

EDEL ASSANTI

Marcin Dudek: Ultra Violence – Eddy Frankel

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A chunk of wood flew through the air and smashed into the back of Marcin Dudek's head. As he lay prostrate and bleeding in the middle of an intersection between two housing districts on the outskirts of Kraków, a group of 30 men armed with sticks and metal pipes descended on him, unleashing a brutal beating that would leave him battered and broken. He was 16 years old. The attack wasn't random. It was an ambush, a planned assault by fans of Wisła Kraków on residents of a district controlled by their rival team, KS Cracovia. And it wasn't unusual: it was just another event in a relentless cycle of violence between Poland's two most infamous groups of football hooligans.

The wood, ripped from a bench, was a primitive spear, and Dudek was easy prey to the Wisła hunters. But he wasn't an innocent victim here, not by a long shot. He'd been going to Cracovia games since he was a little kid, and by the age of 12 had started the long process of working his way up the ranks of the team's ultras. By 16, he'd committed countless acts of brutality in the name of KS Cracovia. By 19, the violence had become so extreme that he realised he needed to escape and managed to flee to art school in Salzburg, Austria, leaving behind a life of suffocating poverty and absolute savagery.

Dudek's art is filled with shattered glass, rubber bullets, police helmets and broken fragments of burnt stadium seating; his installations are bathed in orange paint, the colour of the insides of bomber jackets, and dominated by peering, hollow eyes watching you from under balaclavas. These are the symbols of a violent past he has abandoned but not truly dealt with. His art is his attempt to come to terms with his own acts of shocking belligerence, and the ones committed against him.

Marcin and I meet at 3pm in Kraków's Plac Bohaterow Getta- the Ghetto Heroes Square- on a grim, rainy Saturday in late October. The plan is to watch the day's 6pm kick-off, KS Cracovia against Bruk-Bet Termalica Nieciecza, a team which has the honour of being from the smallest village ever to gain promotion to the top level of a European football league. It has a population of just 750. Marcin has never even heard of them, but from the minute we say hello, he's nervous. Today will be the first time he's returned to watch a full KS Cracovia match since 1997.

He wants to make a pilgrimage before the game, to go back to the place where he was attacked. We take a tram and then a bus through the outskirts of Kraków, the medieval architecture of the centre giving way to a stuttering stream of identical grey tower blocks. As we walk in the driving rain, pushing against wind that feels like it's cutting straight through your bones, Marcin points out Cracovia districts – massed complexes of concrete buildings, separated by single roads, with each structure covered in crude graffiti calling for the death of rival fans. Marcin is constantly looking over his shoulder, he's agitated and jittery, forcing me to hide my camera. He shows

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me a bus stop he and his friends used for ambushes. They'd wait in small groups for busloads of Wisła fans returning home from games. As the doors opened, they'd run on and start throwing punches indiscriminately. Bang, bang, bang – it didn't matter who it was, if you were in the way, you were fair game. I ask him what he'd say during these ambushes, if he had a war cry. 'Violence is most effective in silence,' he responds.

We finally reach a crossroads by a small patch of forest and a massive Lidl. 'This is where it happened', he says. 'The wood hit me in the head here, they attacked me and left me in the middle of the road.' The crossing has been painted a bright red with white stripes across it, as if the blood that flowed that day has seeped permanently into the tarmac. Marcin takes in the scene, notices its differences – the supermarket, the police station – and then hurries us away. He wants to walk straight through the middle of the neighbouring Wisła district, the area his attackers would have come from.

The main path through Nowy Bieżanów is dwarfed on all sides by grey. The apartment blocks loom oppressively and inescapably over you, titanic concrete clouds that smother everyone in the area. Each kid that walks by makes Marcin flinch, as if he's convinced that they'll somehow sniff him out as a rival fan, an outsider. It's a primordial fear, an instinctive reaction borne of years of attacking and being attacked. He won't let me take notes or pictures; his English fragments and his words stop coalescing into sentences. A group of teens in tracksuits coming out of a supermarket turn him completely silent. He's so heightened, so filled with fear and adrenaline, that it's infectious. The anxiety is palpable.

We head to safer territory, the district Marcin grew up in and where his mother still lives. On the way, he points out which districts belong to which team, and which have changed allegiances. Kraków's football isn't divided in the same geographical way as London's, it's not about east and west, north and south; each neighbouring district has its own team, and that's not permanent. 'You can convert a district. If the right person moves to the area, a strong figure, they can force the people in the area to change team,' he says. Senior ultras can become sort of hooligan missionaries, spreading their own violent football gospel across the city. Most of Kraków's population, especially here outside the centre, is recent. These families moved from rural Poland to the big city in the 1970's, their footballing allegiances aren't passed down from generation to generation. As the day wears on, I realise that football has almost nothing to do with any of this anyway. 'Conversion isn't about how good your team is – Cracovia were in the third division when I was a teenager – it's about how good your hooligans are.'

If you haven't lived in a world of violence, it's hard to wrap your head around how people could exist like this. Marcin says there were no options growing up, he says he was born into this, they all are. You participate or you don't exist. He admits that you don't have to take it as far as he did, but there is nothing in the outskirts of Kraków but football and the violence that comes with it.

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Once we're in Nowy Prokocim, Marcin's whole demeanour changes. Gone is the anxiety and fear, replaced by a puffed-up confidence as he point out the abandoned field where he used to play football. He stops to take a piss behind the goal. 'Territorial,' he says. I ask him about some graffiti that says 'jude gang'. 'That's the name of the senior ultras, the "Jew gang", I became one of them when I was 16'. Cracovia is Kraków's 'Jewish' team, like Spurs in England or Ajax in Holland, and most of the anti-Cracovia graffiti you see is shockingly anti-Semitic – crossed-out stars of David, 'Jews to the gas', that kind of thing. The Wisła ultras are called the Wisła Sharks: Jews vs Sharks, like 'West Side Story' with balaclavas.

Before taking the bus to the game, we stop off at the estate pub, Cobra Café, a two-room bungalow with an electric fire, covered in paper printouts of club badges and side-room converted into a shrine to Manchester United. The owner Maryla recognises Marcin almost instantly, she's known him since he was a kid: he got pissed here throughout his teenhood. It feels safe, like a homecoming. On the bus to the game, all the day's anxieties have been replaced by confident anticipation, all my qualms about coming to see the fearsome KS Cracovia are gone.

The stadium is new, clean and modern with a healthy but not worrying police presence. Our tickets are £4 each. Marcin wants to stand with the ultras, to see if he'll recognise old faces. He wants to try to grasp his past, to step back into his old world, to see if it still makes any sense to him. He cut himself off from this 20 years ago, now he wants to see if he can reconnect with it.

We sit with our beers in the middle of the stand, just behind the goal. Down the front, three guys are setting up speakers and a drum. Some younger kids hang a homemade banner along the wire, tying knots and stretching out the fabric with pride. Marcin is smiling and relaxed, each kid he sees reminds him of himself at that age.

As the game kicks off, the two chant leaders and their drummer force everyone to stand closer together. Hundreds of fans squeeze in around us. The drum pounds, everyone starts signing. And immediately, it's obvious there's something not quite right. Us.

Every person in our vicinity has clocked the two outsiders. Men to every side of us turn and stare. They mutter to each other between chants. One guy, either very drunk or very high, is the first to say something. He turns to us, spitting with vitriol, yelling in Polish. Marcin responds calmly, but the guy stands on his seat and lunges towards us, jabbing a finger at him, his face red from screaming – Marcin lunges back, screaming in return. 'What the fuck is going on, Marcin?' I ask between gritted teeth. 'Sing,' Marcin says. 'What? I don't know any of the fucking words, I can't fucking speak Polish'. 'I'm serious, Eddy. Sing.' What follows is 40 mortifying minutes of senseless, wordless, tuneless blabbering and rhythmless clapping by a very frightened English moron. Not even Marcin knows the songs. When the tunes are familiar, like a lot of international football chants are, I sing Spurs songs and try to keep up. The guy in front constantly turns back, holding our gaze and repeatedly yelling at us. The men

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either side of us stare too. I try desperately to concentrate on the football and not make eye contact. I ask Marcin if we can just go. 'If we leave, it'll be worse, they'll follow us,' he says. It's the longest half of football I've ever watched.

We have another beer at half time and try to calm our nerves. We decide to watch the second half from the same stand, but sat off to the side. As we walk back towards the seats, a younger guy is waiting for us and shoulder barges into Marcin's chest. Marcin grabs him, pushes him towards the wall, the guy pushes back. There's yelling, a mini-scuffle. Marcin manages to assert his dominance, slapping the guy on the back over and over again, halfway between a hug and a punch. The kid slouches away. 'It was a test, he was one of the younger ones from the front, they sent him to push us,' Marcin says. I tell him I can't believe he fought back, I'd have just walked away. 'It's the code, you're in more trouble if you don't fight.'

The match itself is terrible. It's freezing cold, the rain is incessant. When Cracovia score in the 81st minute, the 6,300 people here can barely be bothered to celebrate. Nieciecza equalise in the 90th. Throughout, the drums never stop. At one point, one of the chant leaders points to the corner of the stand and a bunch of hooligans run in that direction – someone's been spotted filming on their phone. The guy gets bundled away, we don't see him again. There's no police in the stand, no stewards. This is the ultras' world, they own this place.

After the game, we walk slowly to a bar in the centre of town, barely saying a word to each other. But once we're sat down with two beers, the bubble bursts. A full day of tension – and 90-odd minutes of pure fear – are pouring out of us, the adrenaline leaching from our bodies in fits of laughter. We both finally realise how naïve we were, how absolutely stupid we'd been. Marcin thought he could just walk back into this totally codified, totally insular world and be accepted with open arms – the long-lost brother returning to the fold. I thought he'd be my in, that I'd be accepted by proxy and get an insight into the world of Polish football hooliganism.

But we were both rejected, and in the process probably put ourselves in quite a bit of danger. The guy who was yelling at us during the match was right. We didn't belong there. This was his world, their world. We were a virus, a foreign body that needed to be attacked. Marcin and I were humiliated, forced to sign and clap, pushed around.

It felt awful, but looking back, it seems almost justified. So much of Marcin's art is about the mob mentality, about being outside or inside, about acceptance and rejection, as if those two things can really be changed. They can't.

Later on – after many, many drinks – Marcin opens up even more about his violent past, telling me about the hunts, the rituals, the fights with the police, the blood, the criminal records. I ask him if he ever misses the violence, the freedom to inflict pain on someone else, the adrenaline. 'I miss the honesty of it,' he says. 'It's not a metaphor, like art. Violence is immediate, you do it and

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it happens. ' I ask him if he ever feels shame about the things that he did, but I realise immediately that I don't think I care. His shame and his past, are his problem. I can escape Marszałek Piłsudski Stadium, I can escape Krakow. He can't, not really. His art is his way of learning to deal with the legacy of the past. It's not about football, none of this is. It's about poverty, violence, belonging, rejection and the human capacity to commit unspeakable acts, to pull down the curtain of morality and reveal the horrifying truth behind it. Football is just a really good excuse.