the so-called „contemporary mythical behaviour” (cf. Eliade, 1989; 1996; 1998a and 1998b; Campbell, 1959 and 1987; Keen, 1969; Mo-

² The author is referring to Role Playing Games (RPG’s). This interactive form of spending one’s time is popular mainly among secondary school pupils and students. It arose in 1973 in the United States. It became widespread in Poland in the last few decades, becoming an element of popular culture (cf. e.g. Dawidowicz, 2001; Zagórska, 2002).

reno, 1970). One of these elements is **the symbolic overcoming of one's own *conditio humana*, satisfying the need to be „somebody more”** (cf. Zagórska, 2001, 2003 and 2004).

The common base for phenomena such distant and different in nature as archaic participation in the living myth as well as the ludic activity of contemporary man is the *mythos* – a specific way of relating to the surrounding world which is connected with visual, imaginative-affective „mythical” thinking. The cultural equivalent of *mythos* in archaic societies (where there was no division into religion and culture) was the living myth, whereas in contemporary desacralized societies (apart from the sphere of religious experience) it is the sphere of cultural phenomena, ludic in nature, that enables psychological transfer into another, beyond the real, reality. Table 1 illustrates these analogies.

Table 1. Overcoming oneself in the archaic and contemporary sphere of mythos type behaviour

mythos type thinking ▼ sphere of mythos type behaviour ▼	
in archaic societies	in contemporary societies
▼ sphere of the living myth	▼ ludic sphere (as a fragmentary substitute of the sphere of living myth)
▼ transcending <i>conditio humana</i> in a mythical reality: «to be someone more»	▼ quasi-overcoming oneself in a culture created secondary reality: «to experience a different self = alter ego»

Mythos is the living word which is being made present in speech; *logos* is a denotational, stabilizing and ordering word. While *mythos* serves expression, the function of *logos* is explaining. The *mythos* way of thinking, also referred to as mythical, is based on the subjective images formed in an intuitive way. Its value does not depend on whether it conforms with reality but on the strength of the emotional charge and aesthetic experiences. It is, above all, made up of personal intuition, fantasies and feelings and is much more „personal” than *logos*, it is a subjective experience of the world (cf. Labouvie-Vief, 1990 and 1994; Gurba, 1993; Mirski, 2000; Zagórska, 2003 and 2004).

Mythos is also the „word that happens in narration” and the *mythos* embodied in the form of a living myth is a sacred history, a symbolic narrative. As Paul Valéry put it, „a «myth» is the name for everything that exists or lasts to the extent that it is caused by a statement” (cf. Nižnik, 1978, p. 164).

The *mythos* sphere, i.e. the phenomena determined by mythical thinking, encompasses everything that belongs to the world of feelings and is „organic”, personal and subjective, imaginative and intuitive, „clearly manifests itself in the lan-

guage of dreams, poetry, myths as well as symbols, metaphors and fantasy” (Mirski, 2000, p. 80). It includes everything that stems from narrative and dialogue, from a direct verbal account starting from mythical narrative.

From the cultural-developmental perspective, ludic activity of man belongs to the field of *mythos*. This activity – increasing in the phylogenetic order as the myth is degraded – was always closely related to the narrative. Throughout the centuries and up to the present day man, by way of the narrative, has always derived pleasure from ludic activity – starting from *The Iliad and the Odyssey* up to computer and narrative games. It is notable that this pleasure is derived from one’s contact with the secondary world, narrative in character, particularly from the possibility of playing a certain role in it (temporarily „being somebody else”). We can safely say that „the need to penetrate other worlds and follow the events of a certain «story»”, a need which, according to Eliade, „seems an integral, constant component of the human condition, and is therefore resilient to any attempts of eradicating it” (1998a, p. 188), also includes the ability to participate in the shaping of events through one’s imagination and to take part in that very „story”.

Therefore, looking from the cultural-developmental perspective at the strenuous attempts of man to satisfy this desire, it is evident that he currently is behaving to a certain extent similarly to the man of archaic cultures participating in the living myth. This participation is inseparably connected to going beyond the limits of the human condition.

2. SYMBOLIC TRANSCENDING OF *CONDITIO HUMANA* BY THE MAN OF TRADITIONAL CULTURES

In archaic societies the sphere of *mythos* was filled with the living myth that belonged to the domain of *sacrum*. This has remained only in a few cultural circles today. The mythical in those remaining cultural circles where *mythos* is alive means that, which is sacral and therefore that, which is real. In traditional cultures, the myth is a holy story, a narrative telling of events that took place in the time of „the beginnings”. It is a „model story, whose primary function is revealing the models and archetypes of religious rites as well as all other meaningful activity that is not automatic but defined by customs and traditions” (Dajczer, 1993, p. 327). The story is the source of patterns of behaviour, giving meaning and value to human existence thus ensuring, among others, a feeling of security.

The mythical narrative is a reality that is experienced and not just a theory, a discursive product of the mind or an abstract explanation. The myth exists only when it is being told. Once written down and analysed it becomes lifeless. It is a narrative translated into a form of symbol, a living expression of man which is then passed on to others to recognise and „re-enact”. Mythical words and gestures are not so much an image to contemplate as an experience that is understood and adopted as action. It is alive in the people present when it is in the form of a narrative and when it is being told. It is the way that the myth exists, the myth, which is „life” and action. Participation in the mythical narrative is connected with experiencing the presence of a person eliminating the subjective-objective distance. The truth of the myth is an existential truth of the subjective relation that expresses man’s situation in the world. However, because that situation is always a living and dynamic

experience, it goes beyond the conceptual level. It is for this reason that mythical models work on the level of the „I – You” subject relation, which is why they are capable of provoking a personal reply (cf. e.g. Alexander, 1953; Paquès, 1964, Dajczer, 1984).

The most important elements of the structure of the living myth are, apart from the so-called „paradise scenery” and presence of mythical heroes, **an overcoming of chronological time** (the time of *profanum*) and entering into a qualitatively different mythical time. It is *sacrum* time – a primordial and infinitely renewable time. The overcoming of time occurs by transferring into the reality that is being made-present at that very time, into the time of the beginnings (Latin *illo tempore*). This transfer is psychological in nature, imaginative-affective, substitutive in relation to the real presence in the reality of myth which is why it should be rather called symbolic (cf. Zagórska, 2001 and 2004). It is important to the man of traditional cultures to „transfer to another dimension that involved «becoming open to that, which is above»” (Eliade, 1996, p. 74). This is an expression of his „yearning after paradise”, his yearning for the lost time of the beginnings that is currently being regained by continually making it present. It deals with the secondary layer and therefore an existentially necessary one because this is where all the shortcomings of the human condition can be replenished.

A member of traditional societies treated the sphere of myth as being existentially the most important because it referred to the highest of values. He acknowledged that he is a truly a person to the extent that he imitates the gods, the culture-created heroes or mythical ancestors. As a *par excellence* religious person, „he would take on human existence having a superhuman and transcendental model”. **He wanted to be somebody different** to whom he was in his secular existence; he wanted to be something „more than he was”. He would create his image in the likeness of the divine models through participation in the living myth (cf. Eliade, 1996, p. 82; – emphasis in bold by W.Z.)

Through the very fact of telling the myth, the individual, „historical” time became symbolically invalidated and the narrator and the listeners transferred into the Great Time (holy, mythical), into an „unfathomable moment, impossible to measure because it is beyond all beginning and all end”. When listening to myth a person would, in a sense, completely forget about his human condition, about his „historical situation” conditioned by a set system of behaviour and would be transferred to another world, which no longer was his „small, mundane World” (cf. Eliade, 1998b, pp. 66-67). One could say that he transcended himself by projecting his own Self into a different reality. In the Heideggerian understanding of the term *transcendence* (cf. Podsiad, 2000, p. 900), **he would go beyond the level he currently found himself on, he went beyond himself**.

According to Eliade, contemporary societies have not completely ridden themselves of the mythical type of behaviour but simply changed their scope of action. **For most people** who are not engaged in any authentic religious experience³,

³ Eliade uses the category of authentic religious experience in a different sense to the widespread understanding. He uses it in reference to societies where a unity between culture and religion exists. Authentic religious experience – present in a social scale in traditional, living a cosmocentric religion cultures – is almost non-existent in Western desacralized cultures..

mythical behaviour can be observed, apart from the activity of the subconscious psyche (e.g. dreams, fantasies, yearnings etc.) **in their entertainment**. It is these forms of behaviour that, in contemporary times, play the mythical function of enabling a person to „break away from mundane existence” and „go beyond historical time”. What with the desacralisation of work, contrary to traditional cultures that managed to „go beyond Time” through any form of worthwhile work, contemporary man cannot „kill” his time during working hours and feels a prisoner of his own profession. He tries to „go beyond Time” and reality in his leisure time, thus creating for himself an incredible multitude of pastimes (cf. Eliade, 1989, pp. 27-28).

As a result, he seeks a substitute form of living myth in the sphere of ludic behaviour above all because **it is here that symbolic transfer into another reality can take place** even though it belongs to the *profanum*. In ludic activity, the presence of mechanisms that are the desacralised and fragmentary equivalent of those that governed the mythical behaviour of the man of traditional cultures are, therefore, clearly evident (cf. Zagórska, 2001; Zagórska, 2004; Zagórska and Kopeć, 2004). Hence, the ludic sphere will also entail some form of overcoming oneself that belongs to the very core of participation in the living myth.

At the current stage of the author’s theoretical analysis and research in this field prove that **the category of overcoming oneself in the sphere of ludic behaviour concerns the symbolic overcoming of one’s own limitations (including the time and space limitation) and one’s own finiteness, satisfying the need to be somebody different (at least for a certain period of time), „somebody more” (also by possessing something more), right up to the „Impossible-Self”, i.e. a Self completely impossible to realise in authentic reality.**

One could ask about the concrete forms that overcoming oneself, thus understood, takes on in the sphere of ludic activity. In order to answer this question, this category needs to be placed in the context of the current psychological theory.

3. SELF-TRANSCENDENCE AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL CATEGORY

Much research was conducted in Polish psychology on the question of overcoming one’s limitations („the limits of one’s own Self”), by Józef Koziellecki who came to develop the transgressive concept of man (cf. 1983, 1987, 1997 and 2001). He understands transgression as a phenomenon of conscious overcoming everything that a person is and has. According to Koziellecki, the term *homo transgressivus* entails the conviction that overcoming one’s own limitations is the strongest human need and therefore an innate characteristic of a human being. „Limitations” are understood by the Author in a very broad sense: they refer to both the physical limitations as well as the social and symbolic. From a transgressive point of view, the phenomena examined in this paper would all fit into the broad field of „individual transgressions” that refer to the „interior world” of an individual. These transgressions concern the personality and its field of action; „creating oneself according to one’s own plan” (Koziellecki, 1987, p. 11).

It seems all the more pertinent for further analysis, particularly because of their mythological reference, to refer to the objectivistic concepts of overcoming oneself where it is understood as self-transcendence. **Transcendence is „an existence out-**

side of the subject (the mind), particularly the existence of the object of cognition outside of the knowing mind or reality” (Szymczak, 1989, p. 523). Thus, the process of authentic self-transcendence always involves turning to a transcendental subject, i.e. one existing outside of the subject, surpassing the boundary of his experience and cognisance. The process of self-transcendence, the ludic substitutes of which are being analysed in this paper, does not belong to the typical individual transgressions in the subjectivistic-transgressive concept of man above.

3.1. SELF-TRANSCENDENCE IN AN EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

The term self-transcendence is used in Polish psychology above all by the representatives of the existential-phenomenological humanistic psychology (cf. Opoczyńska, 1996b). In their approach to this term they continue the thought of the internationally renowned psychiatrist, neurologist and psychotherapist and existentially inclined scientist, Victor E. Frankl. „To be a human being means to go beyond oneself. The essence of human existence lies [...] in its self-transcendence” (1984, pp. 147-148). Frankl’s concept is known throughout as the concept of self-transcendence. Its foundations have direct references to the philosophy of Max Scheler.

Self-transcendence means going beyond that, what a person currently is, towards that, which should be; it means going beyond lower values that are at the service of the needs of the psychophysical organism of man (hedonistic, utilitarian, and vital) and intentionally aiming towards objectively existing higher values, the „transcendentals”⁴. „In discovering the values and then living them”, comments Maria Straś-Romanowska, „a [person] brings about a transcendence of one’s own Self; overcomes oneself towards the transcendentals. This self transcendence is nothing other than acting as if against one’s personal, whether rational, pragmatic or hedonistic way of existing naturally serving as a defence of one’s own vital interest – that of life, adaptation, autonomy” (1995b, p. 49).

In the approach of Straś-Romanowska (1992 and 1995a) the term overcoming oneself, alongside the renunciation of Self, humility and a feeling of a greater meaning, is one of the effects of metaphysical development. This development is based on experiencing absolute values and a sense of personal duty. Self-transcendence is, therefore, a category that belongs to the highest stages of personal development (auto-transcendental). It is something more than self-realisation which is referred to the developmental changes in the subject sphere. It arises in connection with carrying out one’s duty, experiencing „noetic tension”⁵ as a result of experiencing values. By transcending towards these values and actualising them man overcomes empirical reality. He uses his abilities and even gives up satisfying the needs connected with other dimensions of the being if necessary and it is as if he „loses himself”. He develops by rejecting the form of life he had up until now and by actuali-

⁴ Transcendentals (from the Latin *transcedere* – to overcome) are understood in metaphysics as the universal properties of existence that are vested in that being as a being. The Classical philosophy tradition distinguishes the following transcendentals: the being (*ens*); the one (*unum*); the true (*verum*); the good (*bonum*); the thing (*res*) – as a certain aspect of being; the something (*aliquid*) – as an aspect of oneness; the beautiful (*pulchrum*) – as a unique synthesis of truth and good (cf. Herbut, 1997)..

⁵ According to Frankl, the principle that a person is motivated by as a spiritual person is the law of ‘nodynamics’ that states that being in a constant state of tension between that which is and that which should be is a characteristic trait of the human being (1975, cf. Opoczyńska, 1996, p. 19).

sing values. This very development in which transcendentals play a crucial role can be deemed after Frankl as auto-transcendence.

3.2. SELF-TRANSCENDENCE IN THE APPROACH OF DANIEL HELMINIAK

The category of self-transcendence is also present in American psychology. Daniel A. Helminiak, psychologist and philosopher of the University of Austin in Texas and of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, elaborates this notion in his concepts. He is creating his own concept of spiritual development trying to analyse it from a purely psychological perspective without any relation to religious, theological and philosophical aspects. This development is, according to Helminiak, „the ongoing integration that results in the self-responsible subject from openness to an intrinsic principle of authentic self-transcendence” (Helminiak, 1987, p. 41).

This „intrinsic principle of authentic self-transcendence” is a key term for Helminiak. He claims that self-transcendence is a characteristic of human consciousness – similarly to openness, dynamic, open-endedness as well as intentionality. Self-transcendence is innate as it is connected with the actualisation of the dynamic in nature consciousness. It is an integral part of human behaviour, in-built into the very essence of being human. It is present everywhere whenever we are dealing with a human person that has an awareness of anything, that understands anything, that makes judgements or decisions. The very fact that consciousness is intentional in character signifies that it is nothing other than **intrinsic self-transcendence**. Helminiak supports the epistemological transcendental realism approach here.

A subject's overcoming oneself, which the Author identifies as self-overcoming one's consciousness, is discussed by him on four hierarchically ordered levels⁶. He identifies the specific function, transcendental precept and specific form of self-transcendence on each of the levels. Table 2 presents the author's arrangement of Helminiak's arguments.

Table 2. Self-transcendence on the four levels of awareness according to Daniel Helminiak (1996, pp. 117-119; edited by W.Z.)

LEVEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS	TASK	TRANSCENDENTAL PRECEPT	SELF-TRANSCENDENCE FORM
1. Empirical	Receiving data	Be attentive!	Awareness of data
2. Intellectual	Understanding What is it? How is it?	Be intelligent!	Having insight and formulating ideas
3. Rational	Judgement of fact Is it truly so?	Be reasonable!	Discovering the objective truth behind the fact
4. Responsible	Evaluating values What do I intend to do with this?	Be responsible!	Making a responsible choice

⁶ Helminiak bases his differentiation on that introduced by Bernard Lonergan, an outstanding Canadian philosopher, theologian and economist (1904-1984), the mastermind of, what he came to call, the „generalized empirical method” (cf. 1997).

On the **first, empirical level of consciousness**, according to Helminiak, the **very fact of becoming aware of information** means to move beyond oneself. By becoming aware of any kind of new information, a person, in a sense, is already somebody different than he was before. He went beyond himself. Therefore, receiving information changes him.

On the **second, intellectual level** of consciousness, the level of receiving **insight and formulating opinions** is once again a move beyond oneself. Having gained a new experience, having a new idea, a person now finds themselves in „a new place”. One is not the same as one used to be. Even the simplest understanding any information received, answering the question: „What is it?”, means self-transcendence because it overcomes the state that was a moment ago when it was still unknown.

Overcoming oneself on the **third, rational level** occurs in a somewhat definite manner by **attaining knowledge**. The judgement of a fact, discovering its objective truth engages a person in truth, reality, existence – understood as universals, as transcendentals (cf. footnote 4). A person is now more convinced of what truly exists than to simply know that it exists, what could exist or what he would like to exist.

On the **fourth level of responsibility, making a responsible decision** which is imperatively connected with the evaluation of values causes a moving beyond oneself. This is **self-transcendence in the strict sense of the word**. A person can then perceive what is good and right. He gives up what could merely have given him satisfaction, pleasure or what could merely have been to his liking. By making responsible choices he affirms himself in his ability of being responsible. And he is, once again, in a sense, a new person. He is not the person he was a moment ago. He went beyond himself.

On the highest level, Helminiak's understanding of self-transcendence is closest to personalistic thought. Only on this level can one talk of „genuine self-transcendence” which is connected with free will and responsibility for one's actions. The three levels preceding it merely act as preparation. Helminiak assumes, as do the personalists, that acts of decision making are the most important. „Choosing” means „encompassing into oneself” the object of one's choice. Therefore, every choice makes the thing that was chosen as if a part of the person choosing; it makes them the person making these kinds of decisions.

A person is therefore self-determined by his choices. A responsible choice, consequently a choice directed at truth and good, makes it easier to behave in the same way in the future. And the opposite is also true: every choice against truth and good is not only a way of drawing evil closer to oneself but makes it easier to choose evil in the future because every such choice weakens the conscience.

A fundamental novelty of the approach presented seems to be the statement that every act of consciousness is connected with *self-transcendence*. Seeing that the true dynamism of consciousness is directed towards that which exists and that which is good, every form of making it present gives rise, according to Helminiak, to overcoming oneself, and an overcoming towards the objective reality and good.

The above theoretical approaches to self-transcendence will serve as a point of reference for the outline of selected forms of overcoming oneself in the ludic sphere.

Results of empirical research carried out under direction of the author on the experiences of theatre audiences, participants of the rave party subculture and computer game players have also been used in formulating the characteristics presented further in the paper.

4. SYMBOLIC OVERCOMING ONESELF IN THE LUDIC SPHERE

According to Eliade, contemporary irreligious man „defends himself from everything that is transcendental. In other words [...] he doesn't agree that there exists a different form of humanity other than the way of being human revealed in various historical situations, [...] he shapes himself, but he can truly shape himself to the extent that he desacralises himself and the world” (1996, p. 168). What then becomes of self-transcendence when one denies the existence of transcendence? What is the symbolic overcoming of *conditio humana* reduced down to the sphere of the profane, no longer based on a turning towards the transcendental but towards oneself?

In the light of the literature on this subject as well as the results of the research mentioned above it is possible to say that the forms that ludic substitutes of overcoming oneself take on are dependent on the traits of the secondary reality they concern in that instance. Considering the manifold possibilities that contemporary man has to his disposal with regards to shaping this „second layer” it seems obvious that the phenomena dealt with in this paper can take on a vast array of forms. It is enough to take into account the character of the medium that transfers into the different reality along with the place it has in symbolic culture (the closeness to the arts, mass culture or subculture) as well as take into account the means used in shaping and communicating it (verbal, visual, sound, digital, etc.), the model of the process of communication used by them or whether they belong to the „old or new media”. The very form of participation also plays an important role therein, whether it is completely substitutory (*per procura*) as in the instance of transferring oneself into the world of literary fiction by means of one's imagination or a more direct form as, for instance, in an out-door version of a RPG (LARP – Live Action Role Play) taking place in specific kinds of locations with the use of props and costumes.

4.1. SELF-TRANSCENDENCE OF A FILM SPECTATOR

In film studies and the theory of mass media there is plethora of theoretical reflection concerning the „transfers of the spectator onto the film screen” and the psychological participation in the show, resulting from it. There are many such phenomena here that can be qualified into the category of symbolic overcoming oneself.

As an example, the concept of a spectator understood as a **transcendental subject** was a key concept in post-modernist French theory of cinema, first coined by Jean-Louis Baudry and later expounded on by Christian Metz. Baudry writes: „If the eye [...] is no longer a prisoner of the body, of matter and time laws, if there are no boundaries stopping it from moving, the world is not only constituted by that eye, but even constituted for it. The mobility of the camera fulfils the necessary conditions for the «transcendental subject» to arise. It is both [...] an objective rea-

lity, which, reducing the forces that limit it, seems to augment the possibilities and the power of the subject” (Baudry, 1970, cit. after: Helman, 1985, pp. 8-9; emphasis in bold by W.Z.).

In Polish theory of mass media Wojciech Chyła developed the concept of the show as a factor of **symbolic change**. He formulated such theories that can be directly applied to contemporary mythical behaviour and to overcoming the human condition analysed herein. For instance: „The non-existent subject that was made present by the show controls me [...]. And, for this very moment, it is my new «God» [...]. And just like in religion: I don't have my own identity without a God ruling over me. And just like in religion **I become 'not myself'** and my thoughts do not define the object I have before my eyes. **I overcome myself, I move beyond myself**, my sensory and rational capacities with the help of the show” (Chyła, 1999, p. 37; emphasis in bold by W.Z.).

The film narrative is without doubt a contemporary substitute for mythical narrative. The participation of the psyche in it gives a substitute experience of one's own change and particularly the illusion of „being somebody more”.

4.2. OVERCOMING ONESELF OF THE THEATRE SPECTATOR

It is also possible to speak of symbolic overcoming oneself in the case of a theatrical show. In the research conducted by Anna Mączyńska (2001) on the experience of the „active theatrical spectator”, overcoming oneself turned out to be the most important element of this experience. The spectators interviewed referred to the following phenomena:

- transcending the borders of everyday experiences, cognizance and emotions, limitations of their own personality and limits of knowledge about themselves and reality;
- perceiving something „new” in themselves and in the world; an openness, sensitivity, the diversity of the world and the spiritual dimension of reality;
- self-cognizance and enriching their own psychological life, enabling them to feel a bond and sense of community with the world, psyche development, self-realisation;
- transformation most often understood as a change in the psychological sphere, in their own traits and ways of functioning.

The most dominant here was the overcoming of barriers defined by the viewers precisely as „overcoming oneself”, also in the context of „the condition of human existence”. The following are a few examples of how they explained it:

[Thanks to the theatre] **I overcome certain limits in myself**⁷. There is something beyond, beyond this boundary; so rational, so material, it's contact with some form of energy [...], I don't know if you can call them values because this is the more rational, intellectual sphere, perhaps some emotions, primary emotions, needs as well, the need of a community and a community not only with people, but with that, which lies beyond that boundary” (female, aged 23).

[Thanks to theatre shows] **I overcome myself**, I forget about the sadness of my existence, I forget, that I am always and everywhere alone [...]. This is a tragic

⁷ All the emphasis in bold in the respondent's comments is by W.Z.

feeling because it is fleeting and because of this it makes you much more painfully aware of certain things [...]. **It's not about mediocrity but about the condition of human existence** [...]. Sometimes the theatre helps me to see all this" (male, aged 24).

The presence of the existential theme in the respondents' statements allows the assumption that overcoming oneself in theatrical narrative shows also entails a certain element of escapism for the viewers. It enables a person to temporarily pull themselves away from the „pain of their existence" (cf. Mączyńska, 2001, pp. 81-82).

4.3. OVERCOMING ONESELF OF A RAVE PARTY GOER

An empirical exploration of this category in the experiences of the participants of the techno music subculture has brought particularly interesting results (Kopeć, 2001; Zagórska, 2003 and 2004; Zagórska and Kopeć, 2004). It turned out that in the case of a rave party goer symbolic overcoming oneself mainly takes on the form of having experiences relating to the Self and going beyond the mundane everyday experiences. It also clearly manifests itself in the desire to create oneself as „somebody completely different", impossible to achieve in reality: the „Impossible-Self". The feeling of overcoming one's own limits which the rave party goers talked about referred mainly to certain temporary experiences, imaginings or **feelings of being a different Self**.

[...] at this rave I completely distanced myself to what was on the outside or I even distanced myself to myself, I mean, **I imagined that I was different, mysterious, better**, that a person, when you go into this trance, when you get into the rhythm [...] **you see yourself to be better**, that everything is [...], that **they're someone prettier**, or ... you simply feel better, **that you're funkier, more sure of yourself – yeah, that's it!** (female, aged 28).

[...] I didn't have any qualms about getting up there on stage and having a laugh with those people. It's something which I suppose I'm not ready for in every day life, to stand out, I mean, in fact I would never do this in a normal situation but when I'm there, I simply get the urge to get up there, **I didn't have such barriers like I can't, that I don't look right or I shouldn't** [...]. It's also different because I'm the type of person who generally cares about what people think of me [...], I generally like being liked by others, whereas when I'm at a rave **I couldn't care less whether they like me or not** (female, aged 26).

Yes. I could do my hair like a punk and [...] but I would never do that in real life. But I could actually do that then, even though I'm so terribly self-conscious [...]. I could do something like that... that **you can be somebody completely different, that everyone changes into a superman for their own ends**, you don't really do that for the sake of the people around you. [...] I would [do it] only to feel better... yeah, that I'm here, there you go, that **I'm a different person** (female, aged 27).

This particular sub-culture clearly reveals how very much symbolic overcoming oneself does not have an self-transcendent character which is connected with a turning towards higher values but is rather a form of pseudo-self-transcendence: experiencing a different Self brought about by turning towards oneself and directed towards realising hedonistic values. Hence, we are not dealing with an aspiration

towards higher values, with the literal self-transcendence but with experiencing oneself as somebody different. It is all about creating oneself with a different set of traits, a different face, about a different, impossible to realise in the real world, version of oneself.

With respects to rave culture we are even dealing with a direct escape from values and, along with it, from responsibility and duty, from that which is demanding, from the effort of being yourself. Using Max Scheler's hierarchy of values (1967), it can be said that the rave culture-created reality mainly serves the lower values as it is aimed at satisfying hedonistic needs⁸. It is a consequence of a consumerist way of life. Nevertheless, one can also find in it the yearning of contemporary man for the experience of the transcendent. People go about satisfying this need by seeking concrete pseudo- or quasi-transcendental experiences by trying to change their own consciousness.

4.4. OVERCOMING ONESELF OF AN NARRATIVE COMPUTER GAME PLAYER

The narrative of a narrative computer game is yet another contemporary substitute of mythical narrative. Psychological participation in such a game gives a substitute experience of one's own change, the illusion of being „somebody more”, of „going beyond” oneself, one's own sensory and mental capabilities. The possibility of symbolic overcoming the borders of one's own Self, temporarily taking on an imaginary identity, checking out roles that are impossible to realise in real life seems to be the deciding factor about the popularity of these games. It is a highly motivating factor of becoming intensely involved in these them. It is worth noticing that the process of identifying with the fictional character and thus broadening the symbolic

limits of one's own Self, belongs to the oldest ways known to mankind of deriving pleasure. It is enough to look at the symbolism of a mask. Manfred Lurker, an eminent anthropologist and historian of religions, a fellow worker of Eliade, writes: „man [...] is hiding his helplessness beneath it while nurturing the hope that, thanks to it, he will be able to **grow beyond himself**. The wearer of a mask manages to get out «beyond himself»; liberates himself from himself and thus gives into the charm of the unforeseeable and working under the surface” (1994, p. 292).

In computer adventure games (e.g. Multi-User Dungeons, Computer Role-Playing Games) where one can create one's own avatar in cyberspace, symbolic overcoming oneself takes the form of experimenting with the created identities. Shaping oneself as somebody different who is impossible to bring about on the level of real life probably refers, as it does in rave culture, to certain substitute experiences and temporary feelings of a different Self (cf. Table 1).

These feelings definitely do not have anything in common with the meaning of self-transcendence defined in existential-phenomenological psychology, as they are not caused by the desire to go by higher values, of losing oneself and overcoming one's own pattern of existence for the sake of actualising these values. They are not the effect of overcoming set schemes that naturally serve to defend a person's vital interest: that of life, adjustment, autonomy (cf. Straś-Romanowska, 1995b).

⁸ According to Scheler, vital, utilitarian and hedonistic values make up the group of *lower values*, while the sacral and spiritual values – the *higher values* (cf. 1967).

These experiences are caused by turning towards oneself, a characteristic of ludic activity aimed at satisfying one's hedonistic needs. The player is interested in a temporary, symbolic change of his own Self. He does not want to find so much a faithful copy of his Self but a different Self in the avatar he takes on. This can be brought about by releasing one's own phantasms into the virtual space. The statements of C-RPG players univocally confirm this:... I think that these games liberate me from everyday life and transfer me into a world of fantasy [...] where I can encounter great and famous heroes, [...] with the avatar I play I want to **equal their fame**, to put my name down in the books of history **as the one who saved the world** from [...]. It's a wonderful feeling for me to see my avatar develop, to master new and more refined techniques, **you can cast so many, ever more powerful, spells**. [...] It's wonderful to become one with the character of a magician who, as the action develops, becomes **more and more powerful** right up to the moment when nothing can stand in his way, when **nobody can go against his power**, the power he uses to spread justice, to fight for the rights of the helpless... (male, aged 23).

You become somebody known and liked for the things that you do but not because of being rich or anything like that, but because of your desire to help others. [...] The game makes you **somebody exceptional and no longer an average person** who there are millions and billions of in the world (male, aged 24).

The avatar can be weak but **the strength of his charisma compensates** for his weak points. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of my avatar makes me **capable of solving almost any problem** if I use the right tactic (male, aged 25).

This is merely a substitute of overcoming oneself also because the interaction between the players takes place in a dimension that is **beyond responsibility**, while every authentic self-transcendence is inseparably connected with responsibility (cf. e.g. Helminiak, 1997; Frankl, 1984). The very fact of the direct absence of the interactive players, replacing the circle of concrete players that are present and sitting around the same table (as is the case in a typical RPG situation) with an intangible circle of insubstantial players in front of their monitors and keyboards, makes the whole procedure of shaping one's own image safer and also less responsible. „The quest to find new, fictitious identities that compel you to play on but by no means lead to cultivate mutual responsibility”, writes the Polish culturologist Wojciech Chyła, commenting on internet communication, „You **don't even have to know who you're playing with but** simply concentrate on **playing out your new Self** who is being unleashed into cyberspace so that reality will do what it wants with this pure identity training [...]. Without responsibility. [...]. These are identity games instead of morality which like present identities. [...] my ludic equivalent of a lack of genuine responsibility for that which isn't present” (1999, pp. 206-208; emphasis in bold by W.Z.).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In light of Helminiak's concept it is possible to risk stating that by using the natural attribute of the self-overcoming consciousness, man creates an **illusion of transcending himself** without actually moving beyond the lowest (i.e. empirical and intellectual) levels of self-transcendence. Overcoming oneself in the ludic sphere fulfils a substitutive function towards auto-transcendence understood in the exi-

stential-phenomenological sense or self-transcendence from the fourth level of consciousness in Helminiak's concept. It therefore seems justified to apply such terms to the accompanying phenomena of the category analysed in this paper as: **pseudo-overcoming oneself** (resembling or imitating), or **quasi-overcoming oneself** (seemingly, apparently but not really overcoming oneself). Thus, lo and behold, in the context of liberating oneself from the burden of responsibility, from making existentially significant choices and from truly going against yourself in striving towards the transcendentals, the man of today has found ways of effortlessly „overcoming himself” and „compensating” for his shortcomings.

According to Edgar Morin (1956), the phenomenon of film reality (i.e. one of the many versions of secondary realities) depends on finding not so much a true to life copy of oneself, not so much an *alter ego*, but something even more important: the **ego alter – a different Self**. This ingenious statement of the esteemed film expert seems to be true not only in relation to the perception of film or photography but also regarding those ludic forms of behaviour in which participation in a simulated reality plays a fundamental role. The „overcoming of oneself” which is inseparably connected to these processes is often rooted in seeking to experience this very *ego alter* (cf. Table 1). Paraphrasing the words of Kirsten Hastrup (cf. Wyka, 1993, p. 145) about the unreal becoming empirical through personal experience, it is possible to state that **the impossible becomes reality thanks to personal experience**.

There is a compelling need in the human being for mythical narrative which is linked with this very want of recreating oneself in a different reality. The need to be „as if” somebody different at least for a moment. To be able to self-realise in a different way and in a different time-space continuum, even if the only thing it serves is to create illusions. To **overcome yourself – remaining yourself**. To find the *ego alter*.

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